Cappelen (2018) — "Summary of Concluding Remarks and the Limits of the Intellect"

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Summarized and Commented by Shimpei Endo

In a nutshell...

This concluding chapter justifies the bad naming of "conceptual engineering" and specifies his seemingly pessimistic but still believing attitude. The basic strategy here is: "they also do that".

Keywords: conceptual engineering

(Contents of this chapter)

'Conceptual enginnering' is not a perfect name. Cappelen admits that 'conceptual engineering' is not the best way to label what he has presented. So far, Cappelen has provided "a theory of conceptual enginnering without concepts and without engineering" [p. 199]. The earlier part of this chapter offers three justifications for this bad naming.

Reason 1: For philosophers at work to notice. The main reason is to capture "the self-image" of philosophers in front lines (see Part I, listed as "data points"). The name of conceptual enginnering is "familiar to the people and the traditions that the book theorizes about" [p. 199].

Reason 2: To revise what conceptual engineers actually do. Relating to the first point, Cappelen intends to revise the self-understanding and practices of philosophers. They, reasonably, misunderstand what they are actually doing.

> In particular, people who spend big chunks of their lives thinking, writing, and talking tend to think that those activities are important and have significant impact. For the most part that is not so.

Reason 3: To call competitors. Cappelen also designed the name to call attention for other competing frameworks. Cappelen even digests their tasks of his rival conceptual engineering in the following two-fold manner:

1. Identify the conceptual core–the relevant (proper) subset of entities in your setting.

2. Show how we can engineer these things.

Pessimistic? Cappelen may have sounded that conceptual engineering is a debunking enterprise. For example, most of representational defects are out of our control. Conceptual enginnering has very subtle and indirect impact like "talking to you about crime in Baltimore or povertry in Bangladesh" [p. 200].

Symphasizing with this concern, Cappelen keeps a certain portion of hope [p.200]. Cappelen appeals "an almost universal aspect of large-scale normative reflections". Disclaimers compare conceptual engineering with too different things. Rather, compare with "the relevant comparison class" [p.201].

The last paragraph.

> That said, the analogy goes only so far. The limitations on our ability to improve our representational devices are perhaps more painful and cut deeper than the other limitations I've mentioned. We are animals who pride ourselves on our rationality. The ability to think and represent is at the core ofthat rationality. That ability enables us to recognize both that our own representational devices are defective and that there isn't much we can do about it. We can observe these defects, describe them, reflect on them, and think of ameliorative strategies. But careful thinking also reveals that such reflection is ineffective. Amelioration might happen, but if it does, it has little to do with our intentional efforts. Our intellect can diagnose itself, figure out a cure, but is impotent when it comes to doing anything. Emphasizing this highlights an important limitation on human rationality and intellect.

Comments by Endo

Vote? Consider an argument for why you should vote even though you know your voting (alone) does not change the situation.

References

Cappelen, H. (2018). *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom.