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TRUTH AT THE LIMITS OF CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING**

Abstract

Interest in conceptual engineering – the project of evaluating and ameliorating concepts – has increased dramatically in recent years. One still underexplored question is whether there are any limits to conceptual engineering: are some concepts immune to revision or replacement? Here I discuss two arguments to the effect that the concept of truth cannot be engineered. Both are based on a thought experiment by Eklund (2015), who suggests that TRUTH might spell one of the limits of conceptual engineering. He does not give a full-blown argument in favor of this, so the arguments I consider are based on two ways of interpreting his comments. Neither, I argue, supports the claim that TRUTH cannot be engineered.

Keywords: conceptual engineering, amelioration, truth, concepts, conceptual change

INTRODUCTION

Could there be a concept better suited to fill the role the concept of truth plays in our thought and talk, but which is distinct from our actual concept, TRUTH? If so, should we try to employ that concept instead? Questions like these are examples of what conceptual engineers are concerned with. Conceptual engineering is about evaluating and, if needed, improving or replacing words or concepts, detecting deficiencies and ameliorating the way we think and talk about some phenomena

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(Haslanger 2000, Cappelen and Plunkett 2020).[1] One such engineering project is fronted by Kevin Scharp (2013, 2020), who argues that TRUTH is inconsistent and should be replaced with consistent concepts (in some contexts). Quite apart from details about Scharp's account, one can worry about the feasibility of such projects. Perhaps engineering TRUTH is not desirable (Burgess 2013, Eklund 2014); perhaps it would require engineering most other concepts we have because of the centrality of TRUTH (Greenough 2019), or perhaps TRUTH cannot be engineered at all.

This paper concerns the last worry. There might be limits to conceptual engineering in the form of concepts we cannot revise or replace. There are many routes one can take to end up at this conclusion: from Kantian concerns about innate ways of conceptualizing the world via reference magnetism, to reasons having to do with the presumed fundamentality of various concepts. Let's briefly look at some of these considerations before discussing particular reasons for thinking that TRUTH cannot be engineered.

If we are creatures that come hardwired with some way of understanding the world – perhaps because there are some ways of experiencing the world we cannot help but have, for instance as divided into distinct objects or as temporally sequenced – then it is reasonable to expect that we could not get rid of the relevant concepts (OBJECT, EARLIER). Perhaps, say, our concept OBJECT is so deeply ingrained in how we experience and represent the world that there just are no alternative OBJECT-like concepts available to us, and no option of doing without the concept. Or perhaps there are "reference magnets" such that we cannot easily mean, say, grue instead of green because the former is too "unnatural" (Lewis 1983, Sider 2011; see also Eklund 2023).

Reasons for thinking that TRUTH, specifically, cannot be engineered can be found in the literature on primitivism about TRUTH. Primitivism takes TRUTH to be a fundamental concept for which no non-circular analysis can be given. Some primitivists argue that TRUTH is so central to our thought and talk that it is a constituent of all thoughts (Asay 2013, 2021, Frege 1918/1997); this would effectively make it impossible to replace it. Others argue that some concepts, and TRUTH among them, are so fundamental that without them, as Donald Davidson (1996: 264) said, "we would have no concepts at all." If there are any such fundamental concepts, then it is hard to imagine that we could change or replace them: they are, as it were, the foundation upon which the rest of our concepts

[1]Also called "conceptual ethics" and "ameliorative projects" (Cappelen 2018, Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b, Haslanger 2000, Nado 2019).

and beliefs rest. However, primitivism is not a widely accepted theory of truth, and so, dialectically speaking, it might not be of much help for those who want to argue that TRUTH is unrevisable and irreplaceable. (That said, if we are looking for concepts that may be unrevisable, it's a good idea to look to primitivist accounts as they invariably concern concepts which have a *prima facie* claim to being at the very centre of our conceptual schemes.)

Other reasons for thinking that TRUTH cannot be engineered focus on the central role it plays in accounting for phenomena such as assertion and belief. Matti Eklund (2015) presents a thought experiment based on such considerations, suggesting that the role of TRUTH as the aim of belief and assertion is such that we cannot engineer TRUTH. This suggestion is intriguing and may be palatable also to those sympathetic to the claim that some concepts cannot be revised or replaced but who do not want to commit themselves to primitivism. In this paper, I consider whether there is a good argument for the claim that TRUTH cannot be engineered in the vicinity of Eklund's (2015) suggestion to that effect.

But first, we need to say something about what conceptual engineering and concepts are, since this makes a difference as to whether there are limits to conceptual engineering.

1. LIMITLESS CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING

On some accounts of what conceptual engineering is, the question of limits does not arise. If conceptual engineering is about revising what we mean by particular words (Cappelen 2018) or giving revisionary theories (Sawyer 2020), as opposed to changing or replacing concepts, then there is no clear sense in which there can be a limit to conceptual engineering. Semantic shifts happen, people posit radical theories, and it would be surprising if there's a limit to how revisionary a word or theory could be. However, most of those working in this field take conceptual engineering to involve the engineering of concepts (e.g., Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b, Eklund 2014, 2015, Scharp 2013, 2020, Haslanger 2020a, 2020b, Prinzig 2018, Nado 2019, Isaac 2020), and for such accounts the question of limits does arise. So, for the purposes of this paper, let's assume that conceptual engineering is really about engineering concepts.

Let's further assume that concepts are things that can be changed. Not all accounts of the nature of concepts square well with talk of conceptual engineering.

There are many different theories of what concepts are[2] and little common ground beyond general claims like "concepts are the building blocks of thought." Some take concepts to be abstract, eternal entities (Frege 1918/1997, Peacocke 1992); others think they are mental representations (Fodor 1998, 2008, Millikan 2000) or cognitive abilities (Dummett 1993), and there is much disagreement about what each of these kinds amounts to.[3] This has consequences for whether concepts can be changed or replaced, and if so, how. For instance, if concepts are Fregean senses, we could do nothing to change them. What could be changed or replaced is which concepts we use. If taken literally, the assumption that concepts are things that can be changed rules out taking concepts to be abstract objects. However, by instead talking about which concepts we ought to use, we can reconcile conceptual engineering with abstract concepts.[4]

A thread running through this paper is that we cannot say much about concepts and the (im)possibility of engineering them without basing this on a detailed account of the concepts and principles of conceptual individuation. First, there is not enough neutral common ground that most who write on concepts agree on for us to say much about concepts in general, i.e., without first specifying, for example, what kind of entities they are and when two words express the same concept. Second, what the identity and individuation conditions for concepts are makes a difference to the possibility of engineering TRUTH. Switching between taking concepts to be finely and coarsely grained (as Eklund does) conceals this, as I argue in section 3.3 below. Thus, it is with more than a little reservation that I continue to talk about concepts and "the" concept of truth. But since this paper discusses reasons to believe that TRUTH cannot be engineered where it is assumed that it makes sense to talk about "the" concept of truth without specifying further, it is worth seeing how far we can get by working only with a pre-theoretic notion of concepts and conceptual individuation.

In the next section, I present Eklund's (2015) thought experiment and some assumptions it is built on, and I discuss whether Eklund intended it as an argument for the claim that there are limits to conceptual engineering. In section 3,

[2]And even disagreement over whether there are any concepts at all (Machery 2009): this is one reason to favor a word- or theory-based account of conceptual engineering, since they do not need to specify what is meant by "concept."

[3]See (Margolis and Laurence 1999), (Machery 2009), (Prinz 2002), and (Murphy 2002) for overviews of different theories of concepts.

[4]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me on this point.

I consider two interpretations of what Eklund's thought experiment is supposed to show and argue that neither supports the claim that TRUTH cannot be engineered.

2. EKLUND'S THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Eklund (2015) suggests that TRUTH is a concept which cannot be replaced. In his terminology, TRUTH is a conceptual 'fixed point.' He says that "one may have the vague sense that somehow there must be important limits to conceptual engineering: that certain in some sense basic concepts cannot be replaced" and discusses some considerations in favor of such limits for some "intuitively speaking basic concepts" (Eklund 2015: 378). These concepts include TRUTH, EXISTENCE, and 'thin' normative concepts like GOOD and OUGHT: here we focus solely on TRUTH.

It is somewhat unclear what exactly Eklund's argument is or what it purports to show. Eklund says he is "not going to argue that it is impossible to replace the concepts in question with other ones" (2015: 378). Elsewhere (2023), he denies that his "considerations" amount to an argument in favor of the limits of conceptual engineering. (We come back to this shortly.) However, although he makes it clear that he does not consider himself to have shown that TRUTH cannot be engineered, it's not at all clear what these considerations are supposed to show instead. He presents these considerations in multiple papers (including 2012, 2014, 2015) in the context of discussing whether there are any limits to conceptual engineering. Indeed, except for brief remarks on more general reasons to think that there are limits to conceptual engineering, these "considerations" comprise all he says about this topic in his (2015) paper. So, he clearly thinks that they are relevant to whether TRUTH can be engineered and that they give some reason to think that it cannot be engineered. But he also says that "the arguments to follow, even if persuasive as far as they go, do not establish anything that strong [as the impossibility of replacing TRUTH]. The upshots are more subtle" (Eklund 2015: 378). Unfortunately, it's unclear what these subtle upshots are.

In the next section (2.1), I discuss whether Eklund intended these "considerations" to be arguments for the claim that TRUTH cannot be engineered. This section can safely be passed over by readers less interested in Eklund-exegesis than in whether his suggestions can be fleshed out as an argument to the effect that TRUTH cannot be engineered. In section 2.2, I give a brief overview of the thought experiment, which was presented as a direct response to an argument by Stephen Stich (1990), so to understand it we need to be familiar with Stich's

argument (section 2.3). We discuss the thought experiment in section 2.4, and section 2.5 discusses some central assumptions built into the case.

2.1. DOES EKLUND ARGUE THAT THERE ARE LIMITS TO CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING?

In his (2023) paper, Eklund argues that his previous arguments in (Eklund 2015) do not even "address [the] issue" of whether there are limits to engineering. This comes in response to Herman Cappelen's (2018) discussion of Eklund's (2015) argument that 'thin' normative concepts might not be engineerable (these are presented alongside his thought experiment concerning TRUTH). Eklund complains that Cappelen (2018) misconstrues his (2015) as an argument in favor of limits to conceptual engineering, saying that

> Cappelen brings up Eklund's argument . . . as [an] argument to the effect that some concepts cannot be engineered. But obviously, even given the complete success of these earlier arguments of Eklund's, there are still questions about whether to employ a TRUTH-like concept at all . . . Maybe one should, but the arguments given by Eklund do not address the issue. They are only to the effect that for a thinker with a concept playing a given role, there are in a sense (in fact different senses) no alternatives. (Eklund 2023: 13)

The argument seems to be that *if* we want a concept that plays the role of TRUTH, *then* we're stuck with our original concept. There could be no other concept playing the TRUTH role. However, we could still decide to do without any concept playing that role at all. That would also be conceptual engineering: we evaluate the concept and decide that we're better off without it, eliminating it from our conceptual repertoire.

Let's grant Eklund the point that *not having any concept at all playing the roles of our concept of truth* is to engineer TRUTH. Engineering is about not just revising concepts (somehow changing a concept, where this is distinct from replacement) but also replacing concepts (eliminating one and, optionally, introducing another in its place). So, if we eliminate TRUTH, we engineer it. So far, so good. We can still ask: what reasons do we have for thinking that we cannot use any other TRUTH-like concept? If Eklund's argument is supposed to show this – as it seems he intends it to in his (2012), (2015), and (2023) – then it's straightforwardly about potential limits to conceptual engineering. Why? Because if correct, it would show that there is only one concept in the vicinity of

TRUTH (namely, TRUTH itself), so it would not be possible to modify it or introduce another concept having roughly the same function but being sufficiently different from TRUTH to be a distinct concept. Regardless of whether we can eliminate TRUTH, the absence of alternative truth-like concepts would be a significant limit to engineering projects involving TRUTH.[5]

So, if the remarks in (Eklund 2023) are meant to explain what (Eklund 2015) meant when he says that he is *not* arguing that TRUTH (and the other concepts he considers) cannot be engineered, that clarification is somewhat misleading. For Eklund's 2023 gloss – that the arguments in (Eklund 2015) are "only to the effect that for a thinker with a concept playing a given role, there are in a sense . . . no alternatives" (2023: 13) – clearly concerns one possible limit to conceptual engineering, namely whether truth can be revised, regardless of whether it can be eliminated. If truth cannot be revised – if there are no alternative TRUTH-like concepts – then engineering projects involving truth are doomed to fail.[6]

2.2. WHY THINK THAT TRUTH CANNOT BE ENGINEERED?

In his paper "Intuitions, Conceptual Engineering, and Conceptual Fixed Points" (2015), Eklund proposes a thought experiment which supposedly throws doubt on the possibility of replacing TRUTH. It concerns the (supposed) role of truth as being the aim of belief and assertion and asks whether any other property could fill this role. (It must be assumed that the concept of truth uniquely picks out the property of truth and that any conceptual replacement would result in us picking out a different concept for this to be relevant to conceptual revision. We come back to this below.) The thought experiment responds to an argument by Stich (1990), discussed in the next section. Here is the gist of Eklund's argument:

> Suppose we set out to conceptually engineer truth. Insofar as the job description of truth is that of being the property our beliefs and assertions aim at, the engineering

[5]For one thing, it would presumably show that Scharp's (2013) replacement project is doomed to fail: there are no truth-like concepts akin to his ASCENDING TRUTH and DESCENDING TRUTH which could take the place of TRUTH.

[6]See (Eklund 2020) for another kind of limitation on the argument in (Eklund 2015), one based on "slow switching," according to which a community arguably retains its original concepts for some time after a shift in the "truth norms" it accepts (2020: 2069). However, this limitation does not concern whether a non-switching community can aim at something other than truth in asserting – which is what the thought experiment in (Eklund 2015) is about – and so leaves plenty of room for an argument based on that thought experiment.

> project would be that of finding a property more adequate to that job description. But by what has been noted about Stich's argument, it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property. (Eklund 2015: 379)

That is, engineering TRUTH involves considering the function of the concept – its job description or role – and finding something better able to fill that function. However, "by what has been noted about Stich's argument," it's difficult to even conceive of something filling TRUTH's function as picking out the property that beliefs and assertions aim at. Contra Stich, who argues that which truth-like property our beliefs have is irrelevant, Eklund argues that it's not even clear what other property beliefs *could* be aimed at.

One could argue against the claim that engineering TRUTH is only about finding another concept "more adequate to [TRUTH'S] job description," but I'm happy to grant Eklund this for the sake of argument. One could also consider all the accounts of belief and assertion which do not take truth to be their aim: clearly, it's possible for many of us to conceive of something other than truth filling this job description. Below, I discuss what Eklund has to assume about conceptual individuation to avoid the straightforward rejection of his claim based on the existence of these other accounts.

I'll discuss two interpretations of Eklund's argument and argue that neither supports the claim that "it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property." Since (Eklund 2015) is a direct response to (Stich 1990), we need to know what Stich's argument is. We discuss this in the next section before turning to a detailed discussion of Eklund's thought experiment. The two possible arguments it gives against the possibility of engineering TRUTH are discussed in section 3 below.

2.3. BACKGROUND: STICH'S ARGUMENT

As noted, what Eklund (2015) says is a direct response to an argument by Stich (1990), so we need to get clear on Stich's argument before we get to the thought experiment. Stich argues that we do not – and should not – value having true beliefs over beliefs with different truth-like properties. The reason is that beliefs are true by standing in the right relation to the right propositions, but there are many equally good ways of relating beliefs to propositions which give us different

truth-like properties. So, it does not matter whether our beliefs are true or have one of these other properties instead.

One of the big assumptions this argument builds on is the token identity of beliefs and brain states (Stich 1990: 103). These beliefs / brain states are individuated independently of their content, which immediately raises a question: How do we ensure that the right belief is mapped to the right content, and how do beliefs acquire semantic properties? They acquire semantic properties by being mapped in a suitable way to propositions, says Stich: a true belief, for instance, is true in virtue of being mapped to a true proposition (1990: 104–105). Which true proposition? That depends on which metasemantic theory is the correct one. We'll get to that shortly, but let's look at the mapping function first.[7] This should give us a specification of the truth condition of a sentence based on the semantic properties of its parts. One way to get this is through a Tarskian truth theory, which defines a truth predicate for a given (object-)language. (Importantly, it does not attempt to define TRUTH in general, i.e., the concept that all the truth predicates in different languages (supposedly) express.)[8] It is a recursive definition that starts from base clauses specifying the referents of names (e.g., "Nishi" refers to Nishi) and the extension of predicates (e.g., "is a cat" applies to *a* iff *a* is a cat) and shows that the truth conditions of a sentence depend in a systematic, compositional way on the semantic properties of its parts by applying recursion rules for the language's quantifiers and logical connectives. Importantly, each set of base and recursion clauses specifies one language. So, what makes one such formal language the right model for a natural language like English?

Stich thinks that a causal-historical metasemantics à la Kripke (1980) gives the base clauses for natural languages. There are two elements to the causal theory: first, we have the name-fixing events whereby some object (say, a cat) or substance (say, water) is given a name; second, we have the reference-preserving transmissions (the "causal chains" of uses) of that name. For instance, when you use the name "Nishi" you can refer to my cat because you have picked up that name from my use of it, and I have picked up the use of that name from the animal

[7]The following is about language. Stich adds some features to make it fit his account of belief, but we do not need to go into that to bring forth what's relevant to Eklund's argument.

[8]This is an essential part of Tarski's theory, meant to ensure that Liar sentences cannot be formulated. We end up with a hierarchy of languages where the object language, i.e., one we're studying, does not have its own truth predicate but where truth is defined for it by the metalanguage – the one we formulate our theory about the object language in – and the truth predicate for that language in turn is given by yet another metalanguage, and so on.

shelter's use of it, and they in turn fixed its reference by naming her "Nishi." So, we can fill in the Tarskian story with an account of how we arrive at the base clauses for names and predicates, which connects these axioms with how we use language to communicate. Thus, we have here a way of mapping (mental, uttered, or inscribed) sentence tokens with truth conditions: the causal theory connects words to their referents, and the truth theory takes these atomic facts about word–world relations – the base clauses – as input and gives out a specification of the truth conditions of complex sentences built up from them. Assuming that propositions have their truth conditions essentially, we are uniquely picking out a proposition through our specification of truth conditions, thus we are mapping sentence tokens with propositions.

However, a different metasemantic account will give us different base clauses and thus different mappings from sentences to propositions. Take, for example, a descriptivist theory of reference whereby we refer to what (uniquely and best) satisfies the description we associate with an expression. For example, "Cora Sandel" refers to the author of the Alberte trilogy: thus, if it turned out that the person we thought was Cora did not write the books, then "Cora" does not refer to that person but instead to whoever wrote the books. Such an account will, in some cases, map a sentence to a different proposition than what the causal account does, as will different hybrid accounts mixing elements from causal and descriptivist theories. To distinguish between different mapping functions, we can follow Stich in labelling only the mapping functions supported by the causal theory "reference," and these other functions we may call "reference*," "reference**," etc. For instance, "REFERENCE*** might be designed so that 'water' includes in its EXTENSION*** not only H_2O but also the famous stuff that looks and tastes just like it, XYZ" (1990: 116). Assuming that "water" belongs to the object language and "H_2O" and "XYZ" belong to the metalanguage, we get different base clauses depending on whether we base it on reference or reference***. In the first case, we get " 'water' applies to *a* iff *a* is a fluid composed of H_2O," and in the second we get " 'water' applies to *a* iff *a* is a fluid composed of H_2O or XYZ." But since the languages for which a Tarskian truth theory is given are determined by their base (and recursive) clauses, this gives us two different languages. Also, the truth predicates defined for these languages will be different because all that we get from such theories are predicates of the form "true-in-L_1," "true-in-L_2," etc. To continue using stars instead of subscripts, we can say that these variations on

causal and descriptivist theories of reference give us two different truth predicates: "true" and "true***."

With this in mind, we are finally in a position to consider Eklund's thought experiment.

2.4. EKLUND'S THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Suppose that we come across a community for the very first time and try to figure out how to interpret what they say and do. People in this community utter sentences like "water is wet" and "water is good if you're thirsty" in situations where they're apparently describing the properties of the stuff in their lakes and glasses. Based on this, we assume that they mean approximately the same as we do by "water." But only approximately, for when faced with Twin Earth scenarios, their considered judgement is that twater – the stuff in the lakes and rivers of Twin Earth – is identical to water. Thus, we may conclude that the interpretation function appropriate to them is one that preserves reference***, which in turn means that they employ a truth*** predicate.

However, Eklund questions whether this is the conclusion we should draw:

> Suppose, as should be possible if Stich's view is true, that there are possible people who care for truth*** the way we care about truth. When we seek to believe and assert what's true, they seek to believe and assert what's true***, etc. The question then arises: why should we say that it is the same propositions they believe and assert that we believe and assert? Should we not instead say that they employ a concept *water****, under which both H_2O and XYZ fall, rather than the concept *water*? Their use of the word "water" is exactly like how we would use a word expressing the concept water***.
>
> . . .
>
> Suppose we set out to conceptually engineer truth. Insofar as the job description of truth is that of being the property our beliefs and assertions aim at, the engineering project would be that of finding a property more adequate to that job description. But by what has been noted about Stich's argument, it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property. (Eklund 2015: 378–379)

The question is whether our two communities differ in what we take to be true – in the content of our beliefs and assertions – or in what truth-like property our beliefs and assertions aim at. When they say, "water is tasty," should we take this to mean *water is tasty* but be aimed at truth***, or should we rather take it to mean *water**** *is tasty* and be aimed at truth?

Why is it hard to conceive of something besides truth being the aim of belief, and how is this shown by Eklund's thought experiment? As Eklund leaves us with the question of whether our communities differ in content or aim, as it were, without giving details or explaining how this connects to the possibility of replacing truth, it is not clear exactly what the argument here is. I'll discuss two interpretations of it in section 3 below and argue that neither version of the argument establishes that TRUTH cannot be engineered.

2.5. UNPACKING THE THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

2.5.1. TARSKI'S PACKAGE DEAL

First, we have to ask whether Eklund's question – whether the two communities differ in what they believe to be true or in what truth-like property their beliefs aim at – even makes sense. On Stich's account, our beliefs and the other community's beliefs would be mapped to different propositions, but, importantly, the different mapping procedures give us different truth predicates (and, thus, different TRUTH-like concepts and properties; we come back to this shortly). A belief *b* is true if it is mapped to proposition p_1, but it is true* if it is mapped to proposition p_2. Far from the community either saying that *p* but aiming at truth***, or saying that *p**** but aiming at truth, they either go star or no star across the board. Given that they refer to both H_2O and XYZ by "water," but we do not, and given that meaning uniquely determines reference such that if two expressions refer to different things, then they do not mean the same: their word "water" and our word "water" mean different things. The claim is not just that the input in a function that determines truth is different; rather, that we have two different functions: one taking us to truth and the other to truth***. At least, that is what we should accept if we base our semantics on Tarski, as Stich does. The base and recursive clauses determine which language we speak, and the truth predicate defines TRUTH for that language only. This is an extensionally defined predicate, specific to the set of sentences to which it applies: thus, if the languages differ, so do their truth predicates.

But Eklund's question is based on the possibility of freely mixing elements from different languages (without creating a new language): "water***" and "truth," on the one hand, and "water" and "truth***" on the other. This runs contrary to Tarski's, Stich's, and thus Eklund's own assumptions as he is talking

about a (potential) consequence if we take Stich to have specified different truth predicates. But we cannot separate the truth* predicate from the language* any more than we can separate a recursive clause from the language.

In the following, in order to make sense of as much as possible of what Eklund says, we'll leave Stich and Tarski behind and instead try to reconstruct Eklund's argument with otherwise-specified truth-like concepts.

2.5.2. PREDICATES, CONCEPTS, AND PROPERTIES

Stich talks about predicates, Eklund talks about properties, and what we're interested in here is concepts. In arguing that the concept TRUTH is a conceptual fixed point, Eklund almost exclusively talks about the property of truth. For this to make sense, we have to assume that there is a very close connection between concepts and the properties they pick out, such that the concept TRUTH (only) picks out the property of truth, while TRUTH*** (only) picks out truth***. This means that they have to be exactly parallel in fineness of grain: if concepts are fine-grained, then so are properties, and vice versa. What about predicates? Again, to make sense of Eklund's discussion of Stich we have to assume that the connection between predicates and concepts is straightforward and tight: any change in a predicate brings with it a change in the concept expressed. On this assumption, the various truth predicates we get by varying the base clauses in a Tarski theory express different potential replacement concepts for truth.

One way for Eklund to challenge the idea that Stich describes potential replacement concepts is to say that "true" and "true***" do not express two different TRUTH-like concepts and do not stand for two different truth properties. Perhaps he meant to challenge Stich's story in this way. However, if that were his intention, I would expect him to challenge not that we express different propositions, but instead that the fact that we express different propositions is relevant to determining the property we aim at. That is, if he meant to challenge that a Tarski theory plus different metasemantic theories give us different truth-like properties – and this would be a reasonable point to make – then the relevant question is *not* whether we express different propositions but whether that has any bearing on the nature of truth. But since Eklund asks the first and not the second question, I think we have to rule out this interpretation of his argument. In the following, let's accept for the sake of argument the assumptions that i) a difference in predicates resulting from a metasemantic difference results in a difference in concept

expressed, and ii) that different concepts pick out different properties. That way, we can follow Eklund in moving quite freely between talk of concepts, properties, and predicates.[9]

2.5.3. AIM OF BELIEF AND ASSERTION

Lastly, we need to say something about the connection between truth and beliefs and assertions. Eklund says that the "job description" of truth – the role that we postulate truth to play – "is that of being the property our beliefs and assertions aim at" and that beliefs and assertions are "guided by" truth (2015: 379). This is a commonly invoked metaphor, and there are many ways to unpack it.[10] Here, I take "truth is the aim of assertion/belief," "assertion/belief is governed by a truth-norm," and "assertion/belief is guided by truth" to express roughly the same claim, namely that the standard of correctness for assertions or beliefs is truth because they are correct only if true. This is arguably the least restrictive way of spelling out the "aim of" metaphor, and so the one most likely to make Eklund's claims come out true.

3. TURNING THE THOUGHT EXPERIMENT INTO AN ARGUMENT

3.1. THE "BEST INTERPRETATION" INTERPRETATION

On one way to understand Eklund's argument, it's not really a question as to whether we should take this other community to express *-propositions and aim at truth or, instead, express what we do but aim at truth*: it is both an expression

[9] To avoid this, could Eklund instead argue that there is one concept of truth but that there are many different properties playing the "truth role" in different discourses, as alethic pluralists such as Lynch (2009) argue? That would make the way he sets up the thought experiment deeply puzzling, particularly the fact that he mostly talks about properties in a discussion about *conceptual* engineering. As discussed above, this only makes sense if we assume that the concept of TRUTH only picks out one property.

[10] For a handful of examples, one could say that to assert that *p* is to present *p* as true (Wright 1994, Bar-On and Simmons 2007); that when one asserts that *p* one undertakes a commitment to the truth of *p* (Green 2017); or that an assertion is correct only if it is true (Rähme 2014). See the papers in (Brown and Cappelen 2011) for further examples. Similarly, one could say that believing that *p* is to regard *p* as true; that a belief is correct only if it is true; or that belief is "regulated for" truth. See (Shah and Velleman 2005) for an account that combines all three claims, and the papers in (Chan 2013) for other ways of spelling out the claim that belief aims at truth.

of the presumption that this other community aims at truth and an attempt to shift the burden to those who would argue otherwise.

If this is what Eklund had in mind, then his objection is that the interpretation favored by Stich (that they aim at truth***) is inferior to the interpretation that this other community express different propositions but aim at truth because "it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property" (2015: 379). We should understand the thought experiment as playing the ball back to Stich's corner: the burden of proof is on Stich to make sense of a property other than truth being the aim of beliefs and assertions.

However, this contradicts Eklund's claim that

> the consideration presented also does not say that the interpretation of the people concerned as using the concept water*** rather than the concept water is preferable to an interpretation according to which they aim at truth*** rather than truth. At most it yields the result that Stich's preferred description of such a case – that the people in question care for truth*** – is not preferable. (Eklund 2015: 379)

This passage would have ruled out the "best interpretation" interpretation of the argument had it not contradicted what Eklund says directly following it. Here, he says that "it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property" (Eklund 2015: 379). But if it is, in fact, hard to conceive of something other than truth being the aim of belief and assertion, then it is clearly preferable to say that they aim at truth (and not truth***). If we have one reasonable interpretation of what this other community means and what their belief and assertion practices involve, and one hardly intelligible one, then we should prefer the reasonable interpretation.

A weaker interpretation of the argument in the vicinity of Eklund's thought experiment is that assertions and beliefs are so closely connected to truth that no other truth-like property could do what we need of it (in particular, explaining assertion and belief). If so, then these different *-properties are not relevant alternatives: even though we can posit them, they are not on par with "ordinary" truth, satisfaction, reference, etc. So, it is not that we *could not* replace TRUTH with one of these potential replacements, it is just that it would not be theoretically fruitful to do so. It is not so much that it would be hard to conceive of truth* being the aim of belief and assertion, but that it would obscure our accounts of belief and assertion.

To recap, the strong version of the "best interpretation" interpretation of Eklund's argument is that because it is difficult to even conceive of something

other than truth being the aim of belief and assertion, we can conclude that Stich's interpretation of the case fails unless and until he shows that something other than truth could fill this role. The weak version of the argument is that because truth is so central to our practices of belief and assertion, a different property is simply not a relevant alternative.

There are substantial problems with the argument on both interpretations. In the next section, I'll first consider an objection that applies to both interpretations before turning to one relevant only to the second, weaker one.

3.2. OBJECTIONS

The metaphor that belief and assertion aim at truth, however we unpack that metaphor, does not discriminate between truth and truth***. Whether we say that a belief is correct iff true, or that one should assert only that which is true, that they are guided by truth, etc., the metaphor remains neutral on what exactly truth is. It does, of course, impose some restriction on what truth is: minimally, truth must be something that can serve as an aim. But the metaphor does not specify what account of the nature of truth – or belief or assertion, for that matter – we should accept. To say that our assertions *could not* have aimed at truth*** is to say that if the descriptivist theory of reference is true (and, thus, that truth***, not truth, is the aim of assertion), then our apparent assertions are not assertions. This is extremely implausible. Moreover, there are accounts of both belief and assertion that do not use TRUTH to explain these phenomena,[11] so for either version of this argument to work, Eklund would have to argue that i) truth is necessarily involved in assertion and belief, and ii) there is only one specific TRUTH-like concept that could be used to account for assertion and belief. So, the argument is at best incomplete, but especially ii) shows how implausible such an argument, even if properly fleshed out, would be.

Furthermore, the weaker version of the "best interpretation" argument does not make sense as an argument to the effect that TRUTH is a conceptual fixed point. It argues that we *should not* replace truth, not that we *could not* do so. If this is what Eklund had in mind, then it is misleading to present the thought experiment as a case "where we are dealing with (intuitively speaking) basic concepts and

[11] See (Cappelen 2011) and (Pagin 2011) for accounts of assertion that do not invoke truth, and (Horwich 2010) for a way of combining a deflationary theory of truth – one on which TRUTH has no explanatory role to play – with accounts of belief, assertion, and other phenomena.

where there do seem to be interesting limitations to conceptual engineering" (2015: 378).

I have not conclusively shown that the "best interpretation" version of Eklund's argument fails, but I think the foregoing shows that there are serious problems with this version of the argument, and that should motivate us to look for a different one. It is to this we turn next.

3.3. THE INDETERMINACY INTERPRETATION

A different interpretation of Eklund's objection to Stich is that it is indeterminate whether the community in question really aims at truth*** or whether, instead, the contents of its beliefs and assertions differ from ours while aiming at truth. There just is no discernible difference between saying that they believe (say) that *water is wet*, where this is correct iff true***, or that *water**** *is wet*, which is correct iff true.

This interpretation fits especially well with how Eklund presents a variant of the argument in Eklund (2012). Here he says: "[w]hat I am asking is what reason we have to take there to be any genuine difference at all between the hypotheses" (2012: 235). This sounds like a rhetorical question and that he thinks there is no reason to think that there is any genuine difference here.

The quote just given is not about Stich's case. However, Eklund presumably takes it to apply equally well to Stich as he uses the same argument that is repeated (nearly verbatim) in his (2015) to support and strengthen the argument given in his (2012).

The quote is taken from an argument against the claim that there can be multiple non-synonymous truth predicates in different languages that stand for different truth-like properties. What does it mean to say that there can be non-synonymous truth predicates? It cannot be that they are spelled "truth," for that is neither necessary nor sufficient to count as a truth(-like) predicate (not necessary – "true" and "sann" both mean *true*; not sufficient – 't'^'r'^'u'^'e' means *swimming* in a possible language). But "nor can it be that there are these different truth predicates all meaning the same as our 'true' yet still behaving differently (arguably absurd)" (Eklund 2012: 234). So, we need to find some other way of identifying truth predicates across different languages. Eklund suggests that we appeal to assertion: "there can be some other property than the one our actual truth predicate stands for, such that some community's practice of

assertion is characterized by aiming at that property instead. Then that property is an alternative truth property, and a predicate which stands for it qualifies as another truth predicate" (2012: 234). The idea is that if we have a community whose assertion-like speech acts are characterized by its relation to a different property, then that property would count as an alternative truth(-like) property, and a predicate standing for it would count as an alternative truth predicate.[12]

However, Eklund says that there is a "principled problem when it comes to making sense of the envisaged scenario" (2012: 235), i.e., that a different community aims at a property other than truth with their assertions. The problem is that of deciding whether the property they aim for with their assertions is different, or rather whether the content of their assertions is different. (Notice the parallel to his argument against Stich, which he immediately presents as a means of clarifying and strengthening the argument (Eklund 2012: 235–236).) One way of making sense of this indeterminacy interpretation of the argument is to argue that in all possible situations in which we could observe this other community, nothing they could do would give us a reason to prefer one hypothesis over the other. They are empirically indistinguishable. Sure, we *understand* the difference between these two hypotheses, and it would not be nonsensical to say that one but not the other is true. But if we are to explain their assertions and other behavior without already knowing how to interpret their truth predicate, then we will be at a loss when trying to decide between these hypotheses.[13]

[12]This works only under two assumptions: first, that assertion aims at truth(-like properties), and so that looking at different assertion practices can help us identify different truth-like properties (i.e., it's assumed that we do not end up with something too different from truth). Second, if two predicates pick out different properties, then they are different predicates (which means that if, e.g., "is a salad" used to pick out the property of being a dish mostly made of lettuce but now truly applies to fruit salads too, then we now have two salad predicates). Both assumptions can be challenged, but let us take them on board for the sake of argument.

[13]A stronger interpretation of Eklund's argument is this: if we do not have any reason to think that there is a difference between the two hypotheses, then there just is no fact of the matter whether they are different or not. But that would be absurd (clearly, there is a difference between the practice of assertion and the content of assertions), so we should reject the troublesome assumption that this other community makes assertions guided by a property other than truth. His argument then becomes a reductio of the claim that there could be a community whose assertions are guided by a property other than truth.

3.4. OBJECTIONS

It may not be clear how this problem of interpretation is relevant to the possibility of engineering TRUTH. For, or so one could object, we are not after a radical interpretation of ourselves and our concepts: we already have (ways of specifying) these concepts, namely TRUTH***, ASCENDING TRUTH, and other potential replacements for truth; we are only questioning which is better.

As Eklund does not elaborate on his argument, it is not clear what he would say to the indeterminacy interpretation of it or the objection that this is not relevant to engineering projects. But here is one potential reply on his behalf which challenges the claim that we do have access to these different TRUTH-like concepts. It goes like this: we cannot start by assuming that we have an independent grasp on different TRUTH-like concepts. We have to start by answering the question: What is it that makes all of these concepts TRUTH-like? Assuming that each predicate expresses exactly one concept, this question is equivalent to the question that Eklund explicitly considers, namely "What is it that makes all of these predicates truth-like?" Eklund's challenge is, then, that we do not know how to answer these questions. That is, we do not know how to specify potential replacements for TRUTH. We may think that we do, but when looking closer at these potential replacement concepts, we find ourselves unable to explain even whether we are considering replacing the correctness condition on mental states and speech acts or the content of such states and acts. That is, on closer inspection, we do not really know what it is that we are considering replacing TRUTH with; so, until we have answered that question, we cannot (intentionally) replace TRUTH.

Here is one way to get around this. One thing that is puzzling about Eklund's (2012) argument that we would not know how to recognize a truth-like predicate is that he only considers three options for what a non-synonymous truth predicate could be: i) that it is spelled "true," ii) that it means exactly what our truth predicate means but behaves differently, and iii) that it picks out a property that characterizes (an) assertion(-like practice). I take it that "behaving differently" means "function differently." Why not also consider predicates that function similarly but mean different things? Perhaps this is what Eklund is getting at when he says that deflationists might say that "what makes a predicate a truth

predicate in a given language is that it satisfies that language's counterpart of the T-schema" (2012: 234).[14]

But a better proposal is to look beyond the form of the T-schema to its function: to what it is deflationists think reasoning with instances of this schema enables us to do. It is not given that these functions depend on the T-schema: perhaps we are even better able to secure them if we give up the schema (that is the basis of Scharp's (2013) replacement project). There is also no reason to restrict this to deflationary theories: all theories of truth give some story of what it is that having a concept of truth (and some way of expressing it) enables us to do such that we would be poorer without it.

Having identified functions which seem especially central to TRUTH, we can identify replacement concepts as those concepts which fill (all, some, or the most important of) those functions. The most obvious function of a TRUTH(-like) concept and a predicate to express it is due to its 'transparency': how we can 'look through' claims of truth to claims about the world. We are entitled to infer something about how the world is (e.g., that water is wet) based on a claim about language (" 'water is wet' is true") in a way that we are not in general allowed to do: we cannot, for instance, infer that water is wet from the claim that "water is wet" is three words long or contains two 'w'-s. This is, of course, what the T-schema captures for two-valued languages (that are safe from Liar paradoxes) by showing how, e.g., " 'water is wet' is true" is equivalent to "water is wet." But this transparency of truth need not be restricted to two-valued languages. From the claim that "water is wet" is certain to be true, we can likewise infer that water is wet (the difference is that we have a potentially large class of statements that fall outside the extension and anti-extension of "certainly true"). It should be clear that the same goes for "truth***."

There are other functions of TRUTH one could highlight, not least its explanatory functions (this is obviously not available to deflationists). This is, in effect, what Eklund does when assuming that TRUTH should account for assertion and belief: he focuses on one potential function of TRUTH and uses that when attempting to identify what a non-synonymous truth predicate could be. We could also identify multiple functions that seem central to TRUTH and use these as a guide in

[14] Eklund rightly criticizes this suggestion: "this requires that we should be able to, so to speak, identify biconditionals with their counterparts across languages with different logics. That might not be trivial. What is more, we should hardly expect truth predicates in many-valued languages to satisfy (those languages' counterparts of) the T-schema" (2012: 234).

identifying potential replacements, whether a single new concept that better fills TRUTH's "job description" or multiple replacement concepts, each filling one part of that job description (this is what Scharp does by proposing two concepts that each do half of TRUTH's job).[15]

It seems that we have all we need to identify potential replacement concepts, thus avoiding the indeterminacy. One would, of course, have to do real philosophical work in showing that (some) concepts have functions, that TRUTH has functions *x*, *y*, and *z*, and that other concepts (can) have one or more of these functions. This involves explaining what conceptual functions are and arguing that concepts have functions. It also involves first-order theorizing by arguing that TRUTH has some specific functions. If deflationism is right, then TRUTH has only expressive and not explanatory functions; if belief does not aim at truth, then explaining belief may not be one of TRUTH's functions, etc. So, we cannot assume from the outset that this will be a workable way of identifying potential replacement concepts. But it is on Eklund to show either that a functionalist reply to how we can recognize potential replacement concepts (beyond its role in accounting for belief and assertion) does not work or that his problem arises also if we consider more than just one of the functions TRUTH can be claimed to have. Having seen none of this, and faced with both the vast literature on truth and what it can explain and the growing literature on conceptual functions, I think we can conclude that it is at least premature to conclude that what Eklund says about belief and assertion – on either interpretation – casts doubt on the possibility of engineering TRUTH.

3.5. A DILEMMA CONCERNING CONCEPTUAL INDIVIDUATION

There is a fundamental problem with how this thought experiment, and thus any argument based on it, is presented. This is a feature Eklund's discussion shares with much of the literature on conceptual engineering and is a rather relaxed attitude towards the nature and individuation of concepts, where general claims are made about which concept is expressed by what word, and when two

[15] Here, one could draw on the extensive literature on conceptual functions. In the conceptual engineering literature, conceptual functions are often invoked to ensure stability of subject matter through conceptual change, i.e., to avoid changing the subject by changing the concept (one does not improve theorizing about *x* by talking about *y* instead (Strawson 1963, Cappelen 2018: 98–103)). For accounts that appeal to conceptual functions to solve this problem, see (Haslanger 2020a, 2020b), (Nado 2019), (Thomasson 2020), (Prinzig 2018), and (Brigandt 2010).

concepts are distinct without connecting this to any detailed theory of concepts or principles of conceptual identity and individuation. Given the controversies surrounding any account of the nature of concepts, this is generally unwise. Here, it creates a dilemma for Eklund because if concepts are coarsely individuated, then TRUTH and TRUTH*** are arguably identical, so it does not make sense to say that assertion and belief are given in terms of TRUTH not TRUTH***; however, if they are finely individuated, then it is not feasible to argue that TRUTH cannot be engineered. Or so I will argue in the rest of this section.

Let us tackle the first horn of the dilemma first. Why think that TRUTH and TRUTH*** are identical if concepts are coarsely individuated?[16] Think of coarse-grained concepts as the inclusive way of individuating concepts that is assumed when we talk of "the" or "our" concept of truth without discriminating between different theories of truth.[17] This is presumably the kind of grain Eklund has in mind when he talks about TRUTH without specifying further, such as when saying that "[h]ere is a reason why the idea of replacing *the* concept of truth is problematic" (2015: 378; italics inserted). But to make sense of talk of the/our concept of truth in a way that does not discriminate between different theories of truth, relatively minor[18] extensional differences cannot make a difference: for example, whether there are any gappy (neither true nor false) or glutty (both true and false) sentences should not make a difference to *the* concept of truth on a coarse-grained view.

We have two options if concepts are coarsely individuated: i) The concept–property relation is not as tight as assumed, and although we grant that different metasemantic theories would specify different truth-like properties, this does not directly impact our concept of TRUTH. If so, then Eklund's argument simply fails

[16]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me on this point.

[17]An illustration might be helpful. Take two people who disagree on whether or not the concept SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION only picks out mechanical explanations. Do they have the same concept of scientific explanation? The extension of what person 1 takes the concept to be is different from the extension of what person 2 thinks the concept is: that is a perfectly good reason to think that we are dealing with numerically distinct concepts. However, we often talk about concepts in a way which glosses over such substantive differences: for example, describing our two people as both using the concept of scientific explanation (as opposed to using two different concepts expressed with the same words). An example closer to home is when dialethists, alethic primitivists, and correspondence theorists are all taken to be talking about *the* (or *our*) concept of truth. It is this inclusive and often pre-theoretical individuation of "concept" that is meant by "coarsely grained concepts."

[18]When are the extensional differences too great for it to make sense to talk about "the" concept of X? I do not know, and I do not think we can answer that in a theory-neutral way.

to address whether TRUTH is a conceptual fixed point as he is mostly talking about the property of truth and not the concept. ii) If the concept-property relation is as tight as assumed, however, then TRUTH and TRUTH*** are identical, and the argument that the community aims at TRUTH and not TRUTH*** collapses.

What about the second horn of the dilemma? If concepts are fine-grained enough to ensure that TRUTH and TRUTH*** are distinct, then it is very implausible that TRUTH could not be engineered. On Stich's account, causal and descriptivist theories of reference, not to mention every kind of hybrid theory, pick out different truth-like properties (and remember that we assume that the different truth-like predicates given by the different metasemantic theories express distinct concepts: see section 2 above). Eklund follows this by doubting that truth*** (or anything distinct from truth) could be the aim of belief. If a difference in the metasemantics results in a difference in the concept of truth, then presumably variations in theories of truth also specify different concepts. If extensional differences are sufficient for two concepts to be distinct, then, say, theories differing in whether they accept truth-value gluts specify different concepts of truth. If different *conceptions*, or ways of thinking about something, are sufficient for two *concepts* to be distinct, then most theories would specify different concepts of truth. Such fine-grainedness straightforwardly undermines the conclusion that "it is hard even properly to conceive of a practice of belief or assertion that is guided by a different property" (2015: 378): existent theories already specify different potential replacement concepts. (It would also undermine any talk of "the" or "our" concept of truth.)

In a different paper, Eklund explicitly claims that different theories specify different concepts in a way that would ensure that they are finely grained:

> The above paragraph also indicates what types of alternatives to the ordinary concept of truth I will consider in my discussion: alternative truth-like concepts that differ in that they obey different logical principles. Obviously one can also imagine comparing truth-like concepts that differ also along other dimensions. For example, one might look at the debates over truth in the more metaphysics-oriented literature and conclude that there are correspondence concepts of truth, coherence concepts of truth, epistemic concepts of truth, deflationist concepts of truth, etc., and hold that while our actual concept is of one of these types, the best truth concept to use is of another type. (Eklund 2014: 295)

But if all these theories specify different truth-like concepts, then has he not already shown that TRUTH is not a conceptual fixed point? If different theories

specify different concepts, it seems to be the case that there are – by Eklund's own lights – already many people with different concepts of truth(-like properties), and many people who have replaced their concept by changing their mind about which theory is correct (or by deferring to experts who have done so). So, far from giving us reasons to accept that TRUTH is unrevisable, Eklund quite convincingly makes the case that there are many different TRUTH-like concepts, and that engineering TRUTH is done by developing different theories of truth – something which we already know is both doable and frequently done.

It should be noted that Eklund (2014) is concerned with showing that replacing TRUTH is not well motivated or desirable, not whether it is *possible* to do so. So, perhaps what he says in this paper is not directly relevant to the argument presented in his (2015). However, in both papers, he oscillates between talking about a fine-grained concept of truth (e.g., TRUTH***, concepts specified by different theories) and "our" coarse-grained "ordinary" concept of truth (e.g., Eklund 2014: 296; 2015: 376). But there is a deep tension between talking, on the one hand, about "our" concept of truth and, on the other, saying that different logical principles or different theories of the nature of truth specify different TRUTH-like concepts. If by "our concept of truth" one is referring to the[19] concept expressed by natural-language predicates like "is true" and the concept one has to have in order to be able to categorize things as true or not true, then we are using a very coarse-grained notion of concept. But if we take different theories of truth to specify different TRUTH-like concepts, then we operate with a far more fine-grained notion of concepts.

To sum up, the dilemma is that we can either talk about "the" concept of truth where smallish extensional differences do not matter, but then the argument that TRUTH cannot be engineered cannot get off the ground; or, we can take a more fine-grained approach where different theories of truth specify different TRUTH-like concepts, but then we have many potential replacement concepts already, and so the argument fails.

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us? If what I have argued in this paper is correct, then neither of the two arguments one could construct from Eklund's (2015) thought

[19]Assuming that "true" is not ambiguous (as Kölbel (2008) argues, following Tarski (1944)), in which case it expresses more than one concept.

experiment are convincing. Furthermore, any argument for the claim that TRUTH cannot be engineered which builds on Eklund's thought experiment must face the dilemma discussed in the last section, since the way the case is set up depends on switching freely between thinking about concepts in a fine-grained and a coarse-grained way. Improving the arguments would require being far more precise about the nature of concepts and their individuation criteria: the tools we have been working with – including a more-or-less unspecified, intuitive notion of concept – are just not sharp enough to show whether TRUTH can be engineered. However, such precision would collapse the argument, as shown in section 3.

So, while there might well be limits to conceptual engineering – and if any concepts are irreplaceable and unrevisable, TRUTH is presumably among them – Eklund's thought experiment does not establish this.

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