



# Conceptual Ethics I

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## Abstract

Which concepts should we use to think and talk about the world and to do all of the other things that mental and linguistic representation facilitates? This is the guiding question of the field that we call ‘conceptual ethics’. Conceptual ethics is not often discussed as its own systematic branch of normative theory. A case can nevertheless be made that the field is already quite active, with contributions coming in from areas as diverse as fundamental metaphysics and social/political philosophy. In this pair of papers, we try to unify the field, reflecting on its basic nature, structure, and methodology.

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## 1. Introduction

Semantic claims and conceptual analyses abound throughout contemporary philosophy. In their purest forms, semantics and analysis are exclusively *descriptive* projects, specifying the meanings or contents of representational vehicles as they are *actually used* by particular speakers, thinkers, or communities thereof. As such inquiry shades into linguistics and psychology, it is increasingly turned over to empirically informed philosophers of language and mind. But of course, philosophers of language and mind are also quite busy with the theory of such inquiry – studying the nature and methodology of semantics and analysis.<sup>1</sup> In light of this heavy workload, it may come as no surprise that comparatively little has been written on the nature or methodology of semantic and conceptual *prescriptions*. As we underscore in the present paper, however, claims about how one ought (or would do well) to think and talk are nearly as ubiquitous in philosophy as their descriptive counterparts, not to mention their prevalence in ordinary discourse. For reasons to be elaborated shortly, we might call such normative and evaluative issues about representation ‘conceptual ethics’.<sup>2</sup> This article and its sequel constitute an overview of conceptual ethics as we find it and an attempt to organize the field for future work.

Our first order of business is to persuade you that the field exists. In Section 2, we offer instances of it from four different spheres: the literature on personal identity, the theory of truth, meta-metaphysics, and the philosophy of race and gender. Section 3 distils the common subject matter from these diverse case studies and clarifies why we are inclined to call it ‘conceptual ethics’. Section 4 considers its connections to more established topics in the theory of representation, like the normativity of content itself, and the internalism/externalism debates. Various reasons for caring about conceptual ethics will be implicit in these remarks. Section 5 develops one of them more explicitly, and then registers another, less obvious reason to take the enterprise seriously. The first point here is that our conceptual repertoire determines not only what we can think and say but also, as a result, what we can do and who we can be. In other words, which concepts we use has an important impact on the space of possible actions and lives available to us. Second, if certain views about metalinguistic disputes are on the right track, we actually already engage in normative argument about representational choices

much more often than one might realize. We would therefore do better to pursue these issues wittingly, overtly, and with greater care.

Having addressed the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of conceptual ethics, we turn in the next paper to discuss how it might be systematically pursued, using our emerging framework to critique certain trends in the literature, sharpen old questions, and raise some new ones.

## 2. Illustrations

Before we start cataloguing cases of conceptual ethics from particular areas of specialization, it might be useful to register a single example that should hopefully resonate with everyone. Take the phrase ‘begging the question’. Presumably, it used to mean (something like) presupposing what one has set out to establish. It still means that in our professional dialect but undergraduates and other ordinary folk now seem to use the phrase to mean *inviting* a question.<sup>3</sup> We all probably know someone who got quite worked up about this shift. Maybe you have even found yourself giving a reactionary sermon on English usage in Intro Philosophy, startling students who had taken you for a fairly liberal, forward-thinking teacher. After all, it hardly seems tragic that an orthographic or phonetic string of public language has changed its meaning, or that people now use ‘begging’ and ‘inviting’ interchangeably in certain contexts. So why all the fuss?

One rationalizing hypothesis would be that we were getting upset about a conceptual loss. In the absence of any convenient verbal handle for the concept *BEGGING THE QUESTION* – that is, the concept of presupposing what one has set out to establish – people are presumably less likely to deploy it in thought and talk.<sup>4</sup> They should accordingly be less likely to identify the fallacy when exposed to it in philosophical arguments or political speeches. Insofar as cognitive errors often have negative practical consequences, one can start to see why we might be inclined toward certain normative views about conceptual or semantic matters.

Let us look now at four further issues in conceptual ethics, drawn from philosophy proper, rather than its sociology.

### 2.1. INDETERMINACY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Suppose it is simply indeterminate whether a certain so-called ‘teleportation device’ developed in the future is a quick means of travel or just a fancy way to die. And suppose the source of this indeterminacy is representational rather than metaphysical. The thought would be that the concept (or range of concepts) we express with the phrase ‘same person’ fails to settle the death/travel question, presumably because it initially emerged for use in a simpler technological era. With the advent of the device, we as a community might opt to refine our notion of personal identity in one direction or the other; or simply replace the old notion with a new one.<sup>5</sup> And of course other puzzles of persistence (like fission and fusion scenarios) might motivate different representational changes. These are conceptual or semantic choices, to be sure, but they are not ‘merely semantic’, in the popular, pejorative sense. On the contrary, we would expect the natural progression of a society opting for the ‘travel’ paradigm to look quite different from that of a society opting for ‘death’ – different with respect to how widely the technology is used, the market for component parts, property law in cases of teleportation and so on. How we think and talk can have a big impact on everything else we do. Insofar as downstream differences like these are ethically significant, so too are the representational decisions that account for them.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. INCONSISTENCY, TRUTH, AND LOGIC

It has often been argued that natural languages like English are in some sense ‘inconsistent’ because they host logical paradoxes like the sorites and the liar.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that certain offending premises in these paradoxical arguments are actually constitutive of the meanings of expressions contained therein. With respect to the liar, for example, an inconsistency theorist might argue that the paradox arises because some suitably comprehensive version of Tarski’s schema T is somehow ‘built in’ to our ordinary notion of truth. Alternatively, she might blame the paradox on some classical inference pattern, like *reductio ad absurdum* – which could be construed as constitutive of the concept NOT. Either way, those of us loath to accept contradictions might naturally wonder whether we ought to revise classical logic or our ordinary notion of truth in light of inconsistency theory. On the one hand, the paradoxes obviously pose no purely practical problems in everyday conversation or deliberation. But TRUTH and logical notions also figure in theoretical enterprises like mathematics and linguistics. Perhaps we should introduce consistent surrogates for our defective expressions in these domains, lifting candidates from the technical literature on the paradoxes.<sup>8</sup> But how exactly would we justify one selection from this potpourri over all the others?

## 2.3. FUNDAMENTAL METAPHYSICS

Not all truths are created equal, one might think. Some ways of describing the world just seem more natural than others. Concepts like GREEN and BLUE ostensibly carve reality closer to its joints than their disjunctive counterparts, GRUE and BLEEN – tracing lines of objective similarity and difference transgressed by the alternatives.<sup>9</sup> Two consistent truth-like predicates (or two conceptions of personal identity) might be more or less equally gerrymandered, because metaphysical naturalness is usually taken to be a matter of degree at the macro-level. But at the fabled fundamental level of reality, naturalness is supposed to be an all-or-nothing affair. The basic facts about the world that ground or give rise to the rest of its features have some determinate structure, so the language we use to catalog these facts – as Ted Sider puts it, ‘to write the book of the world’ – should have expressions for all and only the components of that structure.<sup>10</sup> Now, this is not to say that we can determine the shape of our fundamental ‘ideology’ independently or in advance of metaphysical inquiry itself. As in the sciences, the best methodology might well be to let first-order metaphysics lead the way (or perhaps to pursue the two projects in tandem).<sup>11</sup> The important point for our purposes is just that a good deal of contemporary debate in and about fundamental metaphysics involves a claim in conceptual ethics: roughly put, that the concepts we use to characterize the ground floor of reality should carve perfectly at its joints.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.4. PEJORATIVES AND THE POLITICS OF RACE AND GENDER

A lot of work has recently gone into the semantics of pejoratives and slurs, most of which is purely descriptive.<sup>13</sup> But part of the topic’s interest presumably derives from the fact that these are expressions we ought to use carefully, sparingly, and in many cases, not at all. Sorting out the details here would be a project in conceptual ethics. In virtue of what is it the case that we should refrain from using a given racial epithet? Should we abjure racial concepts altogether? If so, why?

Sally Haslanger frames a kindred project in her influential work on race and gender: ‘to identify what legitimate purposes we might have (if any) in categorizing people on the basis of race or gender, and to develop concepts that would help us achieve these ends.’<sup>14</sup> The main end she emphasizes is social justice. So, Haslanger wants to know which concepts will

best enable us to pick out properties whose distribution we need to recognize in order to develop a more just social order.<sup>15</sup> She argues that the relevant properties have to do with social identities – more specifically, the ways in which one is either systematically subordinated or privileged along certain dimensions (economic, political, legal, etc.) as a result of being imagined by others to possess particular features that purportedly reveal biological, ancestral, or other socially salient facts.<sup>16</sup> In a fully just society, wherein people are not systematically subordinated or privileged in these ways, such properties would simply be uninstantiated. Given that they are *currently* instantiated, however, Haslanger thinks we need to keep track of them in theorizing about socio-political reality. So she introduces concepts to pick out the relevant properties and proposes we lexicalize them with extant terms: ‘race’ and ‘gender’. Her project therefore involves conceptual innovation, which is often a crucial part of conceptual ethics. Like consistent surrogates for our ordinary notion of truth, Haslanger’s replacement concepts of race and gender are put forward as *better* tools for thought and talk.

### 3. Defining Conceptual Ethics

Hopefully, the foregoing illustrations have helped demarcate and to some extent legitimate the enterprise of conceptual ethics. Let us now try to circumscribe it more precisely, clarifying and justifying our conception of the field, and noting some potentially important points of contact between the ethics and metaphysics of representation. To these ends, we might begin by addressing a question that has probably been nagging at a number of readers from the outset. Why exactly are we using the phrase ‘conceptual ethics’ to pick out the range of normative and evaluative issues about representational choices and changes raised in the previous section? The phrase has two parts, so the question does too.

First, why *conceptual ethics*? The basic answer is just that ‘ethics’ is less clunky than ‘normative and evaluative theorizing’. This conception of ethics is obviously quite broad, covering both the study of what one should or ought to do (dually, what can permissibly be done) as well as the study of which actions and outcomes are good or bad, better or worse.<sup>17</sup> We do not equate ethics and moral philosophy – though of course moral considerations are among those that can be brought to bear on what one ought to do. A closer approximation might be ‘practical’ philosophy, though we should keep in mind that paradigmatically ‘theoretical’ considerations (like cutting nature at the joints) are often front and center in conceptual ethics.

Second, why *conceptual* ethics? Why not, for example, ‘the ethics of representation’ instead? Here, the answer is more complicated and perhaps a bit more interesting. In the first place, the R-word seems to carry strong inflationary connotations, and we would like to remain neutral on deflationism about truth and reference. To put the point another way, we do not want to assume that concepts are intrinsically or essentially representational in an inflationary sense. Moreover, even if they are, the fact remains that we do plenty of things with concepts besides using them to describe or represent the world: we ask questions, make plans and promises, bullshit each other, etc. These activities might well be parasitic on the representational functions of our conceptual schemes, but it hardly follows that the norms governing the former can just be read off those for the latter.<sup>18</sup>

That said, our preferred terminology has shortcomings of its own. The phrase ‘conceptual ethics’ admittedly seems to sideline normative and evaluative questions about *linguistic* content – or worse, to presume without argument that their answers follow immediately from facts about mental representation. The phrase also trains our attention on content rather than form, suggesting that the *structures* or *vehicles* of representation are ethically irrelevant.

We hereby explicitly and emphatically disavow these various suggestions. There is no reason to expect that the ethics of thought and talk *tout court* can somehow be reduced to our focal issue in this pair of papers. That we ought to use concept C does not yet settle how we should lexicalize it, for example. If C has just been minted, we might be torn between introducing a new word for it and recycling an old one. Clarity and other values of philosophical bookkeeping presumably speak in favor of novelty. But there may be overriding practical or political reasons to pick a term already in circulation.<sup>19</sup> There are also important normative questions about grammar and style, which unfortunately lie beyond the scope of the present papers.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, we think ‘conceptual ethics’ remains a useful shorthand for the full range of normative and evaluative issues about thought and talk we have been sampling, and a nice partner to broad uses of ‘conceptual analysis’. The phrase also reflects our view that conceptual matters are central to this range, if not exhaustive of it.

#### 4. *Metaphysical Entanglements*

With these clarifications in hand, let us consider a few more substantive questions about the metaphysical presuppositions of conceptual ethics, as we understand it. To begin with, insofar as the field revolves around concepts, it would certainly seem that any sustained engagement with conceptual ethics will require taking talk of concepts seriously. Not everyone believes in concepts, however; and among those who do, there are significant disagreements about their nature. We would like to cast as wide a net as possible. Eliminativists about concepts will hopefully be able to massage our discussion to fit the mold of their favorite metaphysics of mental representation. As for the nature of concepts, let us just say for present purposes that they are ‘ingredients’ or ‘components’ of thoughts, however these metaphors are ultimately best unpacked. Accordingly, for an individual to *have* or *possess* a given concept is (at minimum) for her to be capable of thinking thoughts involving that concept. We can then say that an individual *uses* a given concept when she draws on this ability to actually think such a thought. These schematic commitments should suffice to fix ideas, without prejudging too many controversial issues in the area. Theorists with diverse views on the nature of content ought to be able to engage in conceptual ethics without talking past each other.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, there are a few places where different metaphysical leanings will predictably inspire different stances in conceptual ethics. One obvious case in point concerns the normativity of content. If concepts themselves are constitutively or intrinsically normative, then any complete ethics of a given concept should somehow take account of whatever norms happen to issue from the essence of that concept. Kripke’s Wittgenstein argues that the facts about meaning are intrinsically normative, if they exist at all.<sup>22</sup> Allan Gibbard drops the skeptical rider and develops the idea in much more detail.<sup>23</sup> But the basic thought here is just that the (putative) fact that ‘dog’ means what it does immediately entails that we ought to use the word in *these* circumstances and ought not to use it in *those*. And of course, the examples can easily be transposed to a conceptual key. Indeed, the normativity of content crops up throughout the theory of representation. Conceptual-role semanticists sometimes emphasize the *rule* in ‘rule of inference’, certain social externalists will construe *deference* normatively, and teleosemanticists often see some ought-ness in their favorite notion of representational *function*.<sup>24</sup>

This syndrome of metaphysical issues helps bring out a contrast between two kinds of question in conceptual ethics. First, one might like to know whether we ought to be using a given concept *at all*. Perhaps the ‘thick’ evaluative concepts we (arguably) express with pejoratives should just be decommissioned.<sup>25</sup> Assuming, however, that there are some

circumstances or others in which we can or should use a given concept, one might like to know whether some particular case falls among them. Granting, for example, that we can legitimately use the concept DOG to think or talk about possible pets, one might wonder: is this ferocious animal before me really a dog or is it rather some sort of feral hybrid? At bottom, the contrast here is just between *whether* to use a concept and *how* to use it.<sup>26</sup> The traditional literature on the normativity of content seems to bear much more directly on the second sort of question than on the first. Insofar as using a given concept can be compared to playing a game, Kripke effectively argues that these games have rules and conceptual-role semanticists try to tell us what those rules are. It is a separate question whether to play the game in the first place. And the case studies in conceptual ethics adumbrated at the start arguably have this more foundational character. That said, whether or not to use a concept may ultimately depend (in part) on how it ought to be used if it is used.<sup>27</sup>

Another point of contact between the metaphysics and ethics of concepts concerns ongoing debates between externalists and internalists about content. The textbook externalist thinks that our social and natural environments serve as heavy anchors, so to speak, for the interpretation of our individual thought and talk. The internalist, by contrast, grants us a greater degree of conceptual autonomy. One salient upshot of this disagreement is that effecting conceptual change looks comparatively easy from an internalist perspective. We can revise, eliminate, or replace our concepts without worrying about what the experts are up to, or what happens to be coming out of our taps. From the externalist's point of view, however, conceptual revolution takes a village, or a long trip to Twin Earth.<sup>28</sup> Now, depending on your broader normative and meta-normative views, feasibility considerations like these might not affect your conceptual ethics. Whether we ought to use a given concept could be completely independent of how hard or easy it would be to do so. That said, the feasibility of *non*-conceptual behavior certainly seems to be ethically significant. As they say, 'ought implies can'. And of course, conceptual behavior is a behavior too.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, to weave these two metaphysical threads together, note that certain normatively inclined externalists think (very roughly) that what concepts we are *in fact* using is largely determined by what concepts we *ought* to be using.<sup>30</sup> If something like this thought were true, deliberate conceptual change might be unnecessary. Which is not to say that conceptual ethics would be moot. On the contrary, it would actually already be at the heart of the theory of content. Be that as it may, there are good reasons to get invested in conceptual ethics quite independently of one's metaphysics of mental representation.

### 5. *Why Bother?*

Hopefully, the reader can now see the philosophical territory we call 'conceptual ethics' a bit more clearly. But why bother baptizing it? Any why try to survey such a sparse and scattered field? Our motivating thought is just that the field would remain fallow so long as no one pointed out its potential – or paved the roads between the plots we surveyed in Section 2. Moreover, having a convenient verbal handle for conceptual ethics increases the odds of spotting normative issues about thought and talk implicit or explicit in the next philosophy paper you read. But of course, these answers just invite the further question: why care about conceptual ethics in the first place? Perhaps the subject already receives exactly as much attention as it deserves.

We think it deserves more, for two main reasons. First, given our discussion at the start of the previous section, what concepts we have fixes what thoughts we can think. The point isn't merely doxastic. Arguably, our conceptual repertoire determines not only what beliefs we can have but also what hypotheses we can entertain, what desires we can form, what plans we can make on the basis of such mental states, and accordingly constrains what we



can hope to accomplish in the world. Representation enables action, from the most sophisticated scientific research, to the most mundane household task.<sup>31</sup> It influences our options within social/political institutions and even helps determine which institutions are so much as thinkable. Our social roles, in turn, help determine what kinds of people we can be, what sorts of lives we can lead.<sup>32</sup> Conceptual choices and changes may be intrinsically interesting, but the clearest reason to care about them is just that their non-conceptual consequences are pervasive and profound.

This initial point is fairly straightforward and yet easy to overlook. One reason we might miss it is that we tend to 'look through' our concepts, to the objects and properties they pick out. But this transparency does not account for the asymmetry in philosophical attention paid to conceptual analysis and conceptual ethics respectively. A better explanation might therefore cite the fact that conceptual development can be glacial. The familiarity of our actual, current conceptual schemes could be confused for inevitability or even virtue. But once we start articulating arguments for the status quo, other possibilities present themselves. We begin to see that alternative concepts might be better – for the purposes of carving reality at its joints, promoting social justice, or whatever else.

We promised a second, less obvious reason to care about conceptual ethics. As we saw in Section 2, some contemporary philosophers already engage the subject more or less overtly.<sup>33</sup> But there is also reason to think we often do so implicitly in other contexts. David Plunkett and Tim Sundell have argued that many normative disputes about ostensibly first-order, object-level questions – e.g., Is this painting beautiful? – are in fact more plausibly understood as disagreements about how to use language in the context at hand; negotiations about which concept a word like 'beautiful' will express.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Peter Ludlow has recently suggested that almost all linguistic communication involves this kind of negotiation.<sup>35</sup> Both views hold that many such disputes are mediated pragmatically, without ever rising to the level of overt assertion and argument, and thus that speakers are often unaware they are effectively engaging in conceptual ethics. If something like this story were right, then presumably we would do better to make these disagreements explicit, address them wittingly, and adjudicate them with greater care (at least when the disagreements arise in the course of philosophical inquiry). If we already practice conceptual ethics, let's do it well.

## 6. Conclusion

We hope the discussion in the pages above has at least made conceptual ethics a more visible territory on the philosophical map, with outposts worth visiting in a variety of active areas. Sticking with the cartographic metaphor, we also hope this survey will open channels of communication and collaboration between theorists stationed at different outposts, from speculative metaphysics to applied ethics. Granted, strategies developed on one front may not always translate to another. Indeed, we expect the correct conceptual ethics will be sensitive to the types and natures of individual concepts, as well as various features of the contexts in which they are deployed. Nevertheless, comparisons among cases like those we have considered here suggest a general structure for normative and evaluative theorizing about thought and talk, which we turn to explore in the next paper.

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, the metaphysics and epistemology of representation. For new work in metasemantics, see the essays collected in Burgess and Sherman (forthcoming). For some recent work on the methodology of conceptual analysis, see Jackson (1998), Knobe (2007), and Williamson (2007).

<sup>2</sup> That is, the ethics of concepts or of what concepts to use – rather than ethics done in an especially conceptual way (whatever that might look like). Compare, ‘reproductive ethics’ is the ethics of reproduction, not ethics done in a reproductive way. We will have plenty to say in Section 3 about the rationale for this terminological choice, which is itself an exercise in conceptual ethics, broadly construed.

<sup>3</sup> Social externalism seems largely irrelevant here, because the folk are in the overwhelming majority, and hardly deferring to philosophers.

<sup>4</sup> We will henceforth designate concepts using smallcaps. On this convention, see Margolis and Laurence (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Whether the distinction between conceptual revision and outright replacement can be maintained, and if so, how exactly we should draw it, are of course controversial issues in the metaphysics of representation. There will be more to say about the interplay between conceptual ethics and metaphysics in Section 4.

<sup>6</sup> The foregoing illustration is adapted from Johnston (1989). Sider (2001) argues that our ordinary conception of survival is ambivalent between biological and psychological criteria. Parfit (1984) obviously got much of this discussion going. He does not always write in explicitly meta-representational terms, but it is easy enough to translate talk about the ethics of identity into talk about the ethics of ‘identity’. Finally, to bridge this illustration and the next, Eklund (2002b) argues for an inconsistency theory of personal identity.

<sup>7</sup> Eklund (2002a) is the new go-to text, building on classics like Tarski (1956) and Chihara (1979) among others.

<sup>8</sup> See Scharp (2013). On the other hand, Patterson (2009) effectively argues that we need not revise our ordinary notion of truth, at least so far as Davidsonian semantics is concerned. Eklund (forthcoming) and Burgess (forthcoming) pursue some of these normative issues further.

<sup>9</sup> See Goodman (1983) and Hirsch (1997).

<sup>10</sup> Sider (2012), building on Lewis (1983). As Sider frames the claim in the opening paragraph of his book (vii, our italics): ‘The world has a distinguished structure, a privileged description. For a representation to be fully successful, truth is not enough; the representation must also use the *right* concepts, so that its conceptual structure matches reality’s structure.’

<sup>11</sup> Insofar as the concept MASS evolved over the relativistic revolution, it certainly wasn’t because physicists were explicitly preoccupied with questions in conceptual ethics. But of course, it’s not obvious that the concept did change (which ties in to our discussion of externalism below). Moreover, it’s entirely possible that rational reconstruction in the history of science might reveal a tacit engagement with normative, representational issues. We float a related proposal in Section 5. And there will be more to say in the next paper about the methodology of conceptual ethics more generally.

<sup>12</sup> Other research programs in and about speculative metaphysics also engage with conceptual ethics. Consider for example neo-Carnapian metaontology, which recasts framework-external questions about the existence of Fs as pragmatic questions concerning which conceptual schemes to use. (Camap 1956). For helpful discussion, see Eklund (2013).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Williamson (2009), Anderson and Lepore (2010), Hom (2008), and Richard (2009), among many others.

<sup>14</sup> Haslanger (2005, 11), discussing the position exemplified in Haslanger (2000). Her views have of course evolved over time, in ways we cannot hope to summarize here. For further reading, see Haslanger (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Targeting the properties we should be studying in the social world – and in turn, the concepts we ought to deploy in our study – is arguably part and parcel of developing a truly *critical* social theory. This thought resonates with much of the discussion in Geuss (1981) about the Frankfurt School.

<sup>16</sup> (Haslanger 2000, 37–45).

<sup>17</sup> Three qualifications. First, we do not mean to rule out the possibility that the study of what one ought to do is ultimately just the study of what *to* do (Gibbard 2003). Second, we are neutral here on whether the evaluative reduces to the normative, or vice versa (or neither). That said, following one standard convention in contemporary metaethics, we will often use ‘normative’ expansively, to cover both evaluative and narrowly normative matters together. On this



convention, see, for example, Enoch (2011). Third, we also think it best to proceed by simply bracketing debates about the relationships between first-person and third-person oughts. Some of our examples here and in the sequel might invite 'agential' readings of normative locutions, but our hope is that all parties to these disputes can find amenable paraphrases.

<sup>18</sup> The ethics of 'representation' might also be mistaken for another field altogether, namely normative epistemology. As will be clear by now, we are not interested here in how to deal with peer disagreement, the problems and prospects for Bayesianism, or the rationality of religious belief. In some sense, the question of which concepts we ought to use is palpably prior to the question of which structures of them we ought to believe or give credence.

<sup>19</sup> See Haslanger (2012) for a trenchant treatment of the political stakes as issue with respect to our terminology for concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. Plunkett and Sundell (forthcoming) discuss the topic more generally.

<sup>20</sup> David Foster Wallace notoriously thought that we ought to enforce the conventions of 'Standard White English' to promote the social interests of black students brought up using other dialects: '...because Standard White English is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself' (Wallace 2006, 109). There is also a literature on the virtues of inaccessibility: Butler (1999b) and Butler (1999a), drawing on themes from Adorno (1990) and Derrida (1983).

<sup>21</sup> There are plenty of metaphysical or descriptive questions on which conceptual ethicists may disagree. Can concepts ever be analyzed? Are any of them innate? How often, if ever, is concept acquisition piecemeal rather than holistic? It is hard to say in the abstract how different answers will impact one's conceptual ethics. We focus below on externalism and the normativity of content just because their impact is somewhat clearer.

<sup>22</sup> (Kripke 1982).

<sup>23</sup> (Gibbard 2012).

<sup>24</sup> For a helpful overview of conceptual-role semantics, see Greenberg and Harman (2007). For a helpful discussion of normativity in the metaphysics of content, see Greenberg (2005).

<sup>25</sup> For a recent treatment of thick concepts, see Väyrynen (2013).

<sup>26</sup> We do not mean to imply that these are the only two types of question the conceptual ethicist can ask. As we have seen, she might also wonder whether concept C is better to use than alternative A. And she might relativize this comparative question to various purposes or goals. We will have much more to say in the sequel about parameterizing issues in conceptual ethics.

<sup>27</sup> We should exercise caution here, however. There may be cases where we ought to use a given concept, yet, at the same time, ought to violate one or more of its central norms. One can easily imagine an inconsistency theory of truth developed along these lines. Or consider the politically important act of 'reclaiming' a sometime slur, as for example with 'queer'. Of course, the possibility of systematically 'misusing' a given concept will hinge on substantive commitments in the metaphysics of representation. If the rule at issue really is essential to the concept, these may just be cases of conceptual innovation.

<sup>28</sup> This is of course a caricature. Many externalists would admittedly allow that individuals can strike out on their own, by explicitly disavowing any intention to defer to experts or others in their cognitive communities. For further discussion of the relationship between conceptual ethics and externalism, see Haslanger (2012).

<sup>29</sup> There are other reasons conceptual change could be difficult. Innate concepts might be hard to shake. And better concepts might be hard to innovate, relative to a given social/historical context. This latter thought plays a prominent role in both Heidegger and Foucault – resonating variously in Butler (1997), Davidson (2001), Geuss (2001), Hacking (2002), and Daston and Galison (2007). Davidson (2001c) would limit our conceptual options in a different way, insofar as extreme differences in conceptual schemes are precluded by the constraints of rationalizing interpretation. And Fodor (1980) argued that conceptual change is simply impossible. One could impose some order on this array by distinguishing various kinds of possibility: logical, psychological, historical, etc.

<sup>30</sup> See Schroeter (2008) for a view in this ballpark.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, if certain views about the nature of intentional action are right – e.g., that an action is intentional only when it's taken under some suitable description – then the concepts we use can literally make certain actions possible for us that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. See Davidson (2001b) for a view of this kind, and Hacking (2002) for more on the upshot noted here.

<sup>32</sup> In *The Order of Things*, Foucault famously writes that 'at any given instant, the structure proper to individual experience finds a certain number of possible choices (and of excluded possibilities) in the systems of the society; inversely, at each of their points of choice the social structures encounter a certain number of possible individuals (and others who are not)'. (Foucault 2002, 415). The concepts we possess and employ arguably help determine the structure Foucault has in mind here.

<sup>33</sup> There are historical examples as well: (Hegel 1977), (Heidegger 1962), and (Carnap 1967). Indeed, Robert Brandom effectively argues that what we have been calling 'conceptual ethics' has long been central to philosophical activity: (Brandom 1994) and (Brandom 2000).

<sup>34</sup> (Plunkett and Sundell forthcoming). See also Sundell (2011).

<sup>35</sup> (Ludlow manuscript). See also Stevenson (1938).

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