Sexual Engineering:
Conceptual Authority and the Gadfly Strategy

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that recent efforts in the conceptual engineering of sexual orientation are practically misguided. More precisely, I argue that philosophers cannot implement a revision to the concept of sexual orientation because we lack conceptual authority over the concept. Furthermore, in virtue of how philosophy is currently structured, we are unlikely to acquire the relevant kind of conceptual authority. Along the way, I critically discuss an argument from Herman Cappelen for a more global pessimism about the implementation problem. I also discuss some alternative strategies to achieving the political goals that motivate these recent efforts to engineer the concept of sexual orientation. Ultimately, I argue that philosophers should instigate a sort of conceptual abandonment by exploiting their social role as a conceptual gadfly.

Keywords: sexual orientation; ameliorative metaphysics; conceptual engineering; conceptual authority; conceptual abandonment; implementation problem

Introduction

Sex is a popular topic, in life as well as in philosophy. Within that much smaller community, there has been an increasingly nuanced conversation about the concept of sexual orientation. Most contributions to that conversation follow this pattern: here's how some people conceive of sexual orientation; their concept is flawed; here's my concept; we should use my concept instead.

Put this way, the conversation sounds like countless other conversations within philosophy. But the philosophers having this particular conversation share two goals that, I think, make their conversation importantly different. First, their goal is for their concept to be adopted by their society, if not also other societies or even the entire world. Publishing in academic journals and persuading their peers in the ivory tower are merely means to that goal. Second, they want their concept to be adopted for political reasons. By conceiving of sexual orientation in the way that they recommend, the world will be a better place – better for everyone, perhaps, but especially for vulnerable sexual minorities.

I share these goals. But I doubt that they can be achieved through the means currently being employed by philosophers. Substantiating these doubts will be my primary goal in this paper. In

a sense, then, this is a pessimistic paper. But I am not a defeatist. As I will suggest later, I think there is a more effective way to achieve our goals.

My doubts ultimately rest on claims about the history of conceptual change and claims about the current division of conceptual labor. I will say more about all of that when the time comes. But here is a brief preview. Philosophy cannot get people to adopt a new concept of sexual orientation unless it has the conceptual authority to do so. But it does not have the authority to do so and it is unlikely to ever get it. I fully acknowledge that these claims are empirical and should ultimately be evaluated as such. But I'm a philosopher and I can't resist the urge to speculate. If my speculations are correct, then the implications for philosophers working on the metaphysics of sexual orientation are quite substantial. Those implications are what I am primarily interested in illuminating right now. Later, I hope that I and others can do more to substantiate the empirical claims upon which my speculations rest.[1]

Here's a roadmap for what is to follow. First, in Section 1, I will present the current state of research on the metaphysics of sexual orientation. In particular, I will show how philosophers' political goals have motivated a project in conceptual engineering. I will then discuss conceptual engineering in greater detail in Section 2 and identify importantly distinct components of the engineering process. In Section 3, I will first discuss the general case for pessimism about conceptual engineering and then make a specific case for pessimism about engineering the concept of sexual orientation. My argument ultimately rests on the claim that philosophers lack conceptual authority over the concept of sexual orientation. Finally, in Section 4, I will evaluate some potentially more productive ways for philosophers to interrogate the concept of sexual orientation. Ultimately, I suggest that philosophers should embrace their role as society's gadfly and undermine the concept of sexual orientation by calling attention to its out its conceptual flaws. In doing so, philosophers might create an opportunity for a better concept to take its place, perhaps even a concept that philosophers have conceptual authority over.

1 - The Metaphysics of Sexual Orientation

The philosophical study of sexual orientation is not new. Since at least the 1970s, philosophers have examined metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical issues in relation to sexual orientation and its more specific aspects, like homosexuality, queerness, and heteronormativity. Perhaps most prominently, philosophers have debated whether an individual's sexual orientation is an essential and biologically driven feature or is instead a social construction. But philosophers have discussed other issues, such as the ethics of so-called gay conversion therapy and the relationship between sexual orientation, identity, and the interpretation of personal experience.

[1] There is very little empirical research on conceptual engineering in general and the problem of implementation specifically. But see Landes and Reuter (2025) for a promising start.

There is a new conversation that is, I think, importantly different from these. The primary topic of this conversation is the analysis of the concept of sexual orientation. This analysis is conducted in the mode of analytic philosophy, with extensive use of thought experiments, unapologetic appeals to possible worlds, and nuanced discussions of dispositions and their stimulus conditions. In this respect, the conversation looks just like the myriad other conversations among analytic philosophers about such-and-such concept.

And yet this conversation is different. Most philosophers within analytic philosophy are primarily concerned with the truth. They want to discern how the world works and adjust their concepts accordingly. But philosophers who are working on the metaphysics of sexual orientation are less concerned with what sexual orientation "really" is. They are more concerned with how the ways people think about sexual orientation have an effect on the ways they treat others. Thus, the primary goal in their analysis of sexual orientation is to improve the ways people treat others with respect to sexual orientation – especially the ways people treat sexual minorities and others who are socially disadvantaged in virtue of their sexuality.[2]

One such philosopher, Robin Dembroff, identifies four purposes that should be served by the analysis of sexual orientation. It should:

1. clarify the criteria for ascribing sexual orientation, as well as how these criteria translate into a taxonomic schema of sexual orientation;

2. be consistent with relevant social-scientific research – in particular, research concerning sex and gender;

3. reduce or eliminate the presumption that cisheterosexuality is the normatively standard sexual orientation and all queer sexual orientations are normatively deviant; and

4. be conducive for establishing legal and social protections for persons who have queer sexual orientations (Dembroff 2016: 4–5).

To be clear, some of these purposes cohere with the "ordinary" or "traditional" purposes of analytic philosophy. For instance, the analysis of knowledge is also aimed toward clarifying the criteria for ascribing knowledge. But these other analyses lack the explicitly political purposes articulated in Dembroff's (3) and (4). While all analytic philosophers should accept that the analyses they offer could be used for political purposes, there remains an important difference

[2] What counts as a sexual minority is itself a substantive question open for dispute. Dembroff gestures toward this question with their distinction between sexual orientation and sexual druthers such as being attracted to redheads (Dembroff 2016: 7). Ayala-López and Díaz-León more substantively engage the question, discussing preferences based on race, age, or relationship structures like polyamory (Ayala-López and Díaz-León 2021: 382–385). See, also, Andler (2025).

between an analysis being used for a political purpose and the adequacy of the analysis itself being evaluated on the basis of those political purposes.

The political purposes Dembroff articulates have an influence on the analysis that they develop, *Bidimensional Dispositionalism*, according to which:

> *A person S's sexual orientation is grounded in S's dispositions to engage in sexual behaviors under the ordinary condition[s] for these dispositions, and which sexual orientation S has is grounded in what sex[es] and gender[s] of persons S is disposed to sexually engage under these conditions.*

The most distinctive element of Dembroff's analysis is its omission of the subject's own sex and gender. This is a feature, not a bug. By omitting the subject's own sex and gender, Bidimensional Dispositionalism effectively eliminates sexual minorities. There are no heterosexual women and there are no gay men; there are just people who are attracted to men. This particular move, Dembroff claims, will decrease the normative influence of cisheterosexuality that is intrinsic to our current concept of sexual orientation.

Bidimensional Dispositionalism also analyzes sexual orientation in terms of dispositions to *behave* rather than dispositions to *desire*. This difference is also motivated by Dembroff's political aims. What matters most for the legal and social protections mentioned in (4) are behaviors. These behaviors might have psychological bases, but that issue is largely irrelevant. A man who has sex with men should be legally and socially protected regardless of the psychological reasons that he has sex with men.

Some philosophers have criticized Dembroff's analysis, not on the basis of Dembroff's stated goals but on the basis of the ways in which their analysis fails to meet those goals.[3] For instance, Díaz-León says that "it is politically useful" to have a concept of sexual orientation that captures the similarity between gay men and gay women because that similarity is an important element of the way in which gay men and gay women are discriminated against. Because Dembroff's Bidimensional Dispositionalism "cannot easily capture these common patterns of discrimination", it should be rejected. In its place, Díaz-León offers a less revisionary analysis that reincorporates the sex and gender of the subject (Díaz-León 2022: 308).

Matthew Andler also adopts politically motivated purposes for an analysis of sexual orientation. He says that it should:

1. Allow the ascription of sexual orientations to non-cisheterosexual individuals, and

2. Be conducive to the constitutive aims of LGBTQIA+ social movements,

[3] In this way, this debate about sexual orientation is structurally similar to some recent debates about gender. See, *inter alia*, Haslanger (2000); Saul (2006, 2012); Jenkins (2016); Díaz-Leon (2016); Brigandt and Rosario (2020).

where those constitutive aims include the promotion of the well-being of non-cisheterosexual individuals and the promotion of queer culture (Andler 2021: 103—104).

These two purposes move Andler into alignment with Díaz-León against Dembroff. Strategically speaking, there is a need to differentiate between members and non-members of the categories *homosexual*, *bisexual*, and *asexual*. This need is primarily a response to the highly specific social issues faced by members of those categories. Bi-phobia and bi-erasure, for instance, contribute to social isolation and psychological distress (Andler 2021: 113–114). Since Dembroff's Bidimensional Dispositionalism eliminates these categories, it should, according to Andler, be rejected.[4]

In summary, much of the recent work on the metaphysics of sexual orientation is unified in its political aims but divided on how best to achieve those aims.[5] Some philosophers advocate for highly revisionary concepts of sexual orientation that will lead us to see it in a new way – a way that, hopefully, is more just. Other philosophers advocate for more modest revisions in large part because the entrenched concept of sexual orientation best explains many of the ways in which some people have been socially disadvantaged. Nevertheless, they agree that these differences only really matter when considering how entire societies think about sexual orientation. Philosophers may be able to generate politically useful analyses, but these analyses contribute very little to social justice unless they are adopted more broadly.

2 - Ameliorative Metaphysics and Conceptual Engineering

The recent work on sexual orientation that I've described above fits into a broader tradition of *amelioration* in social metaphysics, a tradition most firmly established by Sally Haslanger. As she puts it, an ameliorative project asks "What is the point of having the concept in question… What concept (if any) would do the work best?" (Haslanger 2012: 386). When it comes to the concepts used to categorize people, the point often has political implications, and these political implications tend to become more significant as the prevalence of the concept grows. Consequently, for many of society's broadest ways of categorizing people – race, gender, class, sexual orientation – ameliorative social metaphysics is inescapably political.[6]

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[4] See Ritchie (2025) for a helpful presentation of a more general discussion about the harms and benefits of labels, sexual orientation being just one case in point.

[5] That being said, some recent work on the metaphysics of sexual orientation does not have immediately political aims. Besides my own work (Finocchiaro 2021, 2025), see Halwani (2023), Whitlow and Laskowski (2023), and Richardson (Forthcoming).

[6] Why, exactly, a society's broadest categories tend to get politicized is of course a difficult question. I don't have much to say about it.

Nevertheless, I think temporarily stepping away from the broader political implications of amelioration will provide a better understanding of the phenomenon at play. To give this phenomenon a name, call it *conceptual engineering*.[7]

As I understand it, conceptual engineering is an activity aimed at changing representational devices. At a very abstract level, this activity has three components: a creative process whereby new representational devices are created or existing representational devices are re-imagined, a deliberative process whereby reasons for or against the use of a representational device are generated and weighed, and a process of implementation whereby the change is advocated for and adopted. The order I presented these processes reflects the temporal order these processes often follow: create first, deliberate second, implement third. But that temporal order is regularly disrupted; deliberations can lead to new creations, and the process of implementation might very well lead people to re-deliberate. Nevertheless, I think the processes should be kept conceptually distinct because they face their own distinct challenges.

My definition of conceptual engineering uses the locution 'representational devices' so as to avoid thorny debates about concepts, words, and the relationship between them.[8] Some people understand conceptual engineering as the name suggests it should be understood: the engineering of concepts. Other people take the expression less literally and understand it as the engineering of the words people use and their shared or conventional meanings. Some people see no important difference between concepts and linguistic meaning. I don't intend what I say in this paper to depend on any particular position in these debates.[9] Personally, I am slightly uncomfortable with the concept of a concept. But those who are currently engaged in the debate about sexual orientation tend to frame that debate in terms of concepts. In what follows, then, I will follow their lead and pray that it makes no difference.

That being said, conceptual engineering does presuppose that there is some sense to be made of the claim that it is possible to change concepts. There are at least two ways to explicate this claim. First, someone could insist that concepts are mutable in the sense that a concept I use at t_1 is numerically identical to a concept I use at t_2 despite it being in some sense not qualitatively identical. To change my concepts, then, is to modify my existing concepts. Someone who is wary of such an idea and the questions about diachronic identity that it generates may favor a

[7] I understand that this terminology is contested. Part of the contention is merely historical, insofar as it seems that multiple terms (e.g. 'conceptual engineering', 'ameliorative projects', 'conceptual ethics') have been introduced for what seem to be extremely similar if not identical phenomena. But there might be substantive issues that make some terminological choices better than others. For some discussion of this, see Cappelen and Plunkett (2020): 2–5.

[8] My definition is also intended to avoid excluding the possibility that there are relevant representational devices other than concepts and words. As far as I can tell, representational devices like pictures, scientific models, and mathematical equations can also be engineered and are subject to all of the same issues that concepts and words are subject to.

[9] But for more on these debates, see, Cappelen and Plunkett (2020): 7–8; Cappelen (2018): 137–147; Sawyer (2020, 2021).

second explication, according to which changing my concepts is nothing more than abandoning old concepts and using new ones.

In this case, those who are currently engaged in the debate about sexual orientation seem to be ambivalent about the extent to which the debate involves modifying the existing concept of sexual orientation or replacing it with a new concept.[10] Indeed, Dembroff goes so far as to say "I'm not sure anything important hangs on whether my project is described as providing a revised or replacement concept of sexual orientation" (Dembroff 2016: 4). I'm not sure that's right. But it will require some set-up to explain why. In the meantime, I will talk as if this debate has been a debate about modification rather than replacement.

Finally, as I define it, conceptual engineering is an intentional activity. Consequently, phenomena like semantic drift are not instances of conceptual engineering. I admit that my definition is somewhat stipulative and there will be hard cases. For example, semantic drift occasionally occurs as the result of the intentional misuse of a word or concept. Though this misuse is intentional, it is not typically intended to have a lasting effect on the word or concept. In fact, in some cases the intended effect of a misuse may only be brought about in a context where there is not a lasting effect on the word being misused.[11] Other hard cases come from prescriptive actions whereby an individual or group of individuals asserts that there is a standard way to use a word or concept, insists that that standard way is the right way, and maintains that any current usage that deviates from it is therefore wrong. The most shameless version of this is the policing of grammar and lexicon – think about objections to the word 'ain't', the non-literal use of 'literal', and the singular 'they'. But such prescriptivism also occurs in the use of philosophical concepts – think about attempts to correct non-factive usages of knowledge or attempts to banish non-philosophical senses of validity and begging the question.

One final note. Any time anyone talks about "our" concept of such-and-such or what "we" mean by this word and that word, there is a dangerous tendency to generalize beyond what is justified. People are diverse, including with respect to their representational devices. Consequently, when

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[10] Somewhat mixed up in this issue is whether the reasons relevant to the deliberative process are restricted to those regarding the contents of concepts or whether reasons regarding non-cognitive lexical effects are also relevant. I may prefer to say that I am pro-choice (or pro-life) rather than anti-life (or anti-choice). There is no meaningful cognitive difference behind this choice. But the choice is still meaningful insofar as the terms produce associative effects that I may reasonably care about. See Lakoff (2014). Lexical effects (or something like lexical effects) also apply to concepts. According to Hume's theory of the association of ideas and impressions, for instance, two ideas may be associated with each other merely because of their coincidental contiguity in space or time.

[11] Any example will be controversial, but it may be useful to consider the politically motivated misuse of labels like 'socialism', 'counter-revolutionary', or 'DEI'. These misuses are used to disparage something by inaccurately placing it within a category that the relevant people have already determined to be bad. Were the label to expand so as to accurately include the thing being disparaged, though, it's possible that the original justification for why that original category was bad (such as there was a justification) would no longer apply to the expanded category. In other words: "if *that* is what it means to be a counter-revolutionary, then I don't see what's so bad about being a counter-revolutionary." *Mutatis mutandis* for positively valanced labels like 'democracy' (see Cappelen 2023: 92).

Dembroff talks about “ordinary discourse” about sexual orientation that “everyone” seems to have opinions about, it’s a bit disappointing to see them cite only American and British sources. To be fair, Dembroff and others occasionally acknowledge their implicit focus on contemporary Western society. But it’s not clear what the connection is between contemporary Western society’s concepts and those of contemporary non-western society.[12]

Thankfully, I do not need a detailed theory of the metaphysics of societies to argue for what I want to argue for here. There exists a fairly cohesive community of philosophers in dialogue with one another. When I use ‘we’ in this paper, I am usually referring to this community. We are engaged in a collective effort to engineer a better concept of sexual orientation that other people will use. My pessimistic argument in this paper doesn’t really hinge on who those other people are. The collective effort will fail for Western society; it will fail for non-Western society; it will fail for the American Deep South; it will fail for East Coast liberals; and it will probably even fail for academia, broadly construed.

Let me explain why.

3 - Pessimism About Engineering

As I mentioned, I am pessimistic about current attempts to engineer the existing concept of sexual orientation. Before I substantiate my pessimism, I think it is worthwhile to briefly taxonomize the ways to be pessimistic.

There are three processes of conceptual engineering: creation, deliberation, and implementation. Corresponding to these three processes are three sets of practical concerns.[13] How, for instance, do we go about creating new ways to revise our concept of sexual orientation? How do we come to an agreement on what criteria to use when selecting a revision, and how do we determine when those criteria are satisfied? How do we successfully and/or efficiently implement a revision?

I am optimistic about satisfying the first set of practical concerns as it relates to the concept of sexual orientation. History (recent and distant, local and global) provides a rich array of examples to draw from.[14] I am in some respects pessimistic about satisfying the second set of

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[12] For some worrying connections, see Ludwig *et al.* (2024); Nowak (2020). Furthermore, it is at best an oversimplification to talk about the concepts of a “society”, Western or otherwise. Any such society is in reality constituted by smaller, more cohesive, communities that may differ with respect to their representational devices. In this sense, most concepts of a society are contested. (See Haslanger (2012): 406–428.) I don’t think Dembroff and others intend to suggest otherwise, though.

[13] Each process also has its own set of ethical concerns. For instance, we may reasonably care about the extent to which the process itself is inclusive (“Nothing about us without us”). See, also, Podosky (2021)’s notion of metalinguistic injustice. Though I focus on practical concerns in this paper, I do not mean to imply that they are more important than other types of concerns, something I will return to later.

[14] See, *inter alia*, Boswell (1980), Halperin (1990), Hinsch (1992).

practical concerns. I'm happy to accept that our concept of sexual orientation should be revised for political reasons, including the protection of those who have been historically disadvantaged by society. But I doubt anyone can reliably predict the effects certain changes to our concepts will have. Here's one illustration. One aspect of the debate concerns the saliency or social significance of our pre-existing concepts. Dembroff argues that a concept like *homosexual* should be made less significant so as to reduce the force of cisheteronormativity. Andler and Díaz-León argue that a concept like *homosexual* should continue to carry significance; without it, we would be unable to understand the ways that some people have been oppressed, and therefore we would be unable to rectify that oppression. Frankly, I think it is impossible to know the future effects of either course of action. Perhaps a serious attempt to reduce the social significance of *homosexual* will bring about an egalitarian utopia. But it seems to me that we have just as much reason to believe that it will lead to a reactionary blowback that makes things even worse than they are now.[15]

I'm sure there are reasonable responses to my pessimism about the deliberative process. But I mention it only to set it aside. In this paper, I am most interested in substantiating my pessimism about the process of implementing a revision to the concept of sexual orientation. I think that current efforts to engineer the concept of sexual orientation are unlikely to be implemented because of the role that philosophers play in how a society conceives of sexual orientation — or, to be more accurate, because of the role that philosophers do not play. To set up my argument, I will first sketch an argument from Cappelen (2018) for a global pessimism about conceptual engineering. I will then develop my position in contrast to that global pessimism, articulating my reasons for a more local pessimism about sexual orientation.

3.1 - Cappelen's Global Pessimism

Cappelen summarizes his central claim about conceptual engineering as follows:

> *Inscrutable—Lack of Control—Will Keep Trying: The processes involved in conceptual engineering are for the most part inscrutable, and we lack control of them, but nonetheless we will and should keep trying (Cappelen 2018: 72).*

As I understand it, this claim is primarily about the process of implementation.[16] The process of designing concepts is only as inscrutable as any other creative process, and evaluating those concepts is something that conceptual engineers of course have control over (even if we cannot reliably verify our evaluations). What we don't have control over is the process of implementation.

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[15] Cf. Gibbons (2022) and the problem of rational conceptual conflict. There will inevitably be conflicting preferences over the expected effects of conceptual change (e.g. the expansion of 'milk' to include plant-based products is good for Oatly and bad for dairy farmers). Though Gibbons presents these conflicts as a challenge to the implementation process, they seem to also create distinct epistemological challenges for the deliberative process.

[16] I acknowledge that the claim itself, as stated, does not make that clear. But elsewhere Cappelen has made it clear that his primary doubt is with implementation. See Cappelen (2020a): 602.

Cappelen thinks conceptual engineers don't have control over implementation because he endorses *semantic externalism*. According to Cappelen, what someone means is at least partially determined by factors other than their beliefs, intentions, and desires. Traditionally, there are at least three types of external factors worth mentioning. First, meanings may be determined through the physical environment and other contextual factors, most interestingly when they figure into "baptisms". When I hold a piece of chalk and say "I shall name this piece of chalk 'Chalky'," the meaning of 'Chalky' depends on what I was in fact ostensioning to. If my twin says the same words while ostensioning toward a cleverly disguised alien, then the meaning of my 'Chalky' is very different from the meaning of his 'Chalky', despite the fact that everything going on inside our heads is exactly the same. Second, meanings are determined through patterns of usage, both current and historical. Since I introduced the name to you, your usage of 'Chalky' depends on my usage of 'Chalky'; and both of our usages depend on my past baptism of the name 'Chalky'. But all of that is also subject to how 'Chalky' is used in our broader linguistic community. If 'Chalky' is a name for a well-known politician, then it is only through sustained effort that an utterance of 'Chalky' refers to my piece of chalk instead of the politician. For some words – though probably not for 'Chalky' – it may be impossible for a speaker to semantically express the speaker's non-standard meaning. Third, many meanings are determined through a division of linguistic labor. To give one classic example, the meaning of a term like 'elm tree' is determined by the beliefs, intentions, and desires of other people – namely, the people who have been given authority to determine the meaning of this term. In healthy circumstances, these people are experts insofar as their beliefs, intentions, and desires enable more informative and productive usage that non-experts can benefit from adopting. Thus, I can use 'elm tree' to refer to elm trees despite my inability to distinguish an elm tree from a beech tree.

At this point I have fallen into a terminological snare. Semantic externalism is typically articulated in terms of the meanings of linguistic entities like words. But I am talking about conceptual engineering, and I stated that I would follow the lead of metaphysicians who talk about our concept of sexual orientation. No worries! The problem originates from Cappelen's belief that concepts are theoretically unhelpful entities.[17] A more ecumenical version of the argument relies on the claim that there is some public thing that depends on baptisms, patterns of usage, and divisions of labor. Whether that public thing is a worldly entity or a linguistic meaning or a shared concept makes no difference.

Let's return to the argument. At a certain level of abstraction, there is a function – call it the *interpretation* function – that inputs various facts and outputs a meaning. Given semantic externalism (or some cousin of semantic externalism), these facts may include facts about baptisms, historical patterns of usage, and so on. Cappelen's argument makes both epistemological and metaphysical assumptions about this interpretation function. While

[17] See, *inter alia*, Cappelen (2018): 137–147.

Cappelen treats the two types of assumptions as interconnected, I think it is useful to separate them, at least for the purpose of understanding the argument.

Epistemologically speaking, Cappelen thinks that conceptual engineers do not know enough of the inputs to an interpretation function. In fact, no one does and no one can. The inputs are too complex, involving, as Cappelen says, "literally billions of speech events over long periods of time" (Cappelen 2020: 598).[18] The inputs are also in some cases inaccessible. If the meaning of a term like 'water' depends on subtle details of the term's initial baptism, it is laughable to think that the details of such a historically removed event can be confirmed.

Cappelen also thinks that, epistemologically speaking, conceptual engineers do not and cannot know the interpretation function itself.[19] To be sure, we have some idea. We know that the referent of a proper name is fixed through an initial baptism but can change over time. We know that the meaning of 'elm tree' when uttered by a non-expert in some sense depends on the beliefs of experts in their linguistic community. But these claims are nowhere near as detailed as they would need to be. According to Cappelen, conceptual engineers would need to know not just that there is a division of linguistic labor, but also precisely how that division operates. We know that reference shifts happen. We even have some competing theories for why they happen. But we are nowhere close to knowing when they happen – either in specific cases or in general.[20]

Either epistemological assumption would probably be sufficient to support Cappelen's pessimism. If conceptual engineers don't know what inputs lead to what outputs, then conceptual engineers don't have control over those outputs. But the situation is worse than that. As Cappelen sees it, semantic externalism entails that conceptual engineers would lack control over outputs even if we had full knowledge of the interpretation functions and the inputs that produce those outputs. We would lack control because we lack control over the inputs. First, as I mentioned, those inputs may include historical facts that conceptual engineers cannot change, such as facts about the circumstances of a term's baptism. Second, conceptual engineers lack control over patterns of usage. Of course, in some weak sense conceptual engineers control current patterns of usage insofar as these patterns of usage are constituted by individual acts of usage and (arguably) each individual conceptual engineer has some control over their individual acts. But to control current patterns of usage in any substantive sense would require the coordination of literally billions of speech events.[21] According to Cappelen, such a task is

[18] Cf. Dorr and Hawthorne (2014): 282.
[19] Cf. Williamson (1994): 206.
[20] Everyone who hasn't already really should read Burgess's 2014 "Madagascar Revisited". It provides in great detail some of the facts relevant to the name's shift in reference. In comparison to the implicit standards set elsewhere in philosophy, the details of Burgess's account are excruciating. Yet even it fails to explain when, precisely, the shift in reference occurred.
[21] Cf. Jorem (2021), who argues that conceptual engineers can meaningfully influence the standing meaning of personal idiolects and smaller "languages" like the English spoken by analytic metaphysicians. Though I am sympathetic to Jorem's line of reasoning, I ignore it in what follows.

impossible for anyone, let alone a handful of analytic philosophers publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

All that being said, it is perhaps misleading to call Cappelen a pessimist about conceptual engineering. First, as I mentioned earlier, Cappelen would accept that we have control over the creative and deliberate processes of conceptual engineering. Second, Cappelen thinks that there is nothing distinctive about his position as it relates to normative theorizing more generally. When it comes to alleviating global poverty or critically examining Trump's time in office, Cappelen thinks that talking and thinking about them is unlikely to have significant and predictable effects. This reality might make thinking and talking about poverty, Trump, or concepts pointless if you think that the only point to doing so is to have significant and predictable effects on those things. But it might not if you think there is some value to thinking and talking other than the large-scale effects of thinking and talking.[22]

3.2 - Astronomical Optimism

While we lack the ability to change many of our concepts, there are some that we do have control over. We have control over those concepts in virtue of the specific divisions of conceptual labor relevant to the concepts.

Here's a prominent example. In 2006, the International Astronomical Union (hereafter "the IAU") defined a planet as a celestial body that (i) orbits around the sun, (ii) is in hydrostatic equilibrium, and (iii) clears the neighborhood of its orbit.[23] Pluto, which had up until then been regarded by most people as a planet, was downgraded by the IAU to a dwarf planet (i.e. a celestial body that satisfies the first two conditions but not the third). Pluto's status as a planet had always been contested among experts. But the IAU's decision was prompted by recent discoveries of many celestial bodies (at least three but potentially hundreds) that seemed to be as deserving of the status of planet as Pluto was. Rather than grow the extension of planets so as to include these other celestial bodies, the IAU decided to shrink the extension so as to exclude Pluto.

As a matter of fact, the IAU's decision to engineer the concept of a planet was successfully implemented. While there are pockets of resistance (see plutoisaplanet.org), most people have followed the IAU's lead. I suggest that this change was no accident; the IAU had the ability to control society's concept of a planet and used that ability to implement a conceptual change that, in their collective opinion, improved upon previous usage.[24]

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[22] See Cappelen (2020b): 149–150, Gibbons (2022): 21–23. Cf. Andow (2021).
[23] For the official resolution, see https://www.iau.org/static/resolutions/Resolution_GA26-5-6.pdf. There is no record of the official vote-count on the resolution. Presumably, this is due to the fact that no official count was taken because those in favor clearly outnumbered those against.
[24] To be more specific, it seems that the IAU explicated (in a Carnapian sense) what was an otherwise underdeveloped concept. Cf. Hinton (2024).

Thus, Cappelen's pessimism about the ability to coordinate billions of speech events is misplaced.[25] In some fortuitous situations, the coordination is a lot simpler than it seems. In this specific situation, the successful engineering of the concept of a planet relied on a pre-established coordination between the speech events of a small community of professional astronomers and the speech events of societies more broadly. Because the IAU had control over the speech events of professional astronomers, they were able to successfully implement a conceptual change. The success of this implementation was predictable, though certainly not guaranteed. And it did not require a deep understanding of the interpretation function of the shared concept of a planet.

The IAU's 2006 decision is a common example for philosophers working on conceptual engineering. I think it can be misleading, though, insofar as the news was received quite dramatically. Most successful implementations are boring.

Consider definitions of physical measurements. At the time Saul Kripke gave his Princeton lectures, a meter was still defined on the prototype model, whereby the length was determined in reference to a physical object. But shortly thereafter, in 1983, a meter was re-defined on the physical constants model – more specifically, as the distance traveled by light in a vacuum over 1/299792458 of a second. Similar re-definitions occurred for other physical measurements. In 2019, a kilogram was re-defined in reference to the Planck constant, thereby ending the era of prototype definitions. Though the re-definitions changed the intensions of these measurement concepts, their extensions remained the same.

But consider measurement systems whose definitions are parasitic on another's. For most of the 19th century, a US yard was defined in terms of a UK yard. The US yard was then independently re-defined in terms of a meter.[26] To fix discrepancies that developed between the various yard-based systems, the International Yard and Pound Agreement of 1959 set the length of a yard to precisely 0.9144 meters. These re-definitions did involve some extensional change; the 1959 agreement made the US yard very, very slightly shorter than it was before. (Apparently, though, old geographical survey data led many people in the United States to continue to use the previous definition.)

The Chinese 里 (an analogue of the English mile) has undergone many re-definitions throughout its thousands-year history. Those re-definitions were like the internal refinements of the metric system. Most recently, though, the Weights and Measures Act of 1929 defined a 里 as precisely

[25] To be fair to Cappelen, our disagreement is at least partially attributable to an underlying meta-semantic disagreement. He has recently argued against semantic deference – see Cappelen and Deutsch (2025). In contrast, I think semantic deference is ubiquitous. Proving so is beyond the scope of this paper, of course, but I think the examples I give in this paper are plausible enough to motivate my position. Cf. Belleri (2025)

[26] One major motivating reason for this re-definition was the failure of the British government to maintain a reliable prototype. Apparently, the original prototype was irrevocably damaged in the Great Fire of 1834, and the replacement copies were deteriorating.

500 meters; this definition has remained unchanged and was affirmed by the People's Republic of China. The Chinese 斤 was similarly re-defined to be precisely 500 grams. Incidentally, the parasitic re-definitions brought somewhat larger changes to the lengths and masses being referred to than did the US re-definitions.

One important thing about these instances of conceptual engineering is the degree to which ordinary people don't know about them and don't care. Yet their uninterested ignorance isn't due to lack of use. Rather, it seems that measurement concepts are paradigms of *divisions in conceptual labor*. Everyone uses these measurements all the time, including traditional US and Chinese measurements. But almost everyone is happy to defer to "someone else" on exactly what they are with respect to both the length or mass referred to and the way it is referred to (i.e. its intension).

Another important thing about these instances of conceptual engineering is the infrastructure behind them. In each instance, the change was implemented by an organized group. To be sure, the creative and deliberative processes of the engineering sometimes involved individuals acting on their own. But the actual implementation was done by individuals acting collectively.

There are differences within those implementations, though I'm not sure if those differences matter. The IAU's decision to change the concept of a planet was voted on by members of a professional organization. Thereafter, the change was left to spread through society. As Ron Ekers, president of the IAU at the time of the decision, put it, the IAU's "decisions and recommendations are not enforceable by any national or international law; rather they establish conventions that are meant to help our understanding of astronomical objects and processes."[27] Despite the lack of enforcement, they succeeded; writers of textbooks and other educational materials followed the lead of the IAU and began to use the new definition. The re-definitions of physical measurements were much more complicated from an organizational perspective. Revisions to the metric system (more specifically, to the International System of Units, or SI) followed an especially complicated process. The revisions were initially proposed by the Consultative Committee for Units ("CCU"), a group constituted by research organizations across the world as well as individual people. The CCU's proposal was then reviewed by the 18-person International Committee for Weights and Measures ("CIPM") and eventually confirmed by the General Conference on Weights and Measures ("CGPM"), which acts on behalf of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures ("BIPM"), an intergovernmental organization that includes 59 member-states. By becoming a member of the BIPM, a national government binds itself to following the decisions of the CGPM.[28]

[27] From the 12.8.2006 IAU newspaper, page 16: https://www.iau.org/static/publications/ga_newspapers/20060812.pdf

[28] To be even more detailed: membership is granted to nations that accede to the Metre Convention document, Article 6 of which gives the BIPM the authority to verify standards and scales used by the member-states.

The major difference here is the involvement of governmental organizations. Without the backing of a governmental organization, the IAU can only “establish conventions”. The CGPM has more coercive power. What this coercive power is, precisely, and why it has it are questions I have no good answers for.

I suspect this major difference doesn’t really matter, though. In these cases, governments are used primarily in their capacity as convenient mechanisms for collective action. The coercive power that distinguishes them from other organized groups operates behind the scenes and in the margins; it is irrelevant to most of the implementation process. If my suspicion is correct, then the re-definitions of the metric system would still have been successfully implemented had the International Committee for Weights and Measures been a “mere” professional organization like the IAU.

They would have been just as successful in virtue of the major similarity in these examples: their *conceptual authority* over the concepts that they were trying to implement changes to.

3.3 - Authority and the Division of Conceptual Labor

Most contemporary societies have divisions in conceptual labor. On one model of this division, there is a concept available for members of that society to use. The precise nature of that concept, however, is not directly determined by ordinary members of the society. Rather, there is a subset of people whose usage determines the nature of that concept and whose usage other members’ usage is parasitic upon. This subset of people has *conceptual authority* over the concept in question.

Conceptual authority in this sense is not conceptual authority in the sense articulated by Mattieu Queloz (2022, 2025). The sort of authority Queloz is concerned with is a feature of the concept itself. To say that a concept has authority in Queloz’s sense is to say that there are reasons to adopt the concept and allow ourselves to be bound by its normative constraints. Thus, conceptual authority is akin to the authority of a moral principle.

Conceptual authority in this sense is also not conceptual authority in the sense articulated by Nicholas Smyth (manuscript). Smyth notes that many conceptual engineers feel entitled to implement changes to our concepts. In fact, though, conceptual change is an ethically fraught affair. As Smyth sees it, concept-users have the right to have their existing concepts changed only by persons with the authority to do so (16). Authority in this sense is a sort of legitimacy. And, as with other notions of legitimacy, Smyth’s conceptual authority is based on a model of hypothetical consent: it requires the implementer to be capable of telling to the concept-users a truthful story about the reasons for implementation that they could accept on their own terms.

In contrast to Smyth, my notion of conceptual authority is more closely connected to some articulations of *de facto* or descriptive political authority.[29] Authority in this sense is about being motivationally efficacious. Thus, a conceptual authority is able to motivate others to use concepts the way they want them to use concepts. Of course, as with political authority, someone can have the ability to motivate others in some domains but not in others. In addition, someone can have the ability to motivate others even if, as Smyth worries, that ability is illegitimate. The motivational means can also vary: as I mentioned before, some but not all conceptual authorities have the ability to motivate through the use of coercion. Finally, as with political authority, the domain over which a single community has conceptual authority can vary in size over time. In the real world, though, all societies lie somewhere between conceptual totalitarianism and conceptual anarchy, and authority over their various concepts tends to be delegated to communities only when those communities are perceived to be experts on the concept in question. This reality partially explains why there is a division of labor for the concept of a planet but not for the concept of a sandwich.

All that being said, my notion of *de facto* conceptual authority remains distinct from *de facto* political authority. Consider bourbon whiskey. Legally speaking, bourbon is strictly regulated within the United States. Among other legal requirements, the whiskey in question has to be made from a grain mixture of at least 51% corn. This law-based political authority is recognized within the United States and is enforced through regulation. America's legal authority over bourbon is recognized in other places as well. Canada and Mexico, for instance, recognize America's legal authority over bourbon in the distinctive products section of the North American Free Trade Agreement. But not every country recognizes the United States government's legal authority to regulate bourbon. Nevertheless, all of these details about a government's legal authority over what can be labeled as bourbon are conceptually distinct from whether or not it has the conceptual authority over the concept itself.

Even though conceptual authority and political authority are conceptually distinct, in practice they are connected. Arguably, political authority over something tends to grant conceptual authority over it as well. And yet I maintain that this connection is contingent rather than necessary. New York State has legal definitions for what counts as a sandwich.[30] But those legal definitions have nearly no weight in popular debates about the concept of a sandwich, not even within the jurisdiction of the sandwich law. More seriously, the current legal definition of an animal operative in the United States' Animal Welfare Act – a definition according to which birds, mice, rats, and farm animals are not animals – is obviously severed from all reasonable deliberations about what an animal is. To be clear, legal definitions can have weight in some conceptual debates. But those legal definitions have weight in virtue of the earned conceptual authority of the governing body. That conceptual authority could be lost even if the law's political authority remained. To see this, let's reconsider bourbon. It seems to me that the

[29] Cf. Hart (2012): 202–203; Raz (1986): 26–27.
[30] See https://www.tax.ny.gov/pubs_and_bulls/tg_bulletins/st/sandwiches.htm. Incredibly, New York's definition counts a burrito as a sandwich.

current US legal definition of bourbon carries conceptual authority even in contexts where it doesn't carry political authority. But this authority is likely dependent on the good stewardship of the US government. Some changes to the legal definition might not cause problems. For instance, the US government might be able to explicate certain requirements – like explicating 'American-made' to allow for whiskey made by a non-American company in a production facility located in America. But other changes seem to me like they would jeopardize the government's conceptual authority. Imagine what would happen if Big Wheat bribed Congress into passing legislation that removed the 51% corn requirement. Legally speaking, whiskey made from 40% corn could be labeled as bourbon. But my intuition says that enough people would no longer acquiesce to the legal definition and as a result the US government would lose its conceptual authority. That loss could hinder other implementations, even those that would have been accepted before the abuse of conceptual authority.

Sadly, I don't have a general theory of conceptual authority to offer. These hypotheticals about bourbon suggest that conceptual authority is in some way connected to what we could call conceptual legitimacy, though we need to again distinguish between my *de facto* sense of legitimacy and the more normative sense articulated by Smyth. I will resist the urge to explore this connection. I will also resist the urge to explore the ultimate source of conceptual authority, the frequency with which conceptual authority is wielded, and so on. Nevertheless, I think I have said enough about conceptual authority to set up my argument against attempts by philosophers to engineer the concept of sexual orientation.

3.4 - A More Local Pessimism

Even if Cappelen is right to be pessimistic about the implementation of changes to concepts that lack divisions of labor, he is wrong to be pessimistic with respect to concepts that do have a secure division of labor. That division of labor enables a more targeted implementation process. Those who hold authority over the concept can act collectively to implement a change to that concept. Assuming there is no abuse or anything else that might jeopardize their authority, their decision would be accepted by everyone else. Soon after, those billions of speech events would begin to reinforce the new implementation.

At first glance, then, the IAU and the ICWM provide models for philosophers working on sexual orientation. We should get together and take a vote on competing accounts of sexual orientation. Whichever proposal gains the most votes will be the one that we agree to collectively accept. We will then promulgate that decision to the general public and wait for others to follow our lead.

But that won't work. Why? Because philosophers lack conceptual authority over the concept of sexual orientation.

If any group of experts has a claim to the concept of sexual orientation, it is scientists. For starters, the terminology itself originates from them. The general term ‘sexual orientation’ is itself relatively new.[31] But terms for more specific “taxonomic” categories of sexual orientation are relatively older. ‘Homosexual’ was first used in Germany in the late 19th-century and was introduced to the English language at the turn of the 20th century by the English sexologist Havelock Ellis, among others. It seems that the concept of sexual orientation may pre-date the term itself. Freud, for instance, talked about 'sexual object-choice' specifically in connection to homosexuality. But the point stands: the early history of sexual orientation as a concept is dominated by scientists.

To be fair, it may be misleading to say our terminology came from scientists. Around that time, the distinction between the scientific community and the medical community was less clear than it is today (and even today it is not exactly crystal clear). Nevertheless, after the partial divergence of the two communities it seems that authority over the concept of sexual orientation has gone to the scientists. When someone provides a source for their definition of sexual orientation, that source is typically scientific – the most common sources being something produced by the American Psychological Association, rather than something produced by the American Medical Association.[32]

But not every cited source is scientific. It is increasingly common to cite sources produced by community activist organizations like GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) and HRC (the Human Rights Campaign). Interestingly, while conceptual authority over taxonomic categories (i.e. “labels”) seems to be shifting away from a scientific division of conceptual labor, the concept of sexual orientation itself seems to remain entrenched as a scientific concept. This difference is important insofar as how the general concept is defined puts pressure on how taxonomic categories should be defined.

So, while there may be some debate over who has conceptual authority over sexual orientation, there is no debating that philosophers lack it. The only people who have cited philosophers as experts are other philosophers.[33] Given our lack of authority, we are unable to follow the IAU model for implementing conceptual change.

Furthermore, I suspect that it is very difficult for philosophers to gain conceptual authority over sexual orientation. To fully substantiate my suspicion would require extensive sociological work

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[31] The 819-page Kinsey Report of 1948 contains no occurrence of the term ‘sexual orientation’ despite the report’s inclusion of many now-familiar terms like ‘homosexual’ and ‘lesbian’ and now-obscure terms like ‘homogenic love’, ‘contrasexuality’, ‘similisexualism’, ‘uranism’, and ‘sexual inversion’. While a quick search for the term ‘sexual orientation’ on Ngram shows a spike of usage in the 1930s, it wasn’t until the 1980s that usage became comparable to the usage of 'homosexuality' in the 1950s.

[32] To be transparent, my claim is based on my own unscientific investigation. I’m sure there is a more proper way to verify the claim, methodologically speaking.

[33] The one possible exception to this is Michel Foucault. Unfortunately, he is dead and therefore unable to implement any new changes to the concept.

that I cannot do here. In lieu of that work, I will sketch a speculative argument based on the state of academic philosophy.[34]

First premise: academic philosophy lacks the conceptual coordination often found in the sciences. Academic philosophy is sometimes capable of coordinating practical projects like the organization of conferences and the awarding of grants. These practical projects are facilitated by professional organizations like the American Philosophical Association. But such organizations are unable to get philosophers to collectively agree about, for example, the concept of free will. This inability is at least partially by design. Conceptual autonomy seems to be a basic value of academic philosophy. Of course, philosophers are expected to be guided by the light of reason. But it seems that the light of reason rarely leads philosophers to the same destination. Why philosophers seem to be unable to reach conceptual consensus on their own is its own interesting question, but thankfully not one I need to answer here.[35] Philosophers, as a community, are unable to coordinate their concepts, whether or not that is by design and whether or not that is a good thing or a bad thing.

Second premise: it is very difficult for philosophers to acquire conceptual authority over a concept that we lack the ability to coordinate on. As I said before, I don't have a general theory of how divisions of conceptual labor are created and maintained. But the following seems to me to be a plausible enough principle: when there is competition for conceptual authority, an organized competitor will tend to defeat a disorganized competitor. Divisions of conceptual labor are typically intended to serve the interests of those who are deferring to experts, and those non-experts will tend to favor definite answers over unresolved disagreement. This tendency is made all the stronger when the organized competitor is already entrenched as the authority over the concept in question.

Philosophers cannot hope to compete against genuinely organized groups like GLAAD and the American Psychological Association. While it is not metaphysically impossible for philosophers to acquire conceptual authority, we shouldn't expect it and our scholarship shouldn't depend on it.

4 - What Philosophers Should Do

Even though philosophers lack the authority to implement changes to the concept of sexual orientation, we do not have to stand by idly. In this section, I will discuss four strategies

[34] Though it's in a very different context, Eli Hirsch gives something like this argument in Hirsch (2011): 181—182.

[35] See, *inter alia*, van Inwagen (2023); Chalmers (2015); Stoljar (2017); Cappelen (2017). One especially worrying explanation is that academic philosophers are professionally incentivized to create conceptual conflict (Gibbons 2022: 18). Of course, it is at least a little bit ironic for me to worry about the creation of conceptual conflict when I am, right now, in this paper, creating conceptual conflict.

regarding what philosophers should do. I will briefly mention why I am skeptical of the first three before going into greater detail about my preferred strategy.

The first strategy is to keep on keeping on. One motivation for adopting this strategy comes from a cost-benefit analysis.[36] If the potential gains of successful implementation are big enough and if the opportunity costs of trying are low enough, then it may be rational to try despite the extremely low odds of success. Alternatively, this first strategy may be motivated by severing the connection between what we should try to do and the odds that we will succeed in what we are trying to do. (Compare: maybe we should advocate for non-violent resolutions to international relations despite the futility of doing so.) While I am sympathetic to these motivations, I think it would be premature to resign ourselves to the first strategy given that there are alternative strategies available to us philosophers that we have yet to try in earnest. I also think it neglects the opportunity costs of ineffective scholarship.[37] Finally, I think it neglects the potential harms from ineffective attempts to illegitimately implement change, including harms to philosophy's reputation and harms to sexual minorities caught in the conceptual crossfire.

The second strategy is to work with, not against, the entrenched conceptual authority. For example, if philosophers are able to influence the deliberative process of the American Psychological Association, then we can indirectly influence the implementation process that they more directly control. This strategy seems promising to me insofar as scientists in many domains are in fact open to collaboration with philosophers. Importantly, though, this strategy depends on genuine engagement with the relevant authorities. In addition, it might be difficult for philosophers to convince psychologists to think about sexual orientation the way philosophers want them to think about it when our reasons for wanting to think about it that way are broadly political rather than epistemic. Perhaps we can overcome this challenge by considering how similar mismatches have been resolved in the past – consider, for instance, the events surrounding the APA's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.[38]

The third strategy is to give up on conceptual change as a means of achieving our political goals. As I mentioned before, the operative definition of an animal in the Animal Welfare Act is disconnected from any reasonable discussion of what an animal is. Nevertheless, the Animal Welfare Act has had an overall positive effect on the treatment of non-human animals. Philosophers could similarly shift their efforts from conceptual change to legal change. In fact, to some degree this has already happened. In 2019, Dembroff and others wrote an amicus brief to the Supreme Court of the United States that argued for Title VII protections against sexuality-based discrimination. While it is difficult to track the impact of such efforts, they are arguably easier to implement given the institutional resources currently available to philosophers as a

[36] Cf. Andow (2021)
[37] Cf. Ludwig (2025), who raises a similar concern about scholarship on epistemic injustice.
[38] For a useful summary of those events, see Drescher (2015).

community. Still, this strategy constitutes a concession. There are reasons to think that the concept of sexual orientation causes harms that only conceptual change can ameliorate. Recall, for instance, that one argument for Dembroff's Bidimensional Dispositionalism is that it will decrease the normative influence of cisheterosexuality that is intrinsic to our current concept of sexual orientation. Legal protections alone cannot eliminate this harm.

The fourth strategy is to attack the concept itself as a means of indirectly implementing change. Earlier, I mentioned Dembroff's claim that nothing important hangs on whether their proposed concept was described as a revised concept of sexual orientation or an entirely new concept. But, if what I am saying about conceptual authority is right, Dembroff is wrong. We cannot implement a revision to the concept of sexual orientation. Yet we might be able to convince people to abandon the concept. That alone may be progress enough. More ambitiously, though, philosophers could fill the gap created by that abandonment with a new concept that we have conceptual authority over.[39] In this respect, we philosophers would be imitating the sexologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though hopefully our rise to power would come with fewer harms.

Megalomania aside, I like the fourth strategy the most. It coheres well with a very long tradition of treating the philosopher as an intellectual gadfly. The tradition starts with Socrates, of course, who claimed that the gods bestowed upon him the responsibility to agitate the city's sluggish thinking. An updated version of it claims that philosophy, including academic philosophy, plays a specific social role in contemporary society. Kevin Scharp gets close to this idea when he describes what he calls the radical therapeutic program:

> I have come to think that philosophy is for the most part the study of what have turned out to be inconsistent concepts… [It involves] pushing faster and faster to identify conceptual defects… with an eye toward repairing the subject matter for outsourcing as a science. The ultimate goal of the process is the potential end of philosophy. Escape for the fly (Scharp, 397—399).

Yet there are two potential differences that may be worth mentioning. First, as I see it, our job as philosophers is primarily destructive rather than constructive: society looks to us to see which concepts are problematic, but doesn't care much about which concepts we prefer, especially when those preferences conflict with scientists or other authorities. Second, our role as society's intellectual gadfly is contingent, rather than constitutive of philosophy as a discipline. Though there is an interesting story to be told about how we came to occupy this social role and there is a substantive question as to whether it is the right role for us, the reality is that we do occupy it and it would be practically impossible to change that reality. It would also be risky, I suspect, because it seems to me to be one of the few reliable ways that philosophy has an impact on society.

[39] Though see Geirsson (2024) on the distinction between the A-project and the P-project and its relevance for society-wide change.

So how should the attack on the concept of sexual orientation, specifically, be carried out? Scharp was right to identify inconsistency as a core conceptual defect. Yet sexual orientation has other problems as well. Most importantly, it is underspecified to a degree that causes real problems in contemporary society. For instance, is a cis man who is attracted to trans women gay, straight, or something else? What if he is exclusively attracted to trans women? I'm not the first philosopher to notice this problem. What I am suggesting, though, is that philosophers leverage this problem as a way to motivate society to abandon the concept as broken and in need of replacement – not simply tweaked to be trans-inclusive.[40]

By following the gadfly strategy, philosophers can indirectly implement conceptual change by attacking the concept of sexual orientation that psychologists (or activist groups) have direct conceptual authority over. It is still likely that we'll be ignored. Such is life. But we might successfully instigate a conceptual crisis wherein society at large recognizes a need to revise or abandon the concept. If the relevant authority fails to resolve this crisis by, for example, refusing to implement a revision, it could thereby lose its authority over the concept of sexual orientation (like how the US government could lose its authority over the concept of bourbon after the machinations of Big Wheat.) That loss of authority could constitute a victory for philosophers because it would provide an opportunity for us to gain authority that we wouldn't have been able to gain without their mismanagement.

I think the gadfly strategy is the most likely to succeed, but whether it would be the most ethical strategy is an open question that would require much more discussion than I can provide here. For instance, Linda Martín Alcoff has recently argued that academic philosophers should serve as an intellectual rearguard to social movements, amplifying, elaborating, and analyzing ideas that originate from marginalized voices (Martín Alcoff 2025); to serve instead as an intellectual vanguard would in most circumstances contribute to epistemic injustice. Besides such general concerns about the ethical social role for philosophers to occupy, there are concerns more specific to engineering the concept of sexual orientation. One especially worrisome concern comes from Smyth, who rightly notes that sexual orientation is for many people an important identity-constituting concept. He argues that it would be unethical to engineer an identity-constituting concept without legitimate, as opposed to *de facto*, conceptual authority.[41] So, while I hope to have offered a practical path forward, it remains to be seen whether that path can be walked ethically.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that current efforts to engineer the concept of sexual orientation are unlikely to succeed. My argument depends on the claim that philosophers lack conceptual authority over the concept of sexual orientation. This claim is ultimately an empirical claim that I

[40] Cf. Cappelen (2023) and Koch (2025) for ways to motivate abandoning a concept.
[41] There might also be more general ethical concerns about any sort of conceptual disruption. See Löhr (2022).

have not fully substantiated. Nevertheless, there are good theoretical reasons to think that philosophers do not have conceptual authority and are unlikely to acquire it. Consequently, philosophers should relocate their efforts to more viable strategies, such as encouraging society to abandon the concept. But the proof is in the pudding, so to speak, and now is the time to try.

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