

*Fixing Language*, by Herman Cappelen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 212.

Herman Cappelen's ambitious new book packs a lot into 200 pages. Its main positive aims include:

1. *The foundation of a sub-discipline* Cappelen aims to 'identify and advocate for' *conceptual engineering* as 'one of the central topics of philosophy, or perhaps even *the* central topic of philosophy' (ix).
2. *The defence of an account* Cappelen defends a package of views he calls *The Austerity Framework*, which include externalist ideas about metasemantics (i.e., that what one means is determined in part by one's environment) and speech-act pluralism (the idea that one typically says many things by an utterance, including things that go beyond the proposition semantically expressed). The Austerity Framework is meant to make sense of what goes on in the sub-discipline, and to provide conceptual engineers with resources to respond to objections to their activities.

The term 'conceptual engineering' is not new – Cappelen cites Simon Blackburn (1999) as an early user – and Cappelen suggests that the phenomenon of conceptual engineering is as old as philosophy itself. But the past few years have seen an explosion of work that is described by its authors as 'conceptual engineering'; and Cappelen bears no small share of the responsibility for this, in large part due to circulation of various drafts of this book prior to publication. So in one sense, it is beyond doubt that Cappelen has succeeded in his first aim: there is now a substantial group of philosophers who are convinced that conceptual engineering is or should be a central topic of philosophy, and the book's critical engagement with some of this work is one of its real strengths.

Whether Cappelen has identified a genuine phenomenon that ought to be the subject of serious study and has provided a defensible account of it is another question; and this is the main issue I intend to discuss in this review. I begin by considering two distinct ways in which Cappelen introduces the idea of conceptual engineering. I will then turn to a detailed discussion of the Austerity Framework.

# 1 Aim 1: The Foundation of a Sub-discipline

Cappelen has two main roads into the topic of conceptual engineering – one, which I will call *the way of acquaintance*, introduces the topic by examples; the other introduces the topic by description, and I will correspondingly call it *the way of description*. When proceeding via the way of acquaintance, Cappelen lists examples such as: the ‘extended mind’ proposal that “‘A believes that p’ be used in a way that makes it true even when p is a proposition that A has access to only with the assistance of various “external” devices’ (10), the Haslanger-style ‘ameliorative’ proposal that it is an analytic or definitional truth that women are subordinated, the Railton-inspired view that our usage of normative language ought to be revised to be more consistent with naturalism, the Carnapian idea that we should aim to ‘explicate’ vague words or concepts by making them more precise, as well as a number of ‘public controversies’ (28-9) about (e.g.) whether foetuses are persons, whether same-sex couples can be married, what it is to be an immigrant or refugee, and the nature of poverty, among others.

Let’s assume that all (or anyway, most) of these examples are indeed instances of a common intellectual project, and call that project  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$ . What exactly is  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$ ? What do all of the examples have in common? According to Cappelen, they are all ‘efforts to assess and improve our representational devices’ (148). This is his introduction to conceptual engineering via the way of description, the explicit definition of conceptual engineering given from the first pages. (The very first sentence of chapter 1 is ‘This book is about the process of assessing and improving our representational devices’ (3).) To be clear, Cappelen does not think that the words *conceptual* and *engineering* describe conceptual engineering. On the contrary, Cappelen denies that conceptual engineering is about concepts – he expresses some doubt that there are any such things as concepts (157) – and he also denies that it involves much if any engineering. (‘I’ve given you a theory of conceptual engineering without concepts and without engineering’ (199).) As Cappelen sees things, the ‘representational devices’ in question are typically words, and ‘improving’ them in the cases of interest amounts to working toward making it the case that they be used with a new and different intension (i.e., that they be used in such a way that they are correctly applied to different actual or possible cases). Let’s call the project of assessing and improving one’s words  $CE_{\text{description}}$ .

As far as I can tell, Cappelen assumes without argument that  $CE_{\text{description}}$

is what is going on in the cases of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$ . For example, Cappelen claims that if it were successful, Haslanger’s project ‘changes the intension of the term “woman”, since the ordinary language term “woman” is used in such a way that it is *possible* for a woman not be subordinated’ (14). This may surprise readers of Haslanger’s recent work (e.g., Haslanger 2012a,b), since she seems explicitly to deny that her proposal involves change of meaning; instead, she wants to insist that it could be the case that ‘woman’ is correctly applied only to people who are subordinated, despite all of our apparent beliefs and intentions to the contrary. In short, Haslanger denies that (at least in her own case) revisionary theorising of the sort exhibited in  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  involves  $CE_{\text{description}}$ .

Cappelen is of course aware of Haslanger’s view of the matter, and we will return to his response to her view in section 3. I have mentioned Haslanger’s view only to emphasise that Cappelen’s view that  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  is  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is contestable. The availability of views like Haslanger’s shows that the following is a substantive theoretical question:

- Is  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  really  $CE_{\text{description}}$ ? Are instances of revisionary theorising of the sort Cappelen lists cases of ‘assessing and improving representational devices’?

Given Cappelen’s other commitments, it is surprising that he doesn’t do more to defend an affirmative answer. The kind of theory on which it most clearly makes sense to think that  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  does not involve  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is a theory that sharply distinguishes *the way we in fact use a word* (our actual dispositions to apply it, and our views about its meaning) from *the way the word is correctly used*. Everyone should agree that Haslanger’s view, if accepted, would result in changes to the way we in fact use the word ‘woman’ (we might apply the word to different individuals, make different judgments about what the word means, and so on); but what is not obvious (and what Haslanger denies) is that this entails that the way that the word is correctly used would change (since (e.g.) our current dispositions to apply it, judgments, etc., could be wrong). In particular, externalist views typically entail that the way one is in fact disposed to use a term can come apart from its correct use. (Think of Burge (1979) on arthritis.)

Externalism is a core commitment of Cappelen’s Austerity Framework, and he is particularly concerned to endorse the idea that one’s beliefs about meaning can be false (59-60). So Cappelen is committed to the kind of view on which it would make sense to deny that  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  involves  $CE_{\text{description}}$ .

We should therefore ask what resources he has to defend the claim that the kinds of cases he lists as examples of conceptual engineering really involve ‘assessing and improving representational devices’:

- Given the theoretical commitments of the Austerity Framework, should Cappelen think that  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  is  $CE_{\text{description}}$ ?

Settling this question is essential to evaluating the book. Cappelen’s aim is to make the case that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is an interesting and worthwhile project. Since most of us will recognise that at least some of the cases of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  are interesting and important, if Cappelen can convince us that  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  is  $CE_{\text{description}}$ , he will have made good progress toward achieving his aim. If not, given that (as we will see in the next section) the Austerity Framework raises independent reasons to doubt the fruitfulness of trying to engage in  $CE_{\text{description}}$ , we may wonder whether Cappelen is right to think that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is worth attempting. We will return to these issues after laying out the Austerity Framework in the next section.

## 2 Aim 2: The Defence of an Account

It is difficult to give a brief summary of the Austerity Framework, which combines Cappelen’s views about a number of issues, but it is useful to see the Framework as consisting of two main pillars from which Cappelen draws four conclusions. The first pillar is an externalist metasemantics: meaning is fixed by factors outwith us, including the facts about ‘experts in the community, complex patterns of use over time, and what the world happens to be like (independently of what the speakers believe the world is like)’ (63), and in particular not by speakers’ views about meaning and reference. Cappelen takes this to entail that speakers can be radically wrong in their beliefs, even their most fundamental beliefs, beliefs of the kind one might pre-theoretically take to be definitional or analytic.

The second pillar is *speech act pluralism*: the view that ‘What we say goes far beyond the proposition semantically expressed. What we say (or one of the propositions we say) when we utter a sentence can be true even though the proposition semantically expressed is false’ (139).

Cappelen does not say much in defence of the two pillars; he is more interested in developing their consequences. The most interesting consequences include:

1. the idea that ‘The process governing particular changes [of meaning] is typically incomprehensible and inscrutable’ (53);
2. the idea that conceptual engineering ‘is a process we have little or no control over’ (53);
3. the idea that one can change meaning without changing the topic of a discourse; and
4. the idea that conceptual engineering ‘changes the world, not just the meanings of words’ (54).

We will discuss these in turn.

## 2.1 Incomprehensibility of Change

It is relatively easy to see why Cappelen might accept the view that change of meaning can occur even when speakers are not aware that it is occurring: his externalism entails that meaning is fixed by factors external to speakers, not by their beliefs or other factors of which one might expect that they would in typical cases be aware. (One might be reminded here of debates about ‘slow switching’ and the like.) But Cappelen’s view is in fact more radical. While many externalists have conceded that meaning is determined in part by factors that can change unbeknownst to us, they have also typically presupposed that we are in a position to know at least roughly which factors matter, and how they matter. Cappelen, by contrast, defends a kind of scepticism about metasemantics, according to which we do not know which external factors matter to meaning change in particular cases, and we do not understand how they work: ‘These mechanisms are also not known to any of us and might in effect be unknowable’ (74).

## 2.2 Lack of Control

Cappelen infers from his brand of externalism and from his scepticism about metasemantics that ‘it is an illusion to think that any individual or group has any significant degree of control of the reference-fixing facts’ and hence that ‘we’re not in control of conceptual engineering’ (i.e., of  $CE_{\text{description}}$ ) (74).

It may seem surprising that Cappelen confidently endorses both the view that metasemantics is incomprehensible (we know next to nothing about

metasemantics), and the view that no individual or group has control over meaning. Given his scepticism about metasemantics, it may seem that he should say that we can't know whether any individual or group has control. (For example, perhaps in many cases, experts control meaning; it's just that since the mechanisms are complicated, we can never be sure.)

Cappelen reaches the conclusions he does because he understands *control* in a particularly demanding way. For example, he argues that internalism provides no more control over  $CE_{\text{description}}$  than externalism, in part because even if meaning is determined by internal states within our control, the way in which those states determine meaning would still not be 'scrutable and within our control' (82). (For example, even if we suppose that meaning supervenes on our intentions, we would not be in control over the metaphysical facts that make it the case that those with such-and-such intentions mean that  $p$  – as opposed to meaning that not- $p$ , or something else entirely.)

This line of reasoning seems suspect; in general, we may have a large degree of control over processes that we do not fully understand, even if there are aspects or parts of those processes that we do not control. I have a large degree of control over how fast and in what direction my car goes. How fast and in what direction my car goes depends on the operation of its engine, steering mechanism, brakes, transmission, and so on – and for that matter, on the laws of physics that govern the interaction of the atoms of which the car is composed, and no doubt much else. I have very limited understanding of how these things work, and very limited control over them. But I am still a decent driver. (If I can't control my car, I ought to lose my driving license; the fact that I can't control the laws of physics does not entail that I ought to lose my license.) Analogously, internalists and externalists alike might admit that we have limited understanding and still more limited control of the metaphysics of meaning, while still maintaining that we have a large degree of control in many cases.

It is therefore not clear to me that Cappelen establishes that we lack control over meaning change, even given his externalism. And this might not be a bad thing, since the idea that we lack control produces a further tension in his position. Cappelen clearly thinks that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is something that we ought to be doing. But he also thinks that we have no control over whether our attempts to do it succeed. It would be natural to wonder at this point: why bother trying? Sure, we could attempt to engineer our concepts; but is the attempt worthwhile if we really have no idea how to go about doing it, and every reason to think that it isn't in our power to do anyway, so that we

are all but certain to fail?

Cappelen offers two responses to this kind of worry. The first is an analogy: ‘think about trying to make a positive change to a person’s life (say that of a child you have responsibility for). For the most part, we understand very little of how such changes can be achieved and what we do know tells us that we have very little control [...] Nonetheless, we keep trying; there’s a sense in which we can’t give up’ (75). It isn’t clear whether the analogy succeeds: after all, we do have at least some degree of control over our children’s lives, some idea of what works and what doesn’t; and though we may be psychologically and morally compelled to take care of our kids, we can pretty easily give up on conceptual engineering. Cappelen’s second response is to point out that we engage in normative theorising in many other domains with no way of bringing about change. (We might, for example, judge that no one should steal, without having any idea how to make it the case that no one steals.) This is a fair point, but perhaps not a complete defence of  $CE_{\text{description}}$  – ‘the process of assessing and improving our representational devices’ – since it would at most amount to a defence of the possibility of *assessment* while giving up on the possibility of *improvement*.

This is one of several places at which the discussion in the book might have been clarified by distinguishing *assessment* of meaning from *improvement* of meaning. It is plausible, even given Cappelen’s metasemantic views, that we are in general in control of whether we are assessing meanings, and that we are in a position to know whether we are assessing meanings or not; and it is relatively clear that at least some of the theorists Cappelen mentions in his discussion of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  are trying to assess what they mean. The Austerity Framework casts doubt only on our control and knowledge of meaning change. Nonetheless, I will follow Cappelen in grouping assessment and improvement together. But it is also worth noting that many of the cases Cappelen mentions as instances of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  involve no explicit assessment of meanings; for example, debates about whether fetuses are persons rarely if ever involve explicit evaluation of meaning. Cappelen classes these as instances of  $CE_{\text{description}}$  because (he thinks) they involve improvement of meaning; and I will follow him in regarding instances of meaning change without explicit assessment as  $CE_{\text{description}}$ .

## 2.3 Change of Meaning without Change of Topic

Cappelen maintains that one of the main threats to conceptual engineering is that it may seem to change the topic, to avoid interesting questions rather than answering them. Suppose, for example, that I have a question about free will; say, whether free will is compatible with determinism. The conceptual engineer proposes that I should be using the expression ‘free will’ differently, and that on this new usage, I can use the sentence ‘Free will is compatible with determinism’ to express a truth. I might well feel that this did not address my initial question; I wanted to know about free will, and the conceptual engineer is suggesting that we stop talking about free will and start talking about something else.

Cappelen’s response to this worry is to claim that it is possible to change the meaning of one’s words without changing the topic. In defence of this claim, Cappelen notes that it is often possible to report another person’s speech in indirect discourse, even if the literal meaning of the words one uses does not exactly match the literal meaning of the words used in the speech act you are reporting. (To take a simple case, suppose that I say ‘Ansel is tall’. The proposition I express will depend on subtle factors of my situation and my state of mind, because these factors determine the standard one must meet to count as ‘tall’. Nonetheless, you can report me as having said that Ansel is tall in a wide range of situations that differ with respect to these factors, and hence with respect to the standard one must meet to count as ‘tall’.)

So far, this will all be familiar to readers of Cappelen’s work. But Cappelen puts this mechanism to new use. He claims that sameness of topic tracks the possibility of speech reports in indirect discourse, and since speech reports in indirect discourse are possible despite change of meaning, it is possible to change meaning without changing the topic (108). Thus Cappelen would claim that adopting the conceptual engineer’s proposed new usage of ‘free will’ does not change the topic as long as I can still truly report my pre-engineering speech by saying things like, ‘I asked whether free will is compatible with determinism’ and ‘I have always said that we have free will’.

## 2.4 Changing the World

A final theme of the Austerity Framework is that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  changes the world, not (just) language or meanings. At different points in the book,

Cappelen entertains various ways in which this might be so: for example, because our practices of using language are constitutive of social reality (44-5). But the claim that is distinctive of the Austerity Framework again turns on speech act pluralism. Perhaps the clearest way to explain Cappelen’s idea is by example. Suppose that we engage in  $CE_{\text{description}}$  at  $t$  and change the meaning of ‘free will’ from *free will*<sub>1</sub> to *free will*<sub>2</sub>. We can also consider *free will*<sub>3</sub>, which is defined as follows: to have free will<sub>3</sub> is to have free will<sub>1</sub> before  $t$ , or to have free will<sub>2</sub> after  $t$ . Then suppose we say ‘Free will has changed’. Cappelen would claim although such an utterance would express many falsehoods (e.g., the falsehood *that free will*<sub>1</sub> *has changed*, and the falsehood *that free will*<sub>2</sub> *has changed*), it will also express a truth – namely, that free will<sub>3</sub> has changed (139-40). Thus we can truly describe the results of  $CE_{\text{description}}$  without speaking of words or meanings.

One can acknowledge that Cappelen’s view makes this possible in principle, while also maintaining that Cappelen gives no reason to believe that it will typically happen in practice. (Given Cappelen’s view, post- $CE_{\text{description}}$  utterances of ‘Free will has changed’ *could* express truths about free will<sub>3</sub>; but why think that they *would*?) One might also wonder whether this phenomenon is really a theoretically significant respect in which  $CE_{\text{description}}$  changes the world; it seems that all of the interesting change is in the language, even if we can talk about that change without mentioning words. But I propose to set these questions aside in the interest of returning to the issues about  $CE_{\text{description}}$  and  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  with which we began.

### 3 Evaluation: $CE_{\text{description}}$ and $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$

What grounds does Cappelen have for thinking that the supposed examples of conceptual engineering are cases of assessing and improving representational devices?

In some cases, this is what the philosophers in question claim to be doing. But on Cappelen’s view this does not entail that they are doing it: ‘The Austerity Framework entails that it will often be the case that you think you’re engaged (or intend to engage) in conceptual engineering, but you are not’ (78). I suppose Cappelen might at least say that these philosophers are *attempting* to do  $CE_{\text{description}}$  – though of course, given Cappelen’s view, we have no reason to think that they are succeeding this attempt. (They may be assessing the meanings of their words, but there is no reason to think that

they are improving them.)

In many other cases, the parties to the debate do not conceive of themselves as trying to evaluate or improve their representational devices. We have already mentioned Haslanger’s externalism; but one might also think of the many debates Cappelen lists as ‘public controversies’. (Consider, for example, debates about whether human foetuses are persons. Most parties to this debate do not see themselves as trying to evaluate and improve the word ‘person’.)

Of course, many theorists are committed to thinking that these cases involve meaning change, and hence are instances of  $CE_{\text{description}}$ . Others might be less sure, but at least agree that there are interesting questions about particular cases. (Would coming to accept ‘Foetuses are persons’ result in a change of meaning? Is Haslanger right to think that one can accept her analysis of gender without meaning change?) The problem for Cappelen is that his metasemantic scepticism precludes substantive engagement with these interesting questions. The Austerity Framework commits him to the claim that there is no way to know whether these cases involve change of meaning. Perhaps it is interesting to wonder whether they do or not, but such wondering must be idle, since (given the Austerity Framework) there is no way we can answer the question.

In short, as far as I can tell, the Austerity Framework gives no grounds at all for thinking that the examples of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  are all or mostly instances of  $CE_{\text{description}}$ ; and though it is a good question whether individual instances of  $CE_{\text{acquaintance}}$  are instances of  $CE_{\text{description}}$ , the Austerity Framework makes this question entirely impossible to answer.

Cappelen’s response to Haslanger’s externalism-based denial of the idea that she is doing  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is that, even if one is an externalist, one should be open to the idea that the external mechanisms that fix meaning have fixed meaning in a problematic way, and hence open  $CE_{\text{description}}$  – to the idea meaning should be evaluated and changed (81). That is, Cappelen suggests that even the externalist should be committed to what he calls *The Revisionist’s Basic Assumption* – that ‘The terms or concepts which we use to talk and think about a particular subject matter can be defective and can be improved to address these defects’ (39). The Revisionist’s Basic Assumption is the key to one of Cappelen’s main arguments for the importance of  $CE_{\text{description}}$  – the Prudential Argument – which states that if this assumption is true, we ought to investigate whether our terms are defective and try to remedy them if they are.

It is not obvious that the argument is sound, even granting that everyone should accept some version of the Revisionist's Basic Assumption. Everyone should agree that our words can be problematic for various reasons – for example, they can be used in the formulation of false or unfruitful theories, or implicated in the expression of morally problematic views. In these cases, revising our unfruitful theories and morally problematic views is very much worthwhile. So what is uncontroversial is that assessing and improving our *beliefs* and *theories* is important. Sometimes, these revisions may require radical departures from what was previously accepted. And sometimes, these departures may result in changing what we mean. But it doesn't straightforwardly follow from this that there is an *additional* worthwhile activity of assessing and improving our *words*. On many views, what we mean is determined in part by our theories and beliefs; thus improving our theories and beliefs may improve what we mean. But this is a byproduct of having come to the right theories and beliefs, not the result of having engaged in some novel activity of  $CE_{\text{description}}$ . On other views – Cappelen's included – attempting to assess and improve what we mean just seems futile.

Cappelen could easily have written a book defending the Austerity Framework and inferring from it that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  is a waste of time. Instead, he wrote a book defending the Austerity Framework and concluding that  $CE_{\text{description}}$  should be 'one of the central topics of philosophy, or perhaps even *the* central topic of philosophy' (ix). I remain unconvinced, and particularly unconvinced that the proponent of the Austerity Framework should accept this conclusion.

## 4 Conclusion and Further Themes

Despite these qualms, I would recommend *Fixing Language* to anyone interested in meaning and philosophical methodology. This is not only due to the interest of the various ideas Cappelen discusses under the umbrella of the Austerity Framework, but also due to the many acute criticisms of alternative views. Since I have largely skipped over these in the preceding discussion, and since they are among the most valuable contributions of the book, I will conclude this review by mentioning some of Cappelen's most interesting critical moves:

- Against the idea that some concepts are inconsistent or incoherent (in the sense that (at least roughly) possessing the concepts disposes us to

accept premises that result in paradox), Cappelen points out that the externalist should deny that there is any ‘cluster of beliefs (or dispositions to endorse) that are analytically true or are required for being a competent user of a predicate’ (86), so that if you are disposed to paradoxical reasoning involving some concept F, ‘That’s *your* problem – not the concept F’s problem’ (86).

- In response to the idea that we should construe many philosophical debates as in large part about what concept is best suited to serve certain functions, Cappelen responds that there is no reason to suppose that parties to debates typically agree about the function at issue (176-7). He is also critical of various attempts to describe the sense in which concepts should be thought of as having functions (180-8).
- In response to the idea that we should regard many philosophical debates as verbal disputes (in which the parties to the dispute are using words with different meanings, and hence talking past each other), to be resolved by disambiguating the relevant terminology, Cappelen argues that the un-disambiguated terminology remains crucial to formulating and understanding the dispute. For example, in response to the claim that there is no substantive, non-verbal disagreement between compatibilists and incompatibilists about free will, since one is talking about freedom<sub>1</sub> and the other is talking about freedom<sub>2</sub>, Cappelen suggests that we ought still be interested in freedom (and not just the various subscripted disambiguations), because what the various subscripted phenomena have in common is that they are ‘all ways to ameliorate freedom (simpliciter)’ (192), and hence that undisambiguated freedom is ‘theoretically indispensable’ (193).\*

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