

Core Seminar in Philosophy of Language

Metalinguistic Negotiation and Conceptual Engineering

W 9–11:50 · Ridge Walk 472

PHIL 208

Description

Conceptual engineering is the philosophical study of conceptual revision and innovation. Whereas traditional analytic philosophers seek to analyze the concepts we currently use, conceptual engineers seek to determine how to improve our concepts to better accomplish our theoretical and practical goals. This approach to philosophy views many of the classic disputes in philosophy as “metalinguistic negotiations” over which meanings to assign to words or, more broadly, which concepts we should employ for various purposes. But there are many unresolved questions about its nature, scope, and value. What is it to “engineer” a concept or “negotiate” meanings? Is it even possible to do these things? Or feasible? Or desirable? Can this approach (dis)solve philosophical problems or is it merely a way of refusing to address them? Does it pose moral or political dangers? This course will focus on foundational issues within this burgeoning literature as well as applications to issues within philosophy.

Prerequisites: graduate status or consent of instructor.

Instructor

Instructor: Arc Kocurek
Email: akocurek@ucsd.edu
Office: Ridge Walk 445

Readings

All required readings will be made available on Canvas. The readings are chosen so as not to require any specialized background in the area. To the extent it does, we’ll cover the relevant background in class.

Assignments

Engagement (16%)

You are expected to do the reading before class and to participate in class. Philosophy seminars without discussion are very boring.

As always, all discussion must be respectful of other classmates. We should always remember to criticize ideas, not people. Failure to meet these norms will result in points deducted.

Reading Responses (14%)

Each week, you will submit a short response to each of the required readings before seminar. Your response should consist of one paragraph (\approx 150 words, but I'm not counting) discussing whatever thoughts you had about the reading (e.g., a question, an objection, a request for clarification, or a connection to other issues/topics).

Responses are due **Tuesday** (end of day). These are graded for completion. You can skip one week without penalty. You do not have to submit a response the week you present.

Discussion Leader (20%)

At least once in the quarter, you will lead the discussion on an assigned reading. You will prepare a brief 2–4 page handout on the chosen reading. The handout should contain summary (key terms, claims, arguments, etc.) and commentary (questions, criticisms, remarks, etc.). You should be prepared to answer questions from the class about the reading. You will receive full credit so long as you demonstrate effort.

Final Paper Synopsis (10%)

Before the final paper is due, you must submit a synopsis of your final paper. The purpose of this is to make sure you're on track for completing the paper and to give me an opportunity to provide feedback or suggestions before it is due. The synopsis should contain a detailed (2–3 page) description of your topic, thesis, and main arguments/objections. (Think of this as the "3-page version" of your paper.) It should also include a rough outline and a tentative list of readings you plan to cite/discuss. The synopsis is due on **November 18**.

Final Paper (40%)

At the end of the quarter, you will submit a final paper on a topic that is broadly connected with the theme of the course. The paper should be between 3000–5000 words. The paper is due on **December 11**.

Subject to approval, you may co-author your final paper with another student in the course. Co-authored papers should be between 5000–7000 words. Co-authored papers must be accompanied by a cover sheet explaining how each author contributed to the collaboration. Each co-author is expected to contribute equally to the paper and must agree to receive the same grade. More details can be provided upon request.

Policies

Paper Extensions

If you need an extension on a paper assignment, just ask. While I reserve the right to not grant an extension, I will typically grant one if a student asks (especially if they ask *in advance*, i.e., at least 48 hours *before* the deadline). However, paper assignments will not be accepted more than a week after the deadline. Exceptions will only be made in extreme circumstances (e.g., family or medical emergency) and may require documentation.

Academic Integrity

We strictly adhere to the University Academic Integrity Policy (found [here](#)). It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with this policy and what constitutes a violation of it. All work submitted must be the student's own, and all sources must be properly cited. Any violation of this policy will be reported immediately. Violations will, at the very least, result in an F on the assignment, but may also lead to an F in the class, suspension, or even expulsion.

Schedule

Foundations

Week 1: What is Conceptual Engineering?

- 10/2 | Hermann Cappelen and David Plunkett (2020), "Introduction: A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics"
Matti Eklund (2021), "Conceptual Engineering in Philosophy"

Week 2: Verbal Disputes

- 10/9 | David Chalmers (2011), "Verbal Disputes"

Week 3: Haslanger and the Ameliorative Project

- 10/16 | Sally Haslanger (2000), "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?"
Jennifer Saul (2006), "Gender and Race"

Week 4: Metalinguistic Negotiation and Conceptual Ethics

- 10/23 | David Plunkett and Tim Sundell (2013), "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms"
Arc Kocurek (2023), "Verbal Disagreement and Semantic Plans" (skim/skip sections 4 & 5)

Challenges

Week 5: Changing the Subject

- 10/30 | Delia Belleri (2018), "Downplaying the change of subject objection to conceptual engineering"
Michael Prinzing (2018), "The revisionist's rubric: conceptual engineering and the discontinuity objection"

Week 6: Externalism

- 11/6 | Sarah Sawyer (2018), "The Importance of Concepts"
Mark Pinder (2021), "Conceptual Engineering, Metasemantic Externalism, and Speaker Meaning"

Week 7: Implementation and Feasibility

- 11/13 | Max Deutsch (2020), "Speaker's reference, stipulation, and a dilemma for conceptual engineers"
| Steffen Koch (2020), "There is no dilemma for conceptual engineering. Reply to Max Deutsch"
- 11/18 | **SYNOPSIS DUE**

Week 8: Power and Authority

- 11/20 | Matthew Shields (2021), "Conceptual Domination"
| Mattheiu Queloz and Friedemann Bieber (2022), "Conceptual Engineering and the Politics of Implementation"

Week 9: Thanksgiving break (no class)

Week 10: Why Conceptually Engineer?

- 12/4 | Rachel Sterken (2020), "Linguistic Intervention and Transformative Communicative Disruptions"
| Steffen Koch & Gary Lupyan (2024), "What is conceptual engineering good for? The argument from nameability"
- 12/11 | **PAPER DUE**