## Going On, Not in the Same Way

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## 1. Introduction

I don't know what concepts are, or even if there are any (Machery 2009). So it feels awkward to set out to write a paper specifically on conceptual engineering. The fact is, I've always been much less interested in what our terms mean (or the content of our concepts) than in what in the world is worth talking about (Haslanger 2012, Ch. 16), though of course, these two issues are related. I suppose I have myself to blame, however, for I have suggested more than once that valuable projects within philosophy can be *ameliorative,* more specifically, that we should seek not only to elucidate the concepts we have, but aim to improve them in light of our legitimate purposes (Haslanger 2000/2012, Ch. 6; also Haslanger 2017). More specifically, I have argued for ameliorative accounts of *gender, man, woman,* and *race;* or, in the language of concepts, for ameliorated concepts of *gender*, etc.

Because my claims about amelioration have been sketchy and confusing, and have shifted over time, I begin my discussion with a recap of and reflection on my earlier projects with the aim of situating this paper in the context of what came before. I will then consider how and why, within an externalist semantics, we might understand the project of improving our concepts in ways that will promote greater justice. I will argue that at least certain concepts should be understood as playing a functional role in enabling us to coordinate and to organize our lives together. As background conditions and assumptions evolve, so do the contents of the concepts. This evolution is mostly not conscious or planned, and is rarely under our control. But in some cases we can demonstrate ways in which our conceptual resources are inadequate and undertake to improve them. This happens in law all the time (consider the evolving legal definitions of 'rape' and consequent changes in sex education and contestation over practices of consent); it also occurs in social movements – both in counter-publics and subaltern communities – and in fascist propaganda.

The idea is not that all we need to do in order to change the world is change our minds. Of course not. But the tools that culture provides us – such as language, concepts, and inferential patterns – provide the frame for coordination and shape our interaction. Contestation over language and meaning is not always "mere semantics" for it shapes our agency and our lives together. Sometimes we should (at least try to) take control over meanings, for if we don't, others will.

## 2. Historical and Political Context

When I wrote my paper, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" (published in 2000, but written in the mid-1990s), I was not thinking much about background philosophical work on concepts, and didn't have the language to express clearly what I

now think is plausible.  Although I was aiming to challenge traditional conceptual analysis by suggesting that our concepts might be improved by empirical or pragmatic considerations, I left the arguments schematic and unclear.  Let me begin by trying to situate my project within the literature I was addressing.

The 1990s were a moment when feminists were questioning whether and, if so, how we could continue to talk about women; some even suggested that we were entering a post-feminist era (Riley 1988; cf. Butler 1990).  At that time, one dominant conception of gender assumed gender to be primarily a matter of *identity*.  The idea of 'gender identity', however, took many forms.  For example, one approach took gender to be (roughly) a set of psychological predispositions constructed in a process of socializing males and females, with the result that gendered girls and women were those who developed a relational (vs. atomistic) or emotional (vs. rational) mode of being in relation to others and to the world (e.g., Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). Those of us who did not fit this stereotype, or who recognized the diversity of women's psychological orientations, found this unacceptable.

Those attending to the diversity of gender formations began to think that the effort to define gender was fruitless:

> If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler 1990, 3)[1]

A deeper problem is that a commitment to the social construction of gender "troubles" the political task of feminism:

> Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion of "a subject before the law" in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony. It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "women," the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought. (Butler 1990, 2)

In effect, gender is constructed and then assumed to be natural or given.  Women, as constructed, are the political subjects in whose name feminism speaks.[2] But if gendered constructions are part of

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[1] There is a huge literature on this issue. See e.g., Mohanty 1984; Harris 1990; Crenshaw 1991.

[2] The claim is not that embodied individuals are created by culture, but that *political subjects* are. Compare Locke on the distinction between men (sic) and persons.  See also Althusser 1970.

the problem, then feminism's effort to support *women* functions as a way to buttress and sustain the construction of gender. It might seem that an alternative would be to support prediscursive agents against the forces of gender. However, many feminists rejected this alternative: following the reasoning of the quote above, *any* notion of the subject is a juridical construction, so there are no *prediscursive* agents. Even if there were, they would not be women, and so not feminism's proper concern. I reject both of these arguments. Of course, I don't think there are humans who exist outside of culture, but the idea of a social/political agent – used as an analytical tool – is as much a resource for oppositional movements as it is for the dominant juridical structure and can be reappropriated to promote justice; and feminists can legitimately speak on behalf of all agents (not just women) against the binary construction of men and women.

At the time, I was interested in the idea that a critical theory should be *emancipatory*. But, as Butler notes, how could we emancipate ourselves from the structures that construct us as political subjects? To respond, it is helpful to draw on the tradition of critical theory (Geuss 1981). Start with the idea that we all participate in social structures and enact social practices that are unjust, but most of the time this is not obvious to us, even when we are the ones disadvantaged. Many of us get up in the morning and do our best to get our kids to school and ourselves to work on time, not thinking about the racialized school to prison pipeline, the exploitation of janitors who have cleaned our offices overnight, or our own enactment of the gendered division of labor. In much of ordinary life, our practices and our identities typically present themselves to us in ways that mask the broader system.

To explain our unthinking participation in unjust and oppressive structures, it is useful to have the concept of *ideology*. The concept of ideology is employed in different ways within different traditions. On my view, a *cultural technē* is a set of social meanings – including concepts, scripts, background assumptions ("analytic" truths), inferential patterns, salient metaphors, metonyms, conceptual oppositions, and (broadly speaking) grammar – that provides tools for interpreting and responding to each other and the world around us, and does so in ways that facilitate (better or worse) forms of coordination.[3] (See also Balkin 1998, 102.) The cultural technē provides the frames of our (fragmented, dynamic) practical orientation – or "practical consciousness" (Marx 1845; Giddens 1984, xxiii) – that enables us to engage in social life. An ideology is a cultural technē gone wrong: it may fail to provide us the tools to appreciate relevant parts of the world, or what's valuable and how things are valuable; it may organize us in unjust ways. When we are in the grip of an ideology, however, our practical orientation positions us to enact – usually unknowingly and routinely – practices and structures that sustain injustice (Althusser 1970, Hall 1996/2006, 24-25).

One step in a process of emancipation is to see how the local cultural technē is ideological. Geuss (1981) again:

> The very heart of the critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology. Their ideology is
> what prevents the agents in the society from correctly perceiving their true situation and

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[3] I've been increasingly tempted to include in the cultural technē not only abstract "meanings" and such, but also material signs and symbols, e.g. a stop sign or a traffic light.

> real interests; if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid
> themselves of ideological illusion. (2-3)

A critical theory challenges the understandings that motivate and appear to justify our unjust practices; it can also offer resources to think and act differently, with better epistemic and normative tools.

> The critical theory induces self-reflection in the agents; by reflecting they come to realize
> that their form of consciousness is ideologically false and that the coercion from which they
> suffer is self-imposed. (Geuss 1981, 61)

Ideological "falsehood," as I understand it, is not always a failure of a sentence to express a true proposition. Ideological falsehoods can be true in that sense, but still be problematic, for they may employ concepts that are inapt for the purposes at hand (think of *grue*), or they may be part of a broader framework of ideas and assumptions that distorts our thinking and the social reality that our thinking (partly) constructs (Anderson 1993). The distortion may concern what is left out, or what inferences are made easy or salient (and what ones are obscured). Working with an externalist framework, commonly shared false semantic beliefs are also a potential site of ideology, for they can mask or distort how and whether our terms track kinds, sometimes contribute to the construction of them, and enable us to avoid taking responsibility for their effects (Haslanger 2012, Ch. 2, Ch. 13).

My own reading of Beauvoir (1989/1949), Frye (1983), Wittig (1993), MacKinnon (1987, 1989), and others, had been liberating in the sense of unmasking the illusion of gender and of disrupting the ideology that gave shape to my practical orientation as a woman. Work by Frye (1992), Collins (1990), and Omi and Winant (1994) also prompted self-reflection on my investment race and related categories.[4] I vividly recall the moment when I read Wittig, ""To refuse to be a woman, however, does not mean that one has to become a man" (Wittig 1981, 49). The obvious truth of this blew my mind, but I had never before considered the possibility it describes. Suddenly, new possibilities for agency became available. Such moments are something philosophical work can make available (Bauer 2015). To notice how the existing practices and structures depend on distorted understandings can itself be liberating, in a sense, for we can begin to frame new intentions, explore different forms of agency, and take on new identities. This enhances our autonomy. But it doesn't make us free. Full emancipation requires also that we (collectively) change the unjust practices that structure our lives, and this requires more than thinking differently.

I saw my work as continuous with feminist and antiracist ideology critique. But the problem remained how to understand gender in such a way that it might be a basis for a feminist movement. Is there a way to speak of women, to struggle on behalf of women, to promote the interests of women, without presupposing a shared "identity," and without reinforcing a system that imposes gender while aiming to liberate us? The same questions could be raised, it seemed to me, to race.

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[4] There were personal reasons for such reflections as well. I have always had a complicated and often unhappy relationship with gender; and in 1994 and 1996 I became a parent of Black children in open adoptions and, as a result, my extended family became mostly Black.

In my "Gender and Race…" (2000) paper, I positioned myself as a feminist, antiracist, critical theorist and offered definitions of gender, and of race, employing what I then called an *analytic* approach.  I later (2012, Ch 6) changed the terminology to *ameliorative* approach, because the term 'analytic' was confusing to some whose background was shaped by the analytic/synthetic distinction and the history and critique of logical positivism.  I'm not sure, however, that the new terminology was any better, and was, perhaps, just confusing in other ways.  But it has stuck.

I had chosen the term 'analytic' having in mind Joan Scott's now classic paper, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986).  Scott's point was to demonstrate how the analytical category of *gender* (vs. sex), allows historians to trace the diverse forms gender takes: the cultural symbols, norms, and practices that shape what it is to be a woman (or man, or other) across time and place.  Rather than a tool of homogenization, in her work the category of gender is a tool for theorizing diversity.  Most importantly, it wasn't a term for an *identity* but a theoretical term for a process of social formation.

The idea that gender is a social formation has Marxist-feminist roots (e.g., Jaggar 1983; MacKinnon 1989; Young 1990).  It would take me too far from the topic of this paper to provide a history of Marxist and socialist feminism. However, it seemed clear that a way to avoid some of the problems that had plagued earlier efforts to define gender as *identity* was to characterize, in a very abstract way and compatible with many different instantiations, the sorts of social formations that produced women and men.  Moreover, the analysis could be made especially apt for feminist purposes, if it focused subordinating social formations.  Drawing on Catherine MacKinnon's analysis of gender in parallel to class (MacKinnon 1982)[5], I suggested this (rough versions):

> A group G *is a gender* (in context C) iff$_{df}$ Gs members are similarly positioned as along some social dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the members are "marked" by the dominant ideology (in C) as appropriately in this position by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of reproductive capacities or function.

There are two dominant forms of gender at least in the contemporary world; but in some contexts there are others and could be even more:

> S *is a woman* (in C) iff$_{df}$ S is systematically *subordinated* along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" by the dominant ideology (in C) as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of *a female's biological role in reproduction.*

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[5] For what it is worth, I chose reproductive markers, rather than "eroticized dominance and submission" (which is MacKinnon's focus) because I had heard global feminists argue that the focus on sex manifested an American obsession (to the best of my knowledge, this was at MacKinnon's Gauss Lectures at Princeton in 1992).  My aim was to find a (bodily) "marker" that ideology latched onto, and (real or imagined) markers of reproductive role – *presumed* to be linked by ideology to social role – seemed to be a good alternative. I assumed that the marker would vary depending on the social context, so in cultures that had different or mistaken ideas about reproduction, it would latch onto what *they* took to be the relevant bodily marker of reproductive role. See Hardt (1993); also Bettcher (2009, esp. 105-107). This allows that there is *a sense* in which "sex" is also socially constructed, i.e., what we count as sex depends on one's social context.

> S *is a man* (in C) iff$_{df}$ S is systematically *privileged* along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" by the dominant ideology (in C) as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of *a male's biological role in reproduction.*

I also argued for an account of geo-ancestral groupings with races as instances:

> A group G *is racialized* (in context C) iff$_{df}$ Gs members are socially positioned *as subordinate or privileged* along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the group is "marked" by the dominant ideology (in C) as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of *ancestral links to a certain geographical region.*

For example:

> *Whites are a racialized group in the US* by virtue of the fact that Whites are socially positioned as privileged along virtually all of the relevant social dimensions, and Whites are "marked" by the dominant ideology in the US as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to Europe.

By theorizing *both* race and gender to be social processes rather than identities, and characterizing them at an abstract level that could allow for ideological specification in time and place, seemed to address some of the serious concerns others had raised.

Importantly, the goal of the project was not to capture *what we have in mind* when we use the terms 'woman,' or 'man,' 'Latinx,' or 'White' to describe ourselves or others. Instead, the idea was to offer a theoretical analysis of the social formations that produce raced and gendered groups of people, i.e., it was an effort to resist the idea of gender or race as, primarily, identities. Of course, people develop race and gender identities, but I took that to be derivative from the social *process* that produces people who enact unjust gender and race practices.

However, the question of critical theory returns: If I was simply providing theories of gender and race, how was this supposed to be *emancipatory?* I suggested my accounts were grounded in and justified by the political goals of feminist and antiracist theory, which is an important commitment of critical theory. However, Geuss's (1991) challenge was to illuminate what makes a critical theory any different from an ordinary theory: "To be more exact: a critical theory has as its inherent aim to be the self-consciousness of a successful process of enlightenment and emancipation" (1981, 58). How does a theory do this?

My strategy (which, obviously, is a common strategy amongst social constructionists) was to appropriate the terms ordinarily used for identities, for the social processes and relations that make those identities available. The goal was to unmask the ideological assumption that gender and race are "natural," "given," or grounded simply in features of one's body, by shifting attention to the sources and consequences of those identities. The thought is that agents who come to understand the historical and political context of their gender and race identification and the role of their identification in perpetuating their own oppression and the oppression of others, will be taking a first step in a process of emancipation. (I recognized that simply introducing new theoretical terms for the categories was a possibility, but it would not have had the kind of personal and political

effects I was hoping for.)   Disruption of this sort does not assume that people who come to question their identity can or should immediately act on it.  They may not have the power, security, or resources to do so. Social emancipation must be a collective effort and change more than minds.  But under conditions of ideological oppression, ideology critique matters.  It invites and sometimes produces a shift in one's practical orientation.

I was very explicit in my discussion that appropriation of the terms ordinarily used for race and gender identities should be handled carefully, for there were contexts in which such appropriation was either unwarranted or potentially harmful.  I also suggested that there were significant questions of authority in making such a move.  The appropriation of existing terminology is risky, for the potential for a theory to function as emancipatory is very context sensitive.  Although at this point I have no qualms about affirming the significance of the categories I defined (and still believe an understanding of these social formations are important to feminist efforts), the appropriation of the terminology was even more problematic than I then realized.

For example, by appropriating the terms '*woman'* and '*man,'* I problematically excluded some women from being counted as women and some men from being counted as men. Although my view does *not* require that one have male genitalia to be a man or female genitalia to be a woman, it does require being subject to subordination/privilege that is linked by ideology to the local bodily markers of reproductive role. This is a mistake: some women are prevented from presenting as women, and some men are prevented from presenting as men, and so do not meet the conditions I proposed (Bettcher 2009, 2012, 2014, 2016 (and comments); See also Jenkins 2016; Kapusta 2016).[6] There are also reasons to think that emancipatory identities that do not build in hierarchy should be available to those who are gendered and raced (e.g., Alcoff 2015). However, my accounts do capture something about the social formation of the public categories of men and women through dominant ascriptions; it is consistent with this that some men and women are excluded from these ascribed positions, and this is a problem that feminism should address.

On this reading of my earlier work, the accounts I offered did not simply appropriate the language of gender and race, but instead revealed features of our meanings that we were mostly unaware of.  Drawing on a kind of semantic externalism, I went on to claim that the disruptive accounts I proposed in "Gender and Race…" might provide a better account of what we *actually* mean in dominant contexts than what we take ourselves to mean (2012, Ch. 13, 14; see also Saul 2006).  In the (then) contemporary United States, the dominant use of gender terms is exclusionary, and both gender and race terms actually track hierarchical social formations.  It is important to have a way to capture this.  At this point in the dialectic, my aim was to combine an account of the kind proposed by post-Quinean scientific essentialists with the sort of critical, ameliorative project I was committed to. Although early scientific essentialists (Kripke 1980; Putnam 1975, et al) focused on *natural kind terms* and thought that only *natural* scientists could be relied on to find the essences of things, I aimed to broaden the reach of their projects to include not only social science, but critical

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[6] We normally grant someone the authority to avow who they "really are," e.g., I'm really an artist (but cannot live as an artist due to economic/political/physical conditions), and this affirmation of existential identity should be extended to those who avow a gender other than one they were assigned at birth (see especially Bettcher 2009).

social theory more broadly.  Working with an externalist framework, commonly shared false semantic beliefs (beliefs about what we mean by our terms) are a potential site of ideology, for they can mask or distort how and whether our terms track kinds, sometimes contribute to the construction of them, and enable us to avoid taking responsibility for their effects (2012, Ch. 2, Ch. 13).

One lesson I draw from this is that linguistic choices that might be emancipatory at one moment, or for some individuals, or in response to a certain threat, may be inadequate in a broader context and even deepen other forms of oppression.  This is not a new lesson and is to be expected. Although I gestured at these risks in early work, I didn't do enough to guard against a number of linguistic and political harms that could have been foreseen. Interestingly, this shift in my understanding of my own accounts altered the political import of my project: emancipation, it seems, involves at least two steps or moments.  One moment is negative: we need to understand the failures of our current practices; another moment is positive: we need to suggest better alternatives.[7] My early accounts of *gender, race,* etc. might be employed in a negative moment to illuminate the exclusionary assumptions embedded in our use of certain social kind terms; however, they fail to offer adequate replacements (Jenkins 2016).  This suggests that, more generally, efforts to provide tools for emancipation are not only context-sensitive, but may require both a disruptive moment that targets a set of existing practices, and also what we might call a visionary moment that gives us resources to create something better.

But where does this leave me with respect to the project of conceptual engineering?  In the late 1990s, I was not really trying to do conceptual or semantic analysis.  I was doing critical social theory and appropriating everyday terminology for the purposes of disrupting our identification with unjust social practices, i.e., aiming for an emancipatory exposure of ideology.  Later (in the mid-2000s), I became more invested in the idea of improving what we think and mean – of ameliorating – our conceptual and linguistic tools. Amelioration comes in many forms because are multiple ways to make things better.  To clarify some of the different ways, it is helpful to work with a particular account of concepts.

## 3. Concepts?

As said before, I do not have an account of concepts.  In this section I will lay out the basics of an externalist account of (coarse-grained) content that will provide a backdrop for my arguments.  I choose to proceed with these background assumptions, first, because I find the approach plausible; and second because I think it is a useful exercise to consider how amelioration might work within an externalist account of this sort.  I am not the first to do this (Cappelen 2018), but I hope that I can provide a different approach that allows us to be at least hopeful about the power of ideology critique.[8]

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[7] For example, as I see it, MacKinnon on sex (1987; 1989), Mills on race (1997), and Manne on misogyny (2017) are engaged in a negative moment; Barnes (2016), Jenkins (2016) and Alcoff (2017) are engaged in a positive moment.

[8] In the conclusion of his recent book on conceptual engineering, Capellen (2018) maintains that "the changes that happen [in linguistic and conceptual change] are the result of inscrutable external factors that

I am anti-Fregean about meaning, content, and semantics: our utterances and our mental states do not have senses or concepts as their content (Stalnaker 1998). We express, believe, suppose, (etc.) propositions, and propositions should be understood in terms of informational content, i.e., "as truth conditions, propositions as functions from possible circumstances to truth values, or equivalently, as sets of possible situations." (Stalnaker 1998, 343). There are no "core commitments" associated with words that cannot be overturned or negotiated. Although in some sense we represent the world – propositions are abstract entities that carry information and are, to that extent, representational – the "mode of representation" is not part of the informational content of what we say and think. This allows you and me to think the same thing, the same proposition, even if we access what we are thinking differently.

How do utterances and mental states get the content they have? This is a project for *metasemantics*. Metasemantics, among other things, investigates how linguistic practices and conventions link utterances (occurring in response to others, in different parts of the world, and in other possible worlds) with propositions (cf. Plunkett 2011). It also concerns the ways in which mental states, whether linguistic or not, process and carry propositional and sub-propositional information. Some philosophers and psychologists are apt to suggest that concepts do an important part of this work. When I believe, for example, that the cat is on the mat, I have a concept of *cat* and *on* and *mat*, and various logical connectives, and I combine them in a thought. Another way to think about what's happening is that I have a set of capacities for processing information: capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like, and these capacities organize inputs in ways that represent information discursively. Propositions – that, as mentioned before, can be understood just as sets of possible worlds – are encoded in a variety of different ways. I have easy and direct access to some propositions, whereas my access to others is more mediated or inferential.

Some of the mental capacities we have are hard-wired. However, humans and some other non-human animals have tremendous perceptual, cognitive, and affective flexibility that enable them to adapt to a variety of settings. For humans and other social animals, adaptation is deeply connected to coordination. Learned mechanisms of coordination require selective attention to public entities that serve as signals in response to which we do our part. A red light might take up only a tiny space in our visual field, but drivers are highly responsive to it, for failure to see it or

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we lack control over" (199) and that "Anyone who spends time thinking and talking about large-scale normative matters should do so without holding out too much hope that their talking and thinking will have significant or predictable effects on the relevant aspect of the world" (200). Although I sometimes fall into such pessimism, I think Capellen doesn't fully appreciate the ways in which culture makes a difference to social life and the sociology of social movements. Feminist interventions have had a huge difference on the construction of gender, and although law (Title IX), technology (especially oral birth control), and economics (such as the abandonment of the "family wage) have made huge differences, the stability of social hierarchy depends on an interdependence between multiple factors, including culture. Such social change did not happen by accident and relied on tools in the cultural technē to challenge existing gender norms. Work by Beauvoir, MacKinnon, Butler, and many others has demonstrated that a book that reframes our concepts can have profound ramifications. Cappelen's discussion suggests that philosophers who hope to contribute to social movements are naïve. However, I haven't found much history, sociology, political theory, or even social/political philosophy, in his book to back up his claims.

respond appropriately may be a matter of life or death.  Language is one form of public information exchange that gives us a basis for coordination, but language itself depends on more basic capacities we have for picking up information from others, and from our environment, and sending it to others (Zawidzki 2013).  In responding to and transmitting information, we develop predictable patterns of behavior that others come to expect; these patterns, when upheld by the coordination group, constitute practices.  Non-human animals have such capacities well.

For example, dogs and humans coordinate.  One crucial task for this trans-species coordination is the timing of the opening and closing of outside doors.  Dogs need to go out to "do their business" and usually cannot open the door for themselves; they need humans to do it for them.  In our house, we have a bell hung by the door.  When Sparky wants to go outside, he rings the bell.  We come to the door and let him out.  Sparky had to be taught to use the bell.  The bell does not have a "natural meaning" (Grice 1957), but it has a meaning in the ecosystem of our home.  In response to his need, Sparky rings the bell, expecting that we will come open the door; we hear the door and expect Sparky to be waiting near the door to go out.  The bell does not have linguistic meaning, but it has, what I call, social meaning.  The ringing bell provides information that we – Sparky and the other family members – are able to access due to a process of learning from each other in an effort to coordinate.  Our capacities for attention, interpretation, categorization, etc. have adjusted to take in this information and act on it in expected ways.  Not all social meanings are about coordination, but it is plausible that the capacities that make social meaning possible originated in the need for coordination.  Humans, though, are able to take delight in social meanings for their own sake and use them to develop cultures that have lives of their own. (Balkin 1998; Zawidzki 2013)

We might say that if one develops a sophisticated set of capacities that enables them to process certain kinds of information, say, about *X*s, then they have the concept of *X*. Consider Yalcin:

> To possess a concept is to have an ability to cut logical space in a certain way, to distinguish possibilities in terms of the sorts of things that answer to the concept….A concept determines a matrix of distinctions. For example, the concept/subject matter BACHELOR corresponds to the partition of logical space distinguishing possibilities depending on what's happening with the bachelors at each world — so that two worlds will belong to the same cell just in case they don't differ in their bachelor respects. To possess a concept, on this idea, is to be capable of entering states of mind sensitive to the associated distinctions." (Yalcin 2016, 14; also Pérez Carballo 2016, 466ff)

The content of the concept is a partition of logical space.[9]  From a psychological point of view, however, *possession* of the concept may occur by virtue of different cognitive mechanisms and give rise to very different dispositions in different individuals.  What it means to have a certain concept

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[9] Many people have developed this view in different ways.  I think there is enough of a shared background so that one need not be a thoroughgoing externalist to accept much of what I say here.  I adopt a Stalnakerian framework, but there are other ways of making the same points.  See, e.g., Jackson 2000. Thanks to David Plunkett for pointing this out. Note also that Yalcin and Pérez Carballo are expressivists about certain kinds of content.  I don't, here, mean to embrace their full views but am simply drawing on the passages I cite.

of *X* is not just what you can articulate, but how you respond to and coordinate with others in your environment, i.e., how your capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like, are marshalled for the purpose to coordinating (and refusing to coordinate) with others in response to particular kinds of information.

For example, we may have the same concept of *cat* – the informational content of the concept *cat* is the same for each of us – but our possession of it occurs in somewhat different ways so that certain inferences are more direct for me than they are for you, or that I am more ready to apply the concept than you. Or it may be that because you know more about *cat*s, you have a sensitivity to different kinds of *cat*, so your partition of logical space is more fine-grained.

Consider the concept of war. "William III of England believed that England could avoid war with France. Did he believe that England could avoid nuclear war with France?" (Yalcin 2016, 12) The content of William III's concept of war might be represented as a division between war (land or sea), and non-war (see Figure 1). Logical space is divided into regions that contain worlds with sea wars, worlds with land wars, and worlds with no wars (considered timelessly); worlds (like ours) can occur in more than one partition of space because we have had both land wars and sea wars. Utopian worlds, perhaps, have no wars. However, once we learn about the possibility of nuclear war, we can carve the space of possibilities in a more fine-grained way (see Figure 2). And as we learn more about war, and as military technology and tactics evolve, we might want to not only add complexity, but also redraw distinctions that seemed exhaustive before (See Figure 3).



Figure 1         Figure 2         Figure 3
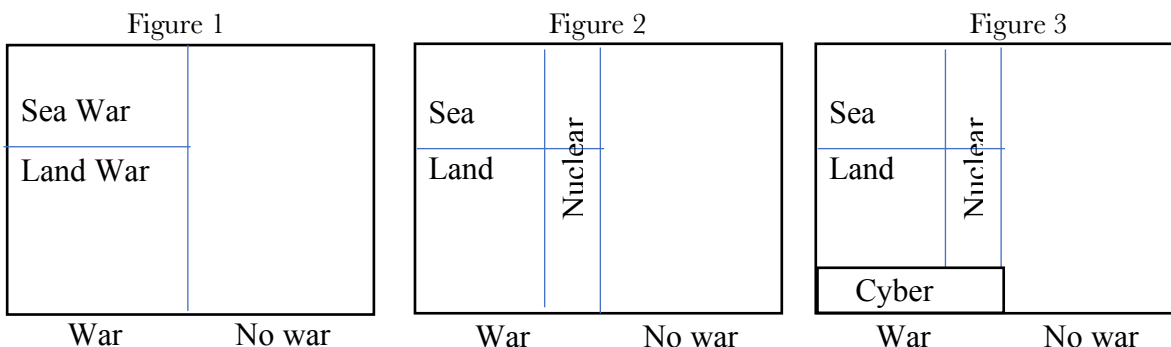
William III could not draw the distinctions between kinds of wars that we draw. In fact, William III couldn't even imagine nuclear war or cyber war. Our concept of war is more fine-grained than his and we have knowledge about more kinds of war. That is to say, we can draw distinctions between kinds of wars that he was unable to draw. But that doesn't mean that we don't, in an important sense, employ the same broad concept when he, and we, think and talk of war. We may be able to form more true beliefs about water, but amelioration, as we shall see, isn't all about increasing truth. In the social domain, in particular, some facts depend, in part, on what cultural, linguistic, and conceptual resources are available, because our cultural technē shapes the world. Simple examples are moves in games: the cultural technē of soccer made possible the fact that there was a total of four red cards at the 2018 World Cup.

Suppose we start with this background picture: mental and linguistic representations have informational content; the *informational content* of a concept is a partition of logical space that divides possibilities.[10] To *possess* a concept is to have some cluster of capacities and mechanisms for using that grid of possibilities at some level of resolution, i.e., for making the distinction(s) in question, and processing and storing the relevant information.[11] We are now in a better position to distinguish some different forms of amelioration.

- *Epistemic amelioration:* we improve our understanding of the informational content of the concept.

  o *Refinement:* We use concepts without having a very solid grasp of them. We may not be able to apply the concept to some possibilities, and there may be gaps in our judgments about cases. So we refine our concept based on a broader or deeper knowledge of the phenomenon, e.g., by gaining empirical knowledge, undertaking conceptual genealogy, and/or insight into logical space at a more fine-grained resolution.

  o *Experiential access:* we improve our access the informational content, gaining more reliable or illuminating access by different modes of presentation, e.g., those who have experienced war with "boots on the ground" have a different appreciation of what war is.

- *Informational/semantic amelioration:* we change what partition of logical space the term or concept represents, i.e., we undertake to change our thought and talk to do better in tracking reality. Better how?

  o A*lethic*: we are improving the resources available to track truths, e.g., a biological account of race prevents us from tracking important truths about race. Making these truths articulable using a social constructionist account can unmask ideology; it can also shine a light on new (emancipatory) possibilities. Ordinary scientific research can also shift content, e.g., biological theory can prompt changes in the distinction between animals and other kingdoms, with the result that the extension of 'animal' shifts.[12]

  o *Pragmatic*: what we track with our language and our concepts can make life easier by shifting terms of coordination, e.g., 'lunch' once picked out a light meal at any time of day or night. Now when we invite a friend for lunch, we convey, with our term, information about the time of the day when we might meet.

  o *Moral:* because what mean can affect what we do and what there is, semantic amelioration can also be (broadly) *moral*, e.g., if the informational content of (legal) 'marriage' excludes same-sex couples, this is a moral wrong.

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[10] There are different ways to spell this out. For example, it might be a distinction between different sets of possibilia (an intension or modal profile (Schroeters 2015, 441)), or a distinction between sets of propositions with respect to their subject matter (e.g., Yablo 2014). For our purposes, it isn't crucial which option we take.

[11] In order to avoid confusion, I use the term 'distinction' and 'distinguish' or 'classification' and 'classify' for the linguistic/conceptual acts of noting or marking differences, and the terms 'difference,' 'differentiate,' or "division" for the ontological basis for distinctions when they divide the world, i.e., we distinguish objects that are different; our distinctions aim to capture what differentiates the objects we're interested in, we draw distinctions along divisions.

[12] Putnam (1962/1975) provides an important early discussion of the importance of amelioration in science and the dangers of maintaining the analytic/synthetic distinctions.

Connecting these distinctions with my earlier projects, epistemic amelioration is especially apt for debunking projects in the negative moment of critical theory. We expose what kind we are simultaneously tracking and creating. Semantic amelioration is especially apt for the positive moment when we undertake to revise what information that is expressed when we use certain terms or conceptualize our options. We highlight and recommend new partitions of logical space – an expansion or contraction of informational content – as a basis for our future coordination. It is fairly clear how the epistemic amelioration might be undertaken But is semantic amelioration really possible? If a word or concept's content is essential to it (and what else could be essential to it?), then semantic amelioration would seem to be incoherent.[13] At best we are instead recommending the adoption of new terms and concepts.[14]

Note that both epistemic and semantic amelioration assume that the informational content of our concept is *given*. In the first case, we are looking to improve our grasp of it; in the second case, we are considering whether to adjust it. There comes a point, however, when there isn't enough overlap to think we are thinking or talking about the same thing. Suppose I think that a bachelor must be "on the make" or available for marriage, and you don't. How do we adjudicate our disagreements? We also find terminological expansions that seem to go too far, e.g., we now talk of the "war on drugs" and the "war on terror." Are these really wars, or just metaphors? It would seem that we should adjudicate this by reference to the contents of 'war,' 'bachelor,' or other term in question.

But what is the content? How is the content determined, and how do we know what it is? I will consider this question in the next section; however, it might be useful to have some examples before us. Water, gold, and jade have been standard examples in the literature about natural kinds. Marriage and family provide examples of controversial social kinds. Gender and race are examples where there is disagreement over whether they are natural or social.

- Is water essentially $H_2O$? Is $H_2O$ the informational content of our thought and talk about water?

- According to the dominant understanding of *marriage* prior to 2004 in the United States, marriage is a legal and/or religious status restricted to one man and one woman. A marriage between two men or two women was, for many, unintelligible. Same-sex marriage is now legal in the United States, and in some religions, it is fully accepted. Both the institution of marriage

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[13] Consider two partitions of logical space D and D\*. Our concept of *bachelor*, say, has D as its content: a particular set of all and only possible bachelors. Suppose an ameliorator comes along and suggests that, instead, the concept of *bachelor* has D\* as its content, i.e., a different set that is a proper subset of D. It might seem tempting to say that D\* can serve as the content for *a* concept of *bachelor*, but that would be a different concept from ours because *our concept* has D as its content and concepts have their informational content essentially.

[14] Dan López de Sa has helpfully pressed me to articulate more clearly why it matters whether we change our concepts or adopt new ones, especially if we can use the same word for new concepts. I think that in some cases it doesn't matter and we can see it as a political choice. But in other cases it is helpful because we can position ourselves as correcting the errors of our past. For example, the informational content of 'rape' has changed, but we were wrong *about rape* (using the same concept) when we neglected to count forced sex between a husband and wife as rape.

and our understanding of it have changed. A consequence of this is that not only how we think of families, but how families are constituted has changed. How should we understand these changes? What is content of the concept of marriage? Have we improved our concept of *marriage* (or of *family*) or adopted a new concept?

- According to Kant, races are groups of humans who have evolved to have certain distinguishing physical and psychological traits, that "resist further transformation." So, for example, the native American, having had to endure the extreme cold, suffers from a "half-extinguished life power" (Kant 1775/2000, 17). And the Negro, because he has benefited from the rich land of Africa, is "strong, fleshy, and agile. However, because he is so amply supplied by his motherland, he is also lazy, indolent, and dawdling." (Kant 1775/2000, 17) Whites, however, have diverged least from the original form and the "noble blond form" characterized by its "tender white skin, reddish hair, and pale blue eyes" that inhabited the northern regions of Germany, is the strongest. This form itself does not constitute a race, but only a lineage within the white race. However, "This stock would have gotten on well enough to persist as a race if the further development of this deviation had not been so frequently interrupted by interbreeding with alien stocks." (Kant 1775/2000, 20) Social constructionists about race reject Kant's claims about race and propose that race is a social category (Mills 1997; Haslanger 2012, Ch. 6; Taylor 2004; Mallon 2004, 2006; Hardimon 2003, 2017; Jeffers 2013). Are social constructionists improving our concept of race or introducing a new concept? What is the relationship between Kant's concept of race and theirs?

## 4. "Conceptual Analysis"[15]

For an externalist, to answer the question "What is the content/meaning of *X*?" one should focus on the question "What is X?" And when we ask "What is X?" – not about a particular (silverfish, for example) but a type or kind – usually a better way to put the question is: *What it is to be* (an) *X*? When natural phenomena such as water, silverfish, or oak trees, it would be, at the very least, odd to answer the questions by consulting our linguistic intuitions. Our judgments about when to use the term 'silverfish' don't tell us what a silverfish is. However, there are a variety of "What is X?" questions that many philosophers seem to think can be answered by discovering the meaning of the term(s) substituted for *X*, as determined by our disposition to apply the term(s) in question, e.g., 'knowledge,' 'moral worth,' 'justice,' 'a person,' 'causation.' In some of these cases, one might think that this a priori methodology is warranted because the boundaries of these kinds depend in some way on us and our practices. Perhaps moral worth, justice, personhood, and the like, don't exist independently our judgments of what counts as moral worth, justice, and personhood. So, of course, we should at least begin by investigating our judgements and putting them in order. (This is more plausible in some cases than in others, e.g., the answer would have to be more complicated in cases such as 'causation' or 'intrinsic property.')

But the idea that (some) philosophical kinds "depend on us," is not entirely clear; nor is it clear why our a priori (linguistic) reflections should be sufficient to provide an adequate theory of

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[15] Some paragraphs in this section also appear in my chapter, "What is Race? Tracing its Socio-Political Reality," and my "Replies," both to appear in Glasgow et al (forthcoming).

them.  For example, "What is a sheriff?"  What counts as a sheriff depends entirely on human stipulation; but even if you are a competent user of the term 'sheriff,' you may not be able to tell me what a sheriff is.  A full answer would presumably require information about the jurisdiction of sheriffs, what their responsibilities are, how they are chosen, etc. as determined by law.  We might need to consult experts in civics to get answers (and the answers will depend on what country we are in).  We can't just depend on common sense or linguistic intuitions; there are no sheriffs outside of a humanly constructed system of government.

In the case of 'sheriff,' there will be a well-defined role specified by statute, and someone who knows the relevant statutes will know the answers to our questions.  But there are also social phenomena that in some sense "depend on us" but are not stipulated or planned by us.  Such social phenomena range from macro-scale economic depressions, globalization, urbanization, and gentrification, to more local social practices and relations, e.g., within a town, religious congregation, or family.  These phenomena call for explanation, and the social sciences (broadly construed) endeavor to provide theories that enable us to understand them, usually identifying kinds of institutions, economic relations, cultural traditions, social meanings, and psychological predispositions, to do so.  The kinds in question are social kinds, in the sense that they are kinds of things that exist in the social world (and so, in some sense, depend on us).  But we discover these kinds through empirical enquiry just as we discover chemical kinds through empirical inquiry.

For example, accounts of gentrification often make reference to the "urban pioneer," sometimes characterized as artists and "bohemians" who take advantage of low rents in poor neighborhoods. Once single people who share rent enter a neighborhood, businesses (such as cafés and pubs) take interest, and landlords see opportunities to raise rents, which drives out the locals. *Urban pioneers* is a functional kind that identifies a particular role in an evolving real estate market. The term 'pioneer' is chosen due to the perceived parallel with pioneers who "settled" the western United States, displacing the local population. If someone were to object to the term 'pioneer' – perhaps thinking that it carried an overly-positive connotation – this would not undermine the explanatory claims.[16]  The adequacy of explaining gentrification by reference to singles moving into an urban neighborhood does not depend on our linguistic intuitions about applying the term 'pioneer' to them. The choice of terminology was intended to illuminate a parallel; if the terminological choice doesn't work, then another term could (and sometimes should) be used as a substitute.

However, insofar as philosophical kinds such as *justice* and *personhood* "depend on us," it is not in the sense that we stipulate what they are (like *sheriff*), or in the sense that they serve in explanations of social phenomena (like *urban pioneers*).  In the case of *sheriff,* you might think that there aren't any independent facts we're trying to accommodate.  (Oversimplifying), we simply create sheriffs and then talk about them. In the case of *urban pioneer*, the prior understandings of 'pioneer' are not crucial to the explanation provided by the theory.   In the case of *person*, there is

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[16] Metaphors and analogies can play an important and even ineliminable role in theorizing and can aid in explanation.  My claim here is only that the choice of terminology for the functional kinds in the proposed mechanisms of gentrification (specifically the influx of singles) is not essential to the success of the model for some purposes (though it may be for others).

something we are aiming to understand that is not simply constituted by what we say, but at the same time, our conclusions cannot float completely free of our practices.

How might we explain this?  Note that in the philosophical cases, we are not situated as anthropologists trying to understand the social life of the "natives."  Nor are we legislators specifying new practices.  We seek an understanding of practices in which we are currently engaged as participants. The practices are not fully understood, however.  And they are open-ended, revisable, possibly self-defeating.  In making sense of them, we are making judgments about how to better understand what we are doing, and how then to go on.[17]

This is not primarily a linguistic exercise: we aren't just deciding how to use existing terminology to pick out things in the world, but how to collectively orient ourselves towards the world and each other.  As I've discussed above, language, concepts, symbols, and what, more generally, I've called *cultural technē,* are not only devices that carry information and allow us to communicate, but are also, and as importantly, tools for coordination.  Coordination is a fundamental human task. Language helps us coordinate, not only by providing a means to interpret and predict others, but to shape each other so that complex forms of coordination are possible.  As Tadeusz Zawidzki puts it:

> Our social accomplishments are not by-products of individualized cognitive feats...Rather, through a form of "group selection," simultaneously interpretive and regulative frameworks that support our social accomplishments, including pervasive, institutionalized cooperation and coordination, language, and so on, have evolved. In the mindshaping metaphor, distinctively human social cognition is conceptualized as a group accomplishment, involving simultaneously interpretive and regulative frameworks that function to shape minds, which these frameworks can then be used to easily and usefully interpret. (Zawidzki 2013, xiii)

Language provides a means to communicate information, but of course, the world presents an information overload.  Coordination requires us to select *what* information is important, ways of linking information, and drawing consequences for action. So when we consider "how to go on," language – a practice within practices – is itself is a proper target of philosophical inquiry.  We are situated within a tradition of linguistic practices that have already shaped our world; so ignoring those practices would be a mistake. We are situated inquirers, and the question is how we should go on, given where we have been, where we are now, and where we are trying to go (Wittgenstein 1958, esp. §§185-243; Kripke 1982, esp. fn. 13 pp. 18-19; Lear 1986).

## 5.  Representational traditions: 'Water' as an example.

Laura and François Schroeter (2015) offer an account of meaning that situates our linguistic activities within our broader social practices.  They focus on the example of 'water,' and suggest that to determine what 'water' means, we should undertake an inquiry into what water *is.*

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[17] David Plunkett has pointed out to me that this sounds a lot like Ronald Dworkin's (2011) interpretivism. I agree; however, as I hope will become clearer as we proceed, there are important differences between my view and what I take Dworkin's view to be.

"It's important to notice that from the first-person perspective, the object-level question 'what is x?' is equivalent to the metalevel question 'what is the reference (or, more generally, the semantic value) of my term "x"?'" (2015, 419)

But how do we determine what water is?  We cannot assume from the start that this is a task for the chemist, for when the chemist says that water is $H_2O$, she may be using the term in a technical sense, in which case it would not provide an account of what the ordinary person means by 'water.'  But neither can we just undertake reflection on linguistic usage or common sense.

> Before you explicitly reflect on the question of what water is, your own assumptions about the topic are bound to be heterogeneous, incomplete, and partially contradictory – and this heterogeneity is only exacerbated when you take your whole community's views into account. Thus justifying an answer to a 'what is x?' question is nothing like slotting some missing values into an implicitly grasped formula. Your goal in rational deliberation is to find some principled way of prioritizing and systematizing your own and your community's commitments about water, so as to identify the appropriate normative standards for evaluating the truth and acceptability of beliefs about the topic. (2015, 430)

The broad idea is this: when we deliberate about what X [water, race, freewill, moral worth, gender...] is, we have to start with *something*.  In the sorts of cases we are considering, we can take ourselves to be situated within a broad representational tradition concerned with X (we are not starting from scratch and stipulating the meaning of theoretical terms).  And we may assume that the tradition has a certain epistemic ambition, so we may "take our words and thoughts to represent genuinely interesting and important features of the world - not just whatever happens to satisfy our current criteria." (2015, 436)  So scientific inquiry is also relevant, since it discloses some parts of the world that are important for many of our purposes. But where do we begin?

The Schroeters (2015, 426) give a sample of inputs to deliberation in the case of water:

- *Particular instances:* there's water in this bottle, in Port Phillip Bay, Lake Michigan, etc.

- *Perceptual gestalts:* the characteristic look, taste, odor, tactile resistance and heaviness of water.

- *Physical roles:* water's rough boiling point, its transformation into steam, its role as a solvent, the fact that it expands when it freezes, etc.

- *Biological roles:* water's necessity for the survival of plants and animals; how it's ingested; the effects of water deprivation; etc.

- *Practical roles:* the roles water plays in agriculture, transport, washing, cooking, surfing, etc.

- *Symbolic roles:* water is strongly associated with cleanliness and purity, it plays an important role in many religious rituals, etc.

- *Explanatory roles:* water has a non-obvious explanatory structure, which explains many of its characteristic roles; water is composed of $H_2O$.

- *Epistemology:* water is easy to spot but hard to define; our beliefs about water may be mistaken or incomplete; observation of instances of water grounds induction to unobserved

cases.

The aim is to answer to the "What is X?" question. Their project is not semantic but *meta-semantic:* what would make it the case that the informational content of 'water' is all and only possible instances of $H_2O$? The inputs just considered help us narrow down the target kind so we can investigate it further. As we proceed, we may find that some of our background beliefs are false and our theoretical efforts misguided. But what do we do with these inputs? How do we balance various considerations? Schroeter and Schroeter (2015) propose that

> …ideal epistemic methods for answering 'what is x?' questions hinge on rationalizing interpretation of one's representational traditions. You need to diagnose the most important representational interests at stake in a representational tradition with 'x', and you should identify the correct verdict about the nature of x as the one that makes best sense of those interests. (2015, 430)

A rationalizing interpretation, on their view, is not determined by reports of beliefs and intentions of participants in the tradition, nor is it a causal explanation of the tradition:

> From the deliberative perspective of a rational epistemic agent, the interests that are relevant to adjudicating 'what is x?' questions are those that help justify or rationalize that tradition. Ideal methods for adjudicating 'what is x?' questions don't simply construe representational practices as meeting psychologically or causally fixed representational interests. Our interpretive methods construe them as meeting representational interests that help make sense of our practices - that help construe them as having a point or rationale." (2015, 435)

On the Schroeters' (2015) view, there is a best interpretation of the representational tradition, where the scope of that tradition is determined by commitment to de jure sameness of reference and shared linguistic and epistemic practices (428). What I mean is not just a function of what I think water is, or any old interpretation of our representational tradition: I can get the meaning wrong if I don't do justice to the interpretive task. For example, if I decide that, given our interests and collective uses of the term, water is the alcoholic beverage also known as 'beer,' I would be wrong. I would have failed to capture a reasonable interpretation of our representational tradition. But I could also be wrong if I miss what is worth talking about:

> As rational epistemic agents, we normally take our words and thoughts to represent genuinely interesting and important features of the world - not just whatever happens to satisfy our current criteria. When asking about the nature of water (or free will, color, etc.), we don't assume that we (or our community as a whole) already implicitly know the right answer. (2015, 436)

We postulate ambiguity or opt for an error theory only as a last resort. In the case of 'water,' plausibly $H_2O$ wins because it organizes and explains the relevant inputs to deliberation. So the informational content of 'water' (and similar words in other languages), is a partition in logical space on which chemical composition is the differentiating feature.

The Schroeters' metasemantics enables us to determine when we are gaining knowledge about the meaning of a term, and when we are talking about something altogether different: If

Aristotle thinks that water is essentially a fundamental element and I think it is essentially $H_2O$ (and not an element), are we talking about the same thing? Yes, because the term/concept functions in importantly similar ways in our communities.[18]  He was wrong about the chemical composition, but that isn't surprising, given the technological and scientific limitations of his day.

## 6. Conceptual Amelioration

This gives us a helpful model for understanding at least some conceptual amelioration.  We are part of a complicated representational tradition with various threads and various purposes for employing the concept *X*.  Although we are adept at using the concept in many contexts, its exact informational content is obscure.  Perhaps we find ourselves in controversy, or in a situation where more precision or understanding is needed.  We engage in reflection on the representational tradition and find that certain ways of going on – ways of interpreting our past practices projecting them into the future – requires adjustment in our judgments about what counts as an *X*, or what is true of *X*s.  This isn't just an epistemic amelioration, for we adjust the informational content – the partition of logical space – in order to do justice to the complex role of the concept in our practices.

Although sympathetic with the Schroeters' view, I am doubtful that there is a single "best" interpretation of a representational tradition.  And although I agree that language is situated within our practices, I am not convinced that the right position from which to evaluate the tradition is that of the "rational epistemic agent."[19]  Of course, whether this is adequate depends on how we characterize the rational epistemic agent and what bits of language we are considering; but I think we need to bring to the forefront the role of language in shaping us for coordination.  As Zawidzki says in the quote I included above, "Our social accomplishments are not by-products of individualized cognitive feats."  Especially in the case of social kinds, the evaluation of a linguistic/conceptual tradition should consider how it shapes us to be responsive to each other (and the world), what forms of social reality are created (institutions, practices, artifacts, identities), and whether or how we might do better.

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[18] It is important to note the difference between a *functional concept* and the *function of a concept*.  A functional concept is a concept whose informational content divides logical space between those things that fulfill a certain function and those things that don't.  The concept of *heart* is a functional concept because hearts are hearts by virtue of pumping blood, i.e., of having that function in a body.  If we grant that water is (essentially) $H_2O$, then *water* is not a functional concept, because water isn't what it is because of how it functions.  It is what it is by virtue of its composition.  However, it is compatible with this that *the concept of water* has a function, i.e., that the division of logical space along the water/non-water axis and the ability to track that distinction has an important function in society.  For example, our ability to distinguish water from other similar but toxic chemicals assists our survival; the concept may function to help us be aware of the distinction, teach it to our offspring, etc.

[19] There is a sense in which the Schroeters' externalism depends on an internalist metasemantics – this is something they acknowledge and a way of capturing what they take to be the advantages of both internalist and externalist insights.  I am aiming to be less internalist in my metasemantics for I see metasemantics as not just about how a rational epistemic agent would judge cases, but about how language is taken up and informs our practices.  Agents can play a role in this process, hence the possibility of amelioration.  More in this below. Thanks to David Plunkett for urging me to clarify this.

But a variation on the Schroeters' metasemantics can also give us a guide that will set limits on amelioration. We use many of our terms/concepts for multiple purposes, not all of which point to the same thing. It is reasonable for us to settle disputes by arguing for a particular way of extending a thread that has been part of our representational tradition, but it is not necessary for us to adhere to the tradition strictly, especially if the threads are tangled or if the world has changed so that background assumptions are no longer valid.[20]

Water is perhaps not the best example when we are thinking about amelioration. Consider instead the concept of *family*. On the approach I have been proposing, we should consider the function of a *family* concept in organizing our lives together and in shaping our self-understandings to engage fluently in the practices that enable coordination. Plausibly, to have a *family*-concept is (roughly) to have a cluster of mechanisms for processing information about the coordination of domestic life, e.g., intimacy, sex, raising of children, economic partnership, intergenerational transfers of traditions and property.[21] These are tasks that any culture has to manage somehow and many do it through the construction of families. Since its inception, anthropology has explored kinship systems, and the formation of social identities that "fit" within such systems. A generic conception of family is not enough, however; more specific ideas about "what it is to be a family" are required in order to coordinate effectively. So language evolves to pick out certain social formations and roles; symbols, metaphors, and narrative tropes take hold so individuals can form expectations about how to manage these tasks. The bionormative nuclear family is not a "natural" phenomenon, and societies that rely on it for coordination provide a script. Many have organized their lives around the script: first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in the baby carriage. There are video games for girls in which they plan fantasy weddings, and even adult women envision themselves as Cinderella. (In 2012, Weddingbee had 14,974 members who were not engaged (Patterson 2014; Baker 2013).) Such observations are relevant to evaluating "our" concept of family, just as observations about water were in the Schroeters' example.

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[20] Herman Cappelen (2018) argues against ameliorative projects such as mine because "there simply isn't a good way to identify 'the phenomenon' except disquotationally and the disquotational identification is unresponsive to the challenge of articulating the limits of revision" (184). But why is disquotation the only option? The Schroeters have identified multiple routes for identifying 'the phenomenon' that is the subject matter for our talk of water that goes well beyond disquotation. Below, I will discuss "the phenomenon" of family which, I assume, we can identify by the multiple roles that talk of family plays in ours and (assuming translation) other cultures; anthropologists have been doing this at least since the 19th c. Of course we cannot determine 'the phenomenon' a priori, but as externalists, why should we expect otherwise?

[21] Cappelen (2018, Ch. 16) argues that a functional approach to concepts, such as the one I suggest here, is implausible because concepts don't have functions: "Of course, people have goals and aims and purposes when they use words on particular occasions. But I don't think concepts have purposes and certainly not words (or extensions or intensions)" (181). I am puzzled. There is, for example, decades of work on functional and structural explanation. Functions are attributed to parts of a system when they contribute to the ongoing working of the system (hearts, carburetors). Although it is misleading (my mistake!) to speak of *the* function or purpose in such cases, things can a function in the social domain without human intention, e.g., the gendered division of labor functions to keep women's wages low, which functions to make exit from marriage more difficult than men's, which functions to sustain women's subordination to men. Language can also be part of a homeostatic social system because of the way it enables us to call attention to certain phenomena and facilitates communication.

For many generations, in the United States at least, the concept *family* conveyed a specific informational content: it included a husband, his (same-race) wife, and her biological offspring.[22] This social formation was legally and culturally entrenched. Other ways of arranging domestic life, although acknowledged, were either unimaginable due to lack of technology (ART), or cognitive bias (queer families), or were tolerated only insofar as they mimicked the dominant formation (adoption, step-families, unmarried and mixed-race couples with children). "Childless" couples didn't really count as families (note: "when are you going to start a family?"). At this point, heterosexual bionormative nuclear families (HBNFs) constitute one kind of family, but it is broadly recognized that families include domestic arrangements made by adoption, donated gametes, families with single parents, same-sex, trans and genderqueer parents, unmarried parents, and extended families of various kinds. I believe that conceptual amelioration has occurred, both as a result of pressure by social movements and by the development of reproductive technology, i.e., the informational content of the term 'family' has changed, due to a change in the social conditions. More ways of organizing domestic life have become normalized. But our concept of family has evolved, improved, at least in part, through the political work done by LGBTQ and adoption activists in conceptual engineering with slogans such as "we are families too."

What sort of amelioration is this? Is it epistemic or semantic? If we are thinking of families as ways of organizing domestic life, generally speaking, then it would seem to be epistemic: there are more ways of organizing domestic life than in HBNFs, even in the actual world, and those who confined their understanding of family to HBNFs were mistaken. Like William III with respect to *war*, they just didn't have a sense of the fine-grained partitions in the logical space of family. However, if we are thinking of the informational content expressed when we speak of families, then it seems to be a semantic amelioration: the partition of logical space communicated changes when we include more kinds of domestic arrangements as families. But this shift doesn't require us to form a new concept. I suggested above that possession of a concept concerns how you respond to and coordinate with others in your environment, i.e., how your capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like, are marshalled for the purpose to coordinating (and refusing to coordinate) with others in response to particular kinds of information. Our capacity to coordinate with others in organizing domestic life – even considering the specifics of how we do it around here – does not necessarily break down as we expand who counts as family. The concept – our capacities for processing relevant information – evolve as we recognize the possibility of new social formations and new norms.

Suppose, however, that Albert thinks of families as heterosexual married couples and the biological offspring of the wife (HBNFs), and only such families. Albert has *a* concept of family. Albert may resist calling same-sex couples raising children a "family" on moral grounds; he may be opposed to divorce and take adoption to create family-like groups, but not real families. We may undertake to epistemically ameliorate Albert's concept of family by pointing out to him that within our representational tradition, *family* is a functional notion concerned with the management of domestic life. This might be to offer him a better grasp of what he means. However, he may resist

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[22] Currently the conditions for being the legal father of a child are complicated and vary from state to state (FindLaw) and still assume it to be the husband of the woman who gives birth. Historically this was generally the case in the United States.

this intervention.  He may have a different interpretation of our representational tradition, or he may not care what the rest of us think and instead choose to consider a different representational tradition as his own, e.g., a particular religious tradition. Because Albert's capacities for processing information about domestic life is at odds with the broader community, he may have trouble communicating and coordinating with others.  And it would be plausible to say that he doesn't share *our* concept of *family*.  "Our" concept of family is embedded in our practices and our laws, our forms of intimacy and love.  At this point in time, families include more than HBNFs.

But simply pointing to the informational content that most of us (around here) express and rely on to coordinate doesn't seem to be sufficient to capture what some want in the idea of conceptual amelioration.  Yes, some people are out of sync with the broader representational tradition of which they are a part, and if they want to conform to that tradition, they should adjust their understandings of what they are talking about.  But the idea of conceptual amelioration is especially valuable when we are cutting against the grain – there are times when the community seems to be (or has been) committed to a particular understanding that should be resisted.  Conceptual amelioration should not just be a matter of demanding that the outliers conform to the dominant understanding of what we are talking about.  Critical (feminist, antiracist, queer, disability) theorists, in particular, seek to ameliorate by shifting our concepts away from dominant understandings. This calls for a more robustly normative sense of amelioration.

Return to the concept of *family*.  Families one kind of social formation. They typically consist of individuals who engage in sets of practices distributing things of (+/-) value: sex, childcare, homecare, eldercare, emotional labor, work in income generation and transfer, social networking, etc.   There are, of course, many ways of accomplishing these social tasks.  What makes a group of people performing such tasks a family?  Let's imagine that according to Albert, a group of individuals engaged in the activities mentioned above constitutes a family$_A$ just in case it is a group consisting of a heterosexual couple that has been blessed by a priest living together (most of the time), and the children born of those parents (by the union of the parental gametes).  *Family$_A$* is not a functional concept, i.e., in order to count as a family$_A$, a group does not need to fulfill a certain social function.  (One might say that families$_A$ are not grounded in functional role.[23])  Still, *the concept of family$_A$* might play a functional role in Albert's society.  If this concept of family is dominant, i.e., if families$_A$ are the primary site for love, intimacy, primary rituals around life and death, non-wage-based economic cooperation, and such, then this distinction will play a crucial role sustaining social coordination.  Moreover, in such a society, non-married or same-sex couples, children born out of wedlock, adoptive families, and such will not be recognized as the proper site for recognized family activities.

When we consider whether Albert's concept of family is adequate, the task seems to be not simply whether it captures how things are, in fact, organized locally, but whether tracking, communicating, and coordinating around the distinction between families$_A$ and not-families$_A$ is a

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[23] There is, I think, and important connection between Epstein's (2015) distinction between grounding and anchoring and my claims here about the distinction between the function of a concept and functional concepts.  Concepts can have a function by virtue of anchoring facts without that function being part of the grounds for the category.  But if we take the anchoring purposes to be what is essential to the concept (rather than the grounds), then grounds can adjust.  I'm not sure I have this right, but it is worth pursuing, I think.

good idea. There is no question about whether Albert's distinction exists or whether we can track truths using the distinction. The question is whether we should collectively develop the capacities to notice that distinction, reinforce the distinction in law and policy, and structure society around it. Does this way of coordinating people domestically bring out the best in us? Does it oppress us? Does it make for a well-functioning society? Does it result in unnecessary suffering?

So, on one hand, there is a descriptive project of characterizing the possible ways of organizing domestic life, or the ways we do it (or have done it) around here. As anthropologists, we talk about different kinds of families, allowing that our structures of domestic life are one form among many. But on the other hand, there is a normative project. If the concept of family makes a difference to how we live – if we coordinate by developing capacities to register and respond to a particular distinction between domestic arrangements – then we should not just engage in description. We should evaluate how we have been thinking of families and decide how to go on. This is what I was earlier characterizing as a philosophical, as opposed to an anthropological, project. It involves, as the Schroeters suggest, an interpretation of our past practice (and the practices of others), but deciding how to interpret the past and how to project ourselves into the future involves normative considerations. (See also Schapiro 2003.)

We know that some ways of organizing family life lead to various kinds of social dysfunction, and others are immoral. So one normative axis of evaluation is functional: Because we process certain kinds of information mainly for the purpose of coordination, we can judge the adequacy of our ways of doing so by reference to how well the coordination works. Better and worse concepts of family might then be evaluated in terms of how well they achieve coordination in relation to the broader social context. Another axis of evaluation may be broadly moral/political. Perhaps Albert believes that there is something morally problematic about non-HBNF families, so we should organize domestic life by creating and supporting HBNFs; all other forms are somehow morally defective and so should be discouraged. On his view, only HBNFs are *real* families. He is not denying that we call many domestic arrangements 'families.' He would agree that the issue is how we should go on, but thinks that we are currently going in the wrong direction. He prefers a more narrow way of understanding what a family "really" is, for he believes that to be a family is to participate in those sets of practices that are (morally) legitimate, perhaps *even if* they do not promote local coordination. A group of individuals counts as a *family* only if they exemplify good ways of organizing domestic life.[24]

How is this related to semantic amelioration? Suppose what is essential to the concept of family is its role in social coordination, rather than its informational content, i.e., the partition in logical space it tracks. The concept of family might be (roughly) the concept that we use to organize us in domestic arrangements. There are many kinds of family because there are many ways to go about such organization. But there are also better and worse concepts of family because there are better and worse forms of domestic organization. If I live in a situation in which Albert's

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[24] One way to develop this idea would be to treat 'family' (and other social kinds) as *thick concepts*. However, whether we need to take the normative requirements to be part of the semantic value of the concept or whether it is pragmatic is a very controversial issue (see Vayrynen 2013). I will proceed here as if it is pragmatic, but I won't defend that position.

concept of family is dominant, it is "our" concept of family there, then I would urge semantic amelioration, i.e., I would demand that my family count as a family too. This would not be to demand that the concept of *family* change its role in our lives, but that it change its informational content. Given that, on the model I'm proposing, its role is essential and its content is not, this would be semantic amelioration – a change in the informational content – and not conceptual replacement.

To understand the tension between the descriptive and the normative aspects of amelioration, it may be useful to consider what Joshua Knobe and Sandeep Prasada call "dual character concepts" (2011, also Knobe et al. 2013; Leslie 2015). Note that some kind terms allow for a distinction between being a good exemplar of the kind and being a true exemplar. Usually these to evaluations go together. A *good* scientist is a true scientist; a true musician is a good musician. However, these evaluations seem to be based on connected but distinct criteria. They argue that there is a set of concepts – the dual character concepts – that

> …are represented via both (a) a set of concrete features and (b) a set of abstract values that the concrete features are seen as realizing. These two representations are intrinsically related, but they are nonetheless distinct, and they can sometimes yield opposing verdicts about whether a particular object counts as a category member or not. (2011, 2965)

One of their paradigm examples concerns the concept of *scientist.* On the one hand, we might characterize a scientist in terms of the sorts of things they do, their qualifications, their job description, etc.; on the other hand, we might characterize a scientist (roughly) in terms of their intellectual virtues. They note that these two characterizations of a scientist might come apart (2011, 2965). One might say of a person who works in a lab but is dogmatic and does the minimum required each day:

> (1) There is a sense in which she is clearly a scientist, but ultimately, if you think about what it really means to be a scientist, you would have to say that she is not a scientist at all.

Or one might say of a person not employed in a lab or academic institution and who "has never been trained in formal experimental methods but who approaches everything in life by systematically revising her beliefs in light of empirical evidence" (2011, 2965):

> (2) There is a sense in which she is clearly not a scientist, but ultimately, if you think about what it really means to be a scientist, you would have to say that she truly is a scientist.

Other examples that scored high as dual character concepts include: "Friend, Criminal, Love, Mentor, Comedian, Minister, Theory, Boyfriend, Artist, Argument, Teacher, Poem, Soldier, Sculpture, Art Museum, Musician, Mother, Rock Music, Scientist, Novel" (Knobe et al, 2013, 256).

What is going on in these cases? Knobe et al argue that there are two kinds of normativity playing a role in the case of dual character concepts. On one hand, we can evaluate the extent to which one meets certain conditions for being a member of the kind in question, e.g., a *good* musician plays fluently, has advanced skills (even though they may have little creative spark). On the other hand, we can evaluate the extent to which one exemplifies certain abstract values, e.g., a *true* musician lives to make music, and does so creatively and with passion (even though they may

not have fabulous skills).  The goodness vs. the trueness of a musician are different dimensions of evaluation.  In the case of dual character concepts:

> …people appeared to employ two distinct sets of criteria. When a given object met one set of criteria but not the other, participants tended to say that it was a category member in one sense but was not a category member in another sense. As such, the experiment provided evidence that dual character concepts provide two bases for categorization. (2013, 248)

This is what would be expected in the case of practices, generally.  We must rely on practices to coordinate us, and in doing so they give us reasons to act and a basis for evaluation.  However, practices themselves can be evaluated, both functionally and on other normative grounds.

I am not suggesting here that all concepts have their social function (rather than their informational content) essentially.  That would be to take a stronger stand than I am prepared to endorse at this point.  Knobe and Prasada suggest:

> We have seen that some concepts are unified through hidden causes (natural kind concepts) and others through abstract values (dual character concepts), but perhaps these are just two of the many possibilities, and there are also yet other kinds of concepts that are unified in quite different ways. For example, there might be concepts in which all of the concrete features are unified in that they all tend to make an object suitable for the same basic function (e.g., the concept COMPUTER). People might then associate these concepts with both (a) a list of concrete features and (b) the more abstract notion of the relevant function. (If so, such concepts would be like the dual character concepts studied here in that they would provide two bases for categorization, but they would be unlike dual character concepts in that they would not provide two bases for normative judgment.) (2013, 255).

A plausible hypothesis is that our concepts have different roles in mindedness.[25]  Sometimes we categorize for the purpose of explanation, sometimes to capture what's of value, sometimes to identify a functional role (and as Knobe et al suggest, possibly for other purposes as well).  There can be controversy, then, over not only what conditions must be met in order to be included in a category, but also the point or purpose of the category, and what gives the category its unity.  My suspicion is that inquiry into concepts sometimes rightly privileges the (paradigm) instances and allows our understanding of the purpose to adjust; and sometimes we are rightly invested in the purpose and reconsider the instances.  Note, however, that the partition of logical space that actually serves the purposes of our distinction (once we figure out the purpose), may be very different from what it was before, based on our judgments of membership, or even based on our conception of what's at stake.  (Baseball doesn't cease to be baseball when we change the rules, or "improve" the ball to allow more home runs so that it attracts more fans.[26])  This provides a basis

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[25] I don't mean to suggest that we have and develop concepts for explicit and intended purposes; we don't. We are socialized into the local conceptual/linguistic scheme and no one designed it.  I do think, however, that concepts play a functional role in systems of communication and coordination, and I have this sort of purposiveness in mind.  See also Haslanger (forthcoming).

[26] I am not assuming, in this example, that baseball is a historical particular (an institution), but as a type of game with instances.  The concept of *baseball* partitions logical space into worlds in which there are baseball

for allowing ameliorative accounts to be, in some sense, a way of improving and not just replacing our concepts.

Let's return to Albert's concept of family as consisting of only HBNFs. It would seem likely that he would grant that, under current circumstances, same-sex families count as families "in some sense," e.g., legally, but nevertheless aren't *true* families. That is because a broader practice of family formation that includes same-sex families (etc.) doesn't realize certain abstract values. This would allow him to say that families are understood as structures for coordinating domestic life, but only a subset count as "true" families, i.e., those that do so in keeping with certain values that he supports. To capture the disagreement between Albert and the others in his milieu, then, we could see it as concerned with the values around which we coordinate. The concept of family is a focal point for such coordination. To determine what "true" families are we cannot simply consider our past practices, or past judgements of memberships, for our past practices may all be terrible. Normative discussion is needed in order to decide how to go on. The adequacy of an ameliorative proposal should be considered with respect to its prospects of either (a) disrupting our current unjust or dysfunctional practices, or (b) improving our practices should the revision become part of the cultural technē. These two options correspond to the two moments (negative and positive) of critical theory's work towards emancipation I mentioned at the end of section 2.

## 7. Conclusion

There is much more that needs to be discussed at this point. However, I've argued that there are two ways to think about conceptual amelioration on a model according to which the content of a concept is to be understood as informational content, i.e., a partition of logical space. On the one hand, we can ameliorate our *understanding* of the relevant space of worlds – both what worlds it includes and how they should be sub-divided. Such improvement in our understanding may be based on advances in empirical knowledge and technological advances (think of war, water, and offspring created by artificial reproductive technologies), on a reinterpretation of the history of the concept, or on information gained by new perspectives that have access to the content from different modes of presentation.

On the other hand, we can ameliorate not simply by reinterpreting our past practice but by *correcting* it. It is not plausible to me that the "best" interpretation of our representational tradition concerning race is an interpretation according to which race is a social category. Nor am I convinced that *marriage* has always included in its informational content worlds in which there were same-sex marriages. I'm not even sure how those judgments would be adjudicated. But on my view, this doesn't matter. The terms 'marriage,' 'family,' and such, function in our culture to focus us on certain relationships as the "proper" basis of domestic life. To have the concept of marriage is to have the capacity to track certain kinds of information that are relevant in our current milieu to coordinate around domestic life and related social tasks. But the terms of coordination evolve,

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games and those in which there aren't (and along more fine-grained baseball facts). But which worlds have baseball games? If we change the rules, do we have a new concept that partitions things differently, or do we allow that the baseball partition changes? I prefer the latter option. Thanks to Ari Koslow for raising this issue.

and we must be able to track that evolution with the term. More importantly, we can contribute to that evolution by challenging local ideas about what should be the "proper" basis for organizing domestic life. This is what happens in social movements, both radical and conservative, and through the work of critical theory. Disrupting the local cultural technē is difficult, because we are all deeply invested in maintaining the terms of coordination in our milieu, and going against the grain is costly. However, to ask, what is marriage, *really?* is to ask what forms of domestic partnerships (if any) promote a well-functioning and just society. When activists have claimed that same sex couples can be married, or that LGBTQ domestic arrangements are families, it wasn't based on what we have meant all along, but on what we should have meant. And what we should mean going forward, at least for now. A new answer, if it is incorporated into our practical consciousness, can be emancipatory and can change our social world, for we shape that world through what we do and who we think we are.

Some of our concepts are organized around values. Others are organized around functions. Some are organized around both. This is because we have an interest in carving logical space in order to coordinate with each other, to draw distinctions that serve our purposes as social beings and to realize our values. The best way to do this changes as we develop new technologies and as we come to appreciate new and different values. When social change happens, there is likely to be controversy and disagreement about how to extend the concepts we've been using to do the work we now need them to do. Such changes should be acknowledged as such, and should not be held hostage to what we have thought we were doing all along, and how to continue that. Our conceptual frameworks should be forward-looking and give us the tools to envision and create better lives together.

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