

Engineering Concepts? Tools for Social Change

1. Recap and Introduction

How should we understand social change? Much social change is triggered by natural disasters, wars, migration, economic booms and busts. But some occurs because the conceptual/symbolic frame for coordination changes. In any case, material and cultural change go hand in hand. What does the process of *cultural* change – a change in symbolic and conceptual resources – involve? What are we doing when we come to understand that race is not a biological kind but a social construct? Do we change what it is to be married when we recognize same-sex marriage? Have we replaced our old concept of marriage (race) with a new one? Or has our understanding of marriage (race) simply evolved?

In response to oppression or injustice, we must (collectively) change the existing social structures, and this requires more than thinking differently. In this lecture, however, I will focus on the project of challenging a cultural technē, specifically the conceptual and symbolic tools it affords. One way of doing this is through conceptual amelioration. Recently, I've argued that one form of conceptual amelioration is *epistemic*, another is *semantic*. Today I will review this distinction and argue that at least one form of semantic amelioration – amelioration on functional grounds – is coherent (and sometimes valuable).

In the context of political activism, it can be important to insist that we are not simply undermining old practices and replacing them with new ones, e.g. in the movement for marriage equality, same sex marriages are marriages as legitimate as any ever were. We should also interpret history as continuous with our current conditions, e.g., race has been constructed over centuries with cultural tools that deflected attention from social reality and this is still happening today. Critique depends on a genealogy that situates us in history; social change is a process of evolution. Resistance to this way of understanding change is a way of contesting movements for social change. (“PC culture”)

It is sometimes difficult, however, to defend the idea that we are not simply discarding our old ways and imposing something new. If it is part of what ‘marriage’ *means* that it is between one man and one woman, then it would seem that same-sex marriage *does* involve a replacement of our concept of marriage; we have destroyed marriage and replaced it with something that we pretend is marriage. Or, because race isn't biological, it isn't real, because nothing social could *be* race; so we should stop thinking in racial terms. Can we avoid this within a philosophically viable account of concepts?

2. One Approach to Concepts

I am going to work with an externalist framework. On this approach, we express, believe, suppose, (etc.) propositions. Propositions are understood in terms of informational i.e., “as truth conditions, propositions as functions from possible circumstances to truth values, or equivalently, as sets of possible situations.” (Stalnaker 1998, 343).

How should we understand concepts on a view of this sort? Let's start with the idea that the informational content of a concept is a partition of possible individuals. A partition of possible dogs is just all the actual and possible dogs – the furry, slobbery, barky, ones in our lives, plus the ones that have existed, will exist, and ones we only imagine.

We have access to content through different modalities, from different vantage points, and at different levels of granularity.

- (Roughly), for an individual to *possess* (in the most minimal sense) a concept of X is to have a cluster of capacities that enables them to process information about Xs. Possessing a concept is a matter of having dispositions towards a space of possibilities. Possessing a concept is not like owning a car – it isn't having a mental particular in one's head. It is like possessing a skill.
- From a psychological point of view, *possession* of the concept may occur by virtue of different cognitive mechanisms and give rise to different dispositions in different individuals. Possession, like skill, comes in different forms and degrees. We may share the concept of X – we both have the capacities the process information about Xs – but we differ in how refined or idiosyncratic our capacities are; we can say, then, that different individuals who share the concept of X form different *conceptions* of Xs.
- Sharing concepts, however, is crucial for communication and coordination. Concepts marshal and organize our capacities for attention, categorization, interpretation, memory, language, inference, affect, and the like, for coordinating with others in response to particular kinds of information.
- This role for concepts requires a kind of standardization of what counts as an adequate appreciation of Xs for the purposes at hand. To be *conversant* with the concept of X in a context C one must be able to process a subset of information about Xs that is socially “approved” in C. (Putnam 1975: tiger, beech/elm).
- Those who are conversant with a concept in a context have an approved *orientation* that privileges certain exemplars, features, responses (affective and cognitive),

experiences, inferences, sub-categories. A vet and a child may both *possess* the (same) concept of DOG, but the vet can take the *orientation* of veterinary medicine and will be *conversant* with DOG in contexts that call for that orientation.¹

We sometimes introduce different words to pick out the same partition of logical space, e.g., vets might use the term ‘*canis familiaris*’ in certain contexts, reflecting the context of inquiry. Yalcin considers WATER and H₂O:

For example, the former [WATER] concept might (inter alia) be understood as embedding the partition into a subject matter reflecting parochial human interests and concerns, one including, say, the subject matter beverages— so that with the concept WATER, we (inter alia) locate that stuff amongst the beverages² — while the latter [H₂O] embeds it in some part of the subject matter chemistry — so that with the concept H₂O, we inter alia locate that stuff amongst the chemicals. (Yalcin 2016, 15)

The subject matter is plausibly delimited by a set of questions that arise in inquiry, but also in relation to our practical concerns.

- If we want to reify an orientation, it might be thought of as a temporally extended abstract particular that is the evolving cluster of socially approved (epistemic-affective-agential) responses to some privileged subset of information. (Rituals? Note that a particular action may be essential to a ritual at one point, but at a later point that action may drop out and be replaced. The identity of a ritual over time is more like a rope than a rock: the strands that make it up give out and are replaced without destroying the rope.)
- Fluency in an orientation can also involve being conversant with a broad range of signaling mechanisms and social meanings employed in the context. The concept PINK has the color pink as its informational content. But to be conversant with PINK in some contemporary contexts requires responses linked to femininity, the use of feminine pronouns, etc.

My focus will on concepts, understood as a public resource for coordination, so on orientations rather than individual conceptions.

¹ Yalcin, 2016: “Rather than a single map, an agent’s beliefs determine something more like a set of maps. Each map in the set is internally consistent, but it may be that some of the maps conflict with each other about how things are. We still steer by a map at any given time, but not always by

3. Forms of Conceptual Amelioration

We can now distinguish some different forms of amelioration.

There are at least two dimensions along which we might evaluate, and so adjust, our conceptual resources. If our orientation is faulty, it might be because (a) it is not adequately tracking the phenomenon (this is a kind of epistemic failure) or (b) it is wrong about what the phenomenon to be tracked is (this is a kind of ontological failure). An orientation can be adjusted (not just replaced!) either way.

- *Epistemic amelioration*: We improve our understanding of and responses to the informational content of the concept. In the cases I’m interested in, this involves certain kinds of changes in our orientation, viz., changes that expand or contract what part of the content our orientation highlights.
 - *Refinement*: Typically we don’t have a very solid grasp of the informational content of our concepts. There may be gaps in our judgments about cases; our orientation may leave out important factors. By gaining empirical knowledge, undertaking conceptual genealogy, or insight into logical space at a more fine-grained resolution, we can refine what responses are apt based on a broader or deeper knowledge of the phenomenon, e.g., we may discover that poverty takes different forms depending on age, gender, geographical location, culture and so access the phenomenon of poverty at a finer grain of resolution.
 - *Experiential access*: We improve our access to the informational content through different modes of presentation. E.g., first-person experience of poverty may demonstrate that our political orientation and affective responses towards poverty is inadequate.
- *Informational/semantic amelioration*: We change the informational content (partition of logical space) of the concept to do better. But better how?
 - *Alethic*: We improve the conceptual resources available to track truths. E.g., it is plausible that in the past the informational content of ‘race’ included only those who met certain biological conditions (some continue to think this). This prevented us from noticing important truths and from being aptly responsive to certain kinds of injustice. Shifting the informational content so social truths become articulable using the term ‘race’ can unmask ideology and shine a light

the same map. We could try putting the new motto like this: belief is the possibly inconsistent atlas from which we select maps by which we steer.” (6)

on emancipatory possibilities.

- *Pragmatic*: We can improve our terms of coordination: ‘lunch’ once picked out a light meal at any time of day or night. By narrowing the possibilities for lunch, we more efficiently convey information about when we intend to meet.
- *Moral*: Because what we mean can affect what we do, and this affects what there is in the world, semantic amelioration can also be (broadly) *moral*. We have moral reasons to make it possible for there to be legal same-sex marriages; this was not possible before. So the informational content/intension of (legal) ‘marriage’ changes.

4. But...Aren't Contents Essential?

It is fairly clear how the epistemic amelioration might work, but is semantic amelioration – ameliorating the concept by changing its informational content/intension – really possible? If informational content is essential to a concept, then semantic amelioration is impossible, and the best we could hope for is concept replacement. Concept replacement is compatible with retaining *the word* for the new content, so replacement could be masked. But can the content of a concept change, while it remains the same concept?

Recall that concepts are to be understood as a cluster of dispositions towards a partition of logical space. The dispositions included in a perspective are not random. They should be dispositions that are apt for the content; they should also be apt for the function they serve in coordination.

For example, suppose that we succeed in fixing the referent of ‘meter’ using a stick – let’s say the stick that happens to be exactly 39” long. But using a particular physical object as the standard is a nuisance because it doesn’t achieve the uniformity of measure that is required. It is reasonable, then, to correct ourselves and at the same time correct the content of ‘meter.’ We might find, for example, that there is a distinctive physical phenomenon that is close in length (say, 39.3701”), and change the length of a meter to that. In changing the length, are we abandoning the concept of METER and introducing a new concept METER*? Plausibly not. The initial length fixed didn’t work for us and the second did.

Concepts are not simply cognitive placeholders for content; they provide orientations toward content at different levels of granularity, highlight features of the content in response to questions, situate the content in different subject matters, and mandate a cluster of (inferential and affective) responses. So these aspects of concepts should carry weight in individuation.

- It is sometimes more important to the individuation of a concept that it be included in the subject matter in which it is situated and embedded in the relevant set of practices (Yalcin on WATER and H₂O), than that it maintain its exact informational content. In these cases, we should say that a change of content is compatible with the continuity of concept.
- The point of introducing concepts is to do justice to the different ways we access content and our different dispositions to respond to content; to ignore these differences in considering the individuation of concepts would be to sacrifice what we have gained.
- I am not going to propose an algorithm to guide us in deciding when and how to ameliorate. This is intentional. These decisions are a matter of judgment and are sensitive to a broad range of considerations (Williamson 2007, Railton 2014). We encounter them not just as theorists, but as agents engaged in historically specific practices. The question is how should we go on, and there isn’t a rule to tell us how.

5. Functions and Systems

In some cases of amelioration, we should look to the function of a concept to determine how to proceed: What function does this concept serve? NOTE: I’m not suggesting that all concepts are functional concepts (that they have functions as their content, e.g., of a HEART that it is an organ that pumps blood.) I am also not claiming that we construct concepts with purposes in mind or that concepts have a “proper function.” This is not teleosemantics. I am relying on a *systems conception of function*, rather than a purposive or etiological conception, and am suggesting that concepts, as part of our cultural technē, function to facilitate communication and coordination.

- According to a systems approach, features of a system (engine, circulatory system) can be at least partly explained by workings of its sub-parts (carburetor, heart).
- We decide on what system and what features of the system we are interested in. The same thing can function differently with respect to different systems (we can consider how a school functions within an educational system, a neighborhood, or a human services department.) So we need not say that the part has a “proper function.”
- It is a standard project in sociology to consider how social systems maintain social stratification: what are the relevant sub-parts (housing, jobs, education, health care) and how do they function to sustain the hierarchy.

- Concepts/orientations are part of the cultural technē that keep a social system (interdependent practices, institutions, structures) running because they focus our attention on features of the world around which we coordinate and call for “approved” responses.
- If the system is flawed, a concept (schema, orientation, social meaning) may be a source of the flaw because broad possession of it and action in accord with it, entrenches injustice.

Consider the concept of FAMILY.

- *Functional*: because we process certain kinds of information mainly for the purpose of coordination, we can judge the adequacy how we do so by reference to how well the coordination works. Better and worse concepts of FAMILY can be evaluated in terms of how having the relevant dispositions to respond to a particular content enables us to achieve coordination, e.g., around intimacy, childrearing, economic collaboration. Sometimes epistemic amelioration is not enough, we need to modify the content, e.g., to include same-sex or adoptive families.
- *Moral*: the organization of family life is a matter of justice. Should we count as *real* families only constituted by heterosexual couples and their biological offspring? Our concept of FAMILY can be evaluated with respect whether it facilitates coordination on morally acceptable terms.

Note that the partition of logical space that we should be collectively tracking, and how we track it, may be very different from the one we are currently tracking. This provides a basis for allowing ameliorative accounts to be a way of improving the content of our concepts, and not just replacing them.

On what basis are we entitled to override previous understandings of the content, or the requirements for the orientation? We rely on a principle of charity – what errors were likely, given the circumstances (errors that can be forgiven); what objectives seemed reasonable at the time; how the world might have changed. This does not avoid all conflict: those who insist that marriage is between one man and one woman may not embrace the new content and their dispositions may not change. But they have lost the battle for the public meaning (in the US and many other places).

Some have argued that conceptual engineers face an insurmountable problem of “lack of control.” This results in “the implementation problem.” We engineers cannot change how people use words, so even if we come up with a great idea in the seminar room, it

doesn’t much matter. This criticism, however, misunderstands the project. Engineers of the sort I have in mind are embedded in social movements and are aiming, through a wide range of activities, to change our perspective – perhaps to prompt a paradigm shift. If one is committed to a kind of reference magnetism, this might seem impossible. But if we are urging a change of practices and a corresponding shift in our dispositions to respond do divisions within logical space, then highlighting phenomena that might have been obscured, distorted, or considered irrelevant (by ideology) can shift our dispositions to be more inclusive/exclusive. And this is all we really need.

7. Conclusion

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. How best 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.