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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: *CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING – FOUNDATIONS AND APPLICATIONS*

1. CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING – WHAT’S THE FUSS ABOUT?

Conceptual engineering is no longer a new and unrecognized proposal on the philosophical margins. It has become one of the most discussed methodological views in contemporary analytic philosophy. Broadly understood, conceptual engineering is a methodological approach within philosophical studies of concepts that reorients how we think about this very process. Instead of merely describing our conceptual repertoire, as traditional conceptual analysis aimed to do, conceptual engineers ask whether, and how, we should revise, replace, or refine the tools of thought themselves.

Though conceptual engineering is still relatively recent as a named and widely recognized approach, it has rapidly gained popularity and impact. As David Bourget and David Chalmers (2023) reported in their study on philosophers’ views on philosophical issues, nearly 40% of anglophone philosophers consider conceptual engineering to be the single most important philosophical method. Much of this growing prominence is due to Herman Cappelen’s influential book *Fixing Language* (2018), which helped articulate the methodology in systematic form and linked it to several contemporary philosophical issues. Another important touchstone is Sally Haslanger’s influential paper “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?” (2000), which remains a *locus classicus* for the applied use of conceptual engineering. Nowadays, there is a rapidly

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increasing number of works on the foundations of conceptual engineering and the application of this approach to particular concepts.

However, the core idea behind the method – namely, that we can and should intervene in our conceptual repertoire – is much older. Rudolf Carnap is often regarded as the grandfather of conceptual engineering, primarily due to his work on explication (Carnap 1950/1956, Creath 1990). In fact, the very term “conceptual engineering” is often traced to Richard Creath, who introduced it in reference to Carnap’s explicatory project of replacing vague or imprecise concepts with more fruitful ones. The story, however, is far richer and points to a more central place for conceptual engineering in the history of philosophy. Beyond Carnap’s legacy, the term “conceptual engineering” also appears in metaphilosophical works by Simon Blackburn (1999) and Luciano Floridi (2011), and earlier in the context of the explication of *a priori* knowledge (Horowitz 1985) and even Parmenides’s philosophy (Mourelatos 1979, see also Kosecki 2024).

The broader philosophical impulse behind today’s conceptual engineering also has deeper historical roots. Earlier traditions, including American pragmatism (Misak 2024, Westerblad 2024), the Lvov-Warsaw School (Sękowski 2024, Brożek et al. 2020), and Michel Foucault’s genealogical methodology (Queloz 2021), have all argued for and adopted a similar methodological approach. It seems, then, that conceptual engineering has been at least anticipated by a variety of philosophical traditions; or, as some argue, perhaps philosophy as a whole should be reinterpreted as already adopting this methodological orientation (Eklund 2021, Thomasson 2021, Sękowski and Landes 2024). Although this view places conceptual engineering in a central position for philosophy, it has been widely contested for several reasons (Isaac 2025, Deutsch 2020), including – in his contribution to this issue – Max Deutsch’s argument that it is interpretively implausible.

Thus, this expansive view has not gone unchallenged and is far from unified. Despite a shared emphasis among proponents on the importance of conceptual change, there remains substantial disagreement about what, exactly, is being revised. This disagreement ranges from representationalist views, which take the targets of conceptual engineering to be psychological concepts (Isaac 2020), conceptions of the relevant subject matter (Sawyer 2020), or speaker meanings (Pinder 2021), to anti-representationalist views, which locate the targets of change in semantic rules (Thomasson 2021) or widely shared discursive inferences (Jorem and Löhr 2022).

Moreover, the foundational assumptions of conceptual engineering have also been challenged. Max Deutsch, while pointing out external factors concerning the meaning of concepts, argued that conceptual engineering is either trivial or misrepresents actual philosophical practice (2020). Some philosophers, even those more charitable to the very idea of conceptual engineering, have still expressed concern that although conceptual engineering might be a desirable philosophical activity, it is simply incredibly hard to do due to the lack of control over the complex and rich mixture of factors that determine the meaning of concepts (for discussion see, e.g.: Plunkett and Sundell 2013, Cappelen 2018, Koch 2021, Andow 2020a). Others have argued that the central move of conceptual change is simply a change of subject, rather than a real solution to philosophical problems (for discussion on this so-called “Strawson problem” or the “discontinuity problem,” see, e.g.: Strawson 1963, Cappelen 2018, Pinder 2020, Belleri 2025, and especially contributions to this issue from Yuanfan Huang, Dolores García-Arnaldos and Concha Martínez-Vidal).

All the above debates concern the foundations of conceptual engineering. They touch not only on its possibility and place within the philosophical landscape, but also on how it can be effectively practiced. Methodological discussions have recently approached this issue from several angles. For example, James Andow (2020b), Ethan Landes (2025), and Eduard Machery (2017) argue that conceptual change can and should be empirically informed, thus tying conceptual engineering methodologically to experimental philosophy. Others, like Jennifer Nado (2021), offer a hybrid model that navigates between empirical and theoretical approaches. Amie Thomasson (2020, 2025) and Matthieu Queloz (2021) emphasize the functional and pragmatic dimensions of concepts, suggesting that amelioration should be assessed in terms of how well concepts serve their explanatory, social, or communicative functions.

This variety of approaches shows that while conceptual engineering shares a general view that philosophy should be understood as a practice of conceptual improvement, it accommodates a rich palette of options when it comes to practical elements of philosophizing. These include the methods, targets, and goals that structure and drive particular projects (see Koch, Isaac, and Nefdt 2022).

Reflections on methods used in conceptual engineering have led us to the observation that conceptual engineering is not merely a metaphilosophical stance: it is also a practical tool. It is not just a theory about philosophy, but a method exercised within it. Even though conceptual engineering seems to be a new trend

in philosophy, the method has been present in philosophy for a long time. As mentioned above, it has been argued that the works of Gottlob Frege, the Lvov-Warsaw School, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Carnap, and even Friedrich Nietzsche could be called conceptual engineering since they involve evaluation, revision, and introduction of concepts. A more recent example would be Miranda Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice, in which she introduces concepts for forms of social experience and injustice that had previously lacked adequate shared names, or Kevin Scharp's (2013) work on truth, where he argues that truth is an inconsistent concept that should be replaced for specific theoretical purposes and presents replacements called ascending truth and descending truth. These two examples are symptomatic of a bigger trend within applied conceptual engineering – the focus on the practical and functional purposes of the ameliorated concepts in question.

There are various motivations behind revising and improving concepts. We might, however, distinguish two general categories of such motivations: one is concerned with the amelioration of theoretical concepts in order to improve our philosophical inquiries; the other concerns ameliorating concepts that are connected to the socio-political dimension of our everyday lives. Perhaps one of the most commonly known examples of revision of scientific concepts is the redefinition of the concept of “planet” (see Landes, Reuter 2025). Scharp's aforementioned work on truth is another example of engineering theoretical concepts. García-Arnaldos and Martínez-Vidal's contribution to this volume concerns the concept of naturalism and also falls into this category. As previously stated, some claim that perhaps all of philosophy is actually conceptual engineering; if that's correct, then many other theoretical concepts have been revised and improved for the sake of the quality of philosophical inquiry. However, many philosophers turn to conceptual engineering as a methodology that can be useful for more socio-politically oriented philosophical projects. Some focus on engineering what one might call folk concepts – the ordinary concepts that we use in our everyday life (see, e.g., Podosky 2022, Neufeld 2024).

While in some cases it might be clear that the target and purpose of the conceptual engineering project fall into the scientific or folk category, many such endeavors can be placed somewhere in between. One example is the project of engineering the concept of conspiracy theory (see Napolitano 2021, Napolitano, Reuter 2023, Reuter, Baumgartner 2025); another is Iñigo Valero's contribution to this volume, in which he discusses the scientific concept of sex and argues

for conceptual pluralism. The targets of these engineering projects are scientific concepts that are commonly used or referenced in everyday conversations. Successful revision and implementation is not only meant to improve the quality of scientific inquiry connected to these concepts, but also to further socio-political progress. This approach has been adopted by many researchers in contemporary social philosophy, as seen in Kate Manne's (2017) revisionary analysis of misogyny, Robin Dembroff's (2016) work on sexual orientation, and Elizabeth Cantalamessa's (2019) work on disability.

The contributions to this special issue engage with both the foundations and applications of conceptual engineering. This dual focus reflects the current state of the field: a discipline still preoccupied with clarifying its methods and commitments, while increasingly turning outward to use these methods in practice. In the next two sections, we offer a brief overview of the contents of this volume, organized according to this foundational–applied distinction.

2. CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING: FOUNDATIONS

The first group of articles in the issue brings together papers focused on the theoretical and methodological foundations of conceptual engineering.

In the opening contribution, “TRUTH at the Limits of Conceptual Engineering,” Mariona Miyata-Sturm addresses the question of whether certain concepts might lie beyond the reach of conceptual revision. Her point of departure is Matti Eklund's thought experiment about the possibility of revising the concept of truth. Miyata-Sturm reconstructs two distinct lines of argument that can be drawn from Eklund's experiment: one grounded in the fact that truth is central to belief formation; the other grounded in its foundational role in semantic interpretation. Miyata-Sturm carefully examines each version of the argument and argues that neither succeeds in establishing a serious challenge to engineering the concept of truth. In the paper she goes even further, offering a general dilemma for objections referring to thought experiments similar to those conducted by Eklund. Her key point is that such arguments depend crucially on the level of granularity at which the concept of truth is individuated. As she argues, once this is made explicit, it becomes clear that any such understanding remains compatible with at least some form of conceptual engineering.

Still within the foundational debates in conceptual engineering, the next paper, “Conceptual Engineering, Folk Commitments, and Reflective Equilibrium” by

Yuanfan Huang, addresses one of the most widely discussed objections: the discontinuity objection. This challenge, already mentioned above, raises a worry that conceptual engineers, by revising concepts, end up changing the subject rather than solving the original philosophical problem. Huang begins by offering a helpful but neglected distinction between three types of discontinuity: between the engineered concept and (i) the layperson's concept, (ii) the philosophical community's concept, or (iii) the concept of another specific philosopher. He then focuses on the first of these – namely, continuity with folk concepts – and criticizes the function-based and the topic-continuity responses. Against this backdrop, Huang develops his own proposal grounded in the Lycanian reflective equilibrium method. In his view, this framework preserves continuity by allowing conceptual revisions that remain coherent with folk commitments. Crucially, Huang argues that to make this method work, folk commitments should be understood as comprising three components: case intuitions, common sense, and ordinary language usage.

The final paper in this group turns to the role of intuitions in not only conceptual engineering, but also in philosophical methodology in general. In “Arguments All the Way Down: Informatism and Philosophical Method,” Max Deutsch offers a substantial challenge to conceptual engineering's methodological self-understanding by defending a completely different methodological outlook. Deutsch develops an account of the justificatory structure of philosophical practice under descriptive assumptions concerning the content of philosophical practice that stands in direct competition with the engineering approach. While, e.g., in the previous contribution by Huang, intuitions can function as a resource for preserving conceptual continuity within conceptual engineering, it is also widely held, especially in traditional conceptual analysis, that intuitions serve as the justificatory endpoint of philosophical argumentation. Deutsch, a vocal critic of conceptual engineering (see Deutsch 2020), challenges this idea by providing and defending a descriptive, intuition-denying, informatist model of philosophical justification. In his view, philosophical arguments ultimately concern descriptive matters of fact, and the source of justification in philosophy lies not in intuitions, but in further arguments, which themselves rest on no foundational intuitions. Deutsch not only articulates and defends this informatist account, but also addresses key objections to it. Finally, he engages with views that interpret philosophical practice as a conceptual engineering project driven by intuitions as reasons for revision. To defend a descriptive metaphilosophy, Deutsch challenges these inter-

pretations as interpretatively implausible, reinforcing his commitment to a model of philosophy as a non-revisionary, argument-based enterprise.

3. CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING: APPLICATIONS

The *Applications* part of the special issue opens with Istvan Danka's "The Engineer, the Scientist, and the Philosopher: Conceptual Engineering as an Applied Science," where he analyses the engineering metaphor that is used to describe philosophical endeavors. Danka shows that there is a misconception about engineering – common in the literature on conceptual engineering – whereby it is treated as (simply) fundamental research instead of applied science. He contrasts two approaches to conceptual engineering: the representationalist view, where the focus lies on improving our representational devices; and the applied view, where more attention is oriented towards the purposes that improved concepts are supposed to fulfill. While these two views aren't incompatible, Danka proposes that the applied view – more concerned with the external rather than the internal purposes of philosophy – is more adequate in terms of the engineering metaphor. Providing us with both descriptive and normative reasons for expanding our understanding of philosophy as conceptual engineering, Danka pulls our focus to the external purposes of philosophy.

In "Conceptual Engineering and Sex," Iñigo Valero argues for conceptual pluralism concerning sex. As a point of departure, Valero takes recent stances in the debate on whether sex is binary, showing that both sides of the dispute agree with the relevant facts about human sexual biology. Clarifying that the claim that sex is binary can be interpreted as either meaning that there are only two sexes (*dimorphism*), or that every human is either one or the other (*exhaustivity*), Valero turns to conceptual engineering in order to show us that there is more than one concept of sex. Through an analogy with pluralism concerning the biological concept of species, Valero shows us that several concepts might be needed in order to serve different functions and fulfill different purposes. Thus, depending on the context, both the binary concept of sex (conveying *dimorphism*) and the non-binary concept of sex (conveying *non-exhaustivity*) can be correct. While Valero does not argue for or against any particular concept of sex, he stresses that the claim "sex is binary" is significantly more problematic as it is not only epistemically but also morally problematic because it denies the existence of intersex people.

Dolores García-Arnaldos and Concha Martínez-Vidal close the applications part of the special issue with “On Fixing Concepts and Changing the Subject: The Case of ‘Naturalism’,” where the authors deal with the subject–change objection while engineering the concept of naturalism. García-Arnaldos and Martínez-Vidal recount Delia Belleri’s approach to this objection and use her proposal to analyze different versions of naturalism. To deal with the objection, Belleri describes the Semantic Conservative Approach (SCA), where the underlying inquiry does not allow for meaning change or metalinguistic questions without substantially changing the inquiry. Belleri also describes the Semantic Progressive Approach (SPA), where the inquiry allows for semantic change under specific circumstances. García-Arnaldos and Martínez-Vidal apply this framework to various versions of naturalism in order to determine whether they are instances of SCA or SPA. They conclude that while Timothy Williamson’s and Ronald Giere’s views do not substantially depart from standard scientific naturalism and therefore fall in the Semantic Progressive Inquiry category, there are also versions of naturalism that involve changing both the meaning of this term and the underlying inquiry, therefore they should not be called “naturalism.” Versions of “naturalism” that are instances of subject change, as the authors show, are minimal naturalism, Putnam’s Liberal Naturalism and Price’s Subject Naturalism.

We are deeply grateful to all the contributors to this issue, as well as to the reviewers and editors of *Filozofia Nauki / The Philosophy of Science*, whose engagement and support made the publication possible. The idea for this special issue emerged from the workshop *Conceptual Engineering: Foundations and Applications*, held in Warsaw, Poland, in June 2023, which we organized together with Antonina Jamrozik and Natalia Karczewska, to whom we are also very grateful. Our thanks also go to all other participants and attendees of the workshop, whose insights and conversations have helped shape the volume.

One of the great participants of the workshop was Anand Vaidya, who intended to submit a paper for the issue and was, quite simply, an inspiring and wonderful guy. Sadly, he was unable to complete it. We dedicate this issue to him.

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