

# Conceptual Engineering: A Metaphysics Seminar

Tuesdays at 14:05–16:30

Room B302, Zhenhua Building

Peter Finocchiaro

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My office hours: Thursdays, 14:00–16:00, and by appointment

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Scan the QR code to add me on WeChat

## Course Description:

Some people say that philosophy – and metaphysics in particular – is the study of the fundamental nature of reality. That is not what we will be doing in this course. Instead, we will study concepts. More specifically, we will study the processes of evaluating our concepts, revising them when needed or creating new ones when necessary, and then determining how best to implement those changes. Call the study of these processes *conceptual engineering*. In this course, we will focus on conceptual engineering's core methodological issues, including topic continuity, externalism vs. internalism, and the implementation challenge. But we will also take the opportunity to explore specific instances of conceptual engineering, especially as they occur within the area of metaphysics.

This course is a graduate-level seminar in metaphysics. While there are many ways to design such a seminar, I have designed this one to be discussion-based and research-oriented. We will read and discuss one book on the topic of conceptual engineering. We will then practice a series of “research activities”, including comprehensive presentations, constructive papers, and reviewer reports.

**Required Texts:** Herman Cappelen's *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering* (2018, Oxford University Press)

**Optional Texts:** Conceptual engineering is a rapidly growing topic in philosophy. Many publications that address it quickly become “out of date”. That being said, the following edited volume seems to be on its way to becoming a canonical text:

- *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, edited by Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen, and David Plunkett

(I will provide a pdf file of this text if you send me a picture of a happy cat.)

**Letter Grade Distribution:** In this course I will use the following scale to convert between numerical and letter grades:

|                |    |               |    |
|----------------|----|---------------|----|
| 96.00 - 100.00 | A+ | 70.00 - 74.99 | B- |
| 90.00 - 95.99  | A  | 67.00 - 69.99 | C+ |
| 85.00 - 89.99  | A- | 63.00 - 66.99 | C  |
| 80.00 - 84.99  | B+ | 60.00 - 62.99 | C- |
| 75.00 - 79.99  | B  | 00.00 - 59.99 | D  |

**Grade Distribution:** Your overall grade is determined by the following:

|                 |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Participation   | 30% |
| Presentation    | 20% |
| Reviewer Report | 10% |
| Paper           | 40% |

**Course Goals:** My goal is to help you become a productive junior researcher. In service to that goal, I offer the following three smaller goals:

- (a) to improve your ability to fruitfully read and discuss contemporary research;
- (b) to develop your ability to produce scholarship in the form of research papers;
- (c) to practice some of the research activities attached to the production of such scholarship.

## Assignments

**Participation:** This course is a discussion-based seminar. I will not lecture. Instead, you and I will discuss and think through the reading material together. Consequently, your participation is essential. If you have taken a course of mine before, you know how I think about participation: we should be engaged in a soccer match, not a game of ping-pong. To that end, everyone must come to class prepared to discuss. Being prepared to discuss means, at a minimum, that you have read all of the material, you have come up with questions or thoughts to share, and you are ready to respond to the questions and thoughts shared by your peers.

To help you develop good discussion skills, I will employ a few techniques. First, I will “guide” our discussions by asking questions that should lead us to cover key aspects of the material. Second, I will track who is contributing to the discussion so that everyone can fairly participate. Finally, I will sometimes “cold call” on students, though I promise to do so impartially.

**Paper:** After we finish reading *Fixing Language*, you will begin writing a constructive paper that engages with one of the issues presented in the book. As a constructive paper, it should contain the following elements: (i) a review of the literature surrounding the issue, (ii) an original argument for a claim about that issue, (iii) an objection to that argument, and (iv) a reply to that objection. This paper will serve as the basis for the other major assignments in this course.

**Presentation:** Sometime during Weeks 9–11, you will give one presentation on the issue you chose to write about. As part of that presentation, you must summarize the “state of the literature” surrounding that issue. Such a summary must include the main positions concerning that issue, who endorses what position, and their reasons for or against endorsement.

**Reviewer Report:** By the end of Week 12, you should have a rough draft of your paper. You will send that rough draft to another student. You will also receive a rough draft from another student. For the rough draft you receive, you are responsible for writing a “reviewer report” for that paper, as if it were being submitted to a journal for publication. As part of the reviewer report, you must constructively suggest some of the ways in which the paper could be improved.

## Reading List and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester.

**Acronyms:** FL =<sup>df</sup> Cappelen’s *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*

**Week 1:** FL Preface (Optional)

**Week 2:** FL Chapters 1 + 2 (approximately 36 pages)

**Week 3:** FL Chapters 3 + 4 (approximately 18 pages)

**Week 4:** FL Chapters 5 + 6 (approximately 15 pages)

**Week 5:** FL Chapters 7 + 8 (approximately 25 pages)

**Week 6:** FL Chapters 9 + 10 + 11 (approximately 38 pages)

**Week 7:** FL Chapters 12 + 13 + 14 (approximately 26 pages)

**Week 8:** FL Chapters 15 + 16 + 17 + 18 (approximately 40 pages)

**Week 9:** “A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics” (Optional)

**Week 10:** “Conceptual Engineering: A Road Map to Practice” (Optional)

**Week 11:** “What is Conceptual Engineering and What Should it Be?” (Optional)

(NB: if you take a picture of a statue at East Lake and send it to me before Week 5, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)