Change for the Better: Conceptual Engineering and the Task of Philosophy

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In the Introduction to *Think*, Simon Blackburn introduces himself as a practitioner of "conceptual engineering". What we aim at "when we investigate the structures that shape our view of the world," he observes, is an understanding of "what would happen for better or worse if changes were made". The implication is that if we arrive at the conviction that those structures "need dismantling and starting afresh" then the job of the philosopher is not restricted to the investigative phase. If—as Marx has it—the point is to change the world (for the better) then philosophers should be emboldened to take on that responsibility.

As an image of the task of philosophy, 'conceptual engineering' is reminiscent of what Strawson calls 'revisionary metaphysics', the search not for a description of our actual conceptual scheme but for a "better structure". By championing the 'engineering' conception, then, Blackburn and other self-styled 'conceptual engineers' like Sally Haslanger and Herman Cappelen set themselves against the tradition that dominated Strawson's Oxford. However, one reason for the conservatism of ordinary language philosophy is the conviction that the only standpoint from which we can legitimate our concepts is the standpoint of our everyday practices. Indeed, from Strawson's perspective, the only point of revisionary metaphysics is to remind us that little sense can be given to the notion of *better* structures.

In Strawson's time, the principle opposition to this quietism came in the form of Quinean pragmatism. From Quine's perspective the recalcitrant attachment to the analytic–synthetic distinction blinds those committed to 'ordinary usage' as the source of normative authority to the obvious alternative; namely, that Carnapian explication qua elimination shows us how to "circumvent the

problematic parts of ordinary usage". Here we get a sense of what *better* might connote, but only at the cost of limiting our interests to those that serve our scientific understanding. And that offers no real promise that the *world* will, as a result, be changed for the better.

Contrasting Quinean pragmatism with ordinary language philosophy neglects one important feature, however; namely, that there's an alternative strand in American pragmatism. On the Deweyan model, it is our moral and political interests that are privileged in the task of world-transformation, and the moral self-image the philosopher-as-conceptual-engineer is exhorted to adopt is construed accordingly. The structure of this paper, then, is as follows. In the first section I outline briefly the contemporary analytic characterisation of philosophy as conceptual engineering. I then go on to contrast the Quinean and Deweyan models of concept change in order to shed light on whether the 'conceptual engineers'—*pace* the ordinary language philosophers—have the requisite resources to clarify what a 'better' structure might mean. Section three examines Rorty's attempt to synthesise themes from Deweyan and Quinean pragmatism in order to give a specifically world-transforming role to intellectuals. I conclude by asking—in the light of the previous considerations—if there is a role in neo-pragmatism for the philosopher as conceptual engineer.