Plain Language Politics

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Proponents of ameliorative analysis argue that people should attempt to revise, improve, or change the shared meaning of existing concepts to advance worthwhile moral and political ends. For example, proponents of this approach have defended revisionist analyses of concepts such as climate change, sexual misconduct, woman, racism, rape, transgender, refugee, marriage, democracy, and conspiracy theory (Craig & Cossette, 2022; Dembroff, 2021; Douglas et al., 2022; Girgis et al., 2012; Haslanger, 2000, 2012; Koch, 2021; Nelson, n.d.; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). People promote these revisionist analyses by encouraging others to speak and write in a way that corresponds to their proposed conceptual reforms.[1] Sometimes, people can experience social sanctions, corrections, shame, stigma, or other penalties when they use language that does not reflect a proposed revisionist meaning of pre-existing concepts.

In this essay, we argue that people should not engage in ameliorative analysis because conceptual revisionism is counterproductive, inegalitarian, and disrespectful. It is counterproductive because there is little evidence that ameliorative analysis causes social changes that would not otherwise occur. And there is significant evidence that ameliorative analysis can inspire backlash against proposals for social reform. If effective, the practice also shifts attention and resources from actions that address material conditions to actions that address how people talk about material conditions. Ameliorative analysis is inegalitarian because it privileges elite communicative norms and excludes and punishes lower-status communication methods. The practice is also disrespectful. When people engage in ameliorative analysis, they implicitly deny the testimonial credibility or the authority of interlocutors who use words and concepts differently.

In response to these claims, a proponent of ameliorative analysis may argue that the existing conceptual landscape is not morally neutral. Ameliorative analysis might be understood as a kind of restorative project which aims to correct the unjust inheritance of the conceptual terrain. In response to this view of ameliorative analysis, we argue that material moral and political progress may prompt people to revise how they use words and concepts. Yet in the absence of material moral and political progress, a practice of encouraging people to change how they use words and concepts can not only make progress less likely, but it can also expose innocent people to harmful social sanctions.

The paper is in six sections. **In section 1,** we describe some standard examples of ameliorative analysis. There, we note that proponents of this approach justify the practice as a method for advancing worthwhile moral and political goals. **In section 2,** we begin to consider whether proponents of ameliorative analysis are justified in assuming that the practice is conducive to their political goals. There we draw on recent work in contemporary political psychology, which suggests that ameliorative analysis is not a politically effective means of persuading people. **In section 3,** we argue further that ameliorative analysis is also likely to backfire in political contexts. This is especially true in times of partisan antagonism and concomitant conceptual misunderstanding. These considerations constitute a strong presumptive case against the practice of ameliorative analysis in politics, which proponents of this approach have failed to acknowledge. **In section 4,** we consider whether our rejection of political ameliorative analysis amounts to ceding the conceptual field to opponents of justice. We agree with proponents of ameliorative analysis that this approach can enable people to question how their language and concepts are shaped by inaccurate assumptions and an unjust status quo. To close, we describe an alternative approach to conceptual reform in **section 5**—plain language politics. On this view, people should advocate for moral and political reform by using terms that have a shared meaning. We grant that this practice is morally risky as well—debates that take this form may be more likely to reflect the injustices of the status quo and may privilege powerful speakers differently than ameliorative analysis would. Nevertheless, we argue that plain language politics is generally a more productive, egalitarian, respectful way of advancing worthwhile moral and political goals. In **Section 6** we conclude that the benefits of ameliorative projects in politics are not worth the moral risks involved since there are more effective and less morally risky ways to achieve these benefits.

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[1] For philosophical discussion of conceptual engineering as a political project, see, for example, (Nimtz, 2021; Pinder, 2021; Podosky, 2018; Queloz & Bieber, 2022; Shields, 2021).

1. **Ameliorative Analysis as a Political Practice**

Many of our concepts are partly fixed and partly dependent on the social context in which they are deployed. For example, the concept of 'fruit' is partly a fixed concept (chicken drumsticks are not fruit). But the concept is also somewhat dependent on context. Tomatoes are fruits in some contexts (biology) but not in others (feeding children). Or, the distinction between a flower and a weed reflects the social context. Phlox is a rare and beautiful flower for some gardeners and a weed for others.

The meanings behind our political and social concepts can also vary, depending on context. Ameliorative analysis refers to the project of analyzing political and social contexts in a way that not only reflects their common usage in a social context but which changes the boundaries of concepts in order to advance social change

Sometimes, ameliorative analysis can mask underlying agreement when two people use similar words to refer to different concepts, but they ultimately agree about the nature of the underlying concepts they are discussing. As Hume writes,

> Nothing is more usual than for philosophers to encroach upon the province of grammarians; and to engage in disputes of words while they imagine that they are handling controversies of the deepest importance and concern.

Some seemingly high-stakes political debates arise solely because people disagree about how to use words. In these cases, when people start using the same term in different ways, there is a risk that someone can see disagreement where people actually agree on everything except which words to use. How this gets resolved often depends on whether A or B has the kind of status that gives them the authority to set the terms of a debate. In this way, a risk of ameliorative analysis is that it can obscure more than it illuminates.

Proponents of ameliorative analysis sometimes write as if they are mainly engaged in social metaphysics. That is, they write as if they are primarily motivated by an interest in a conceptual analysis of social concepts with the goal of better understanding the truth about social phenomena. For example, the conceptual analysis might involve the philosophical project of locating a set of *a priori* platitudes about a concept that jointly locates its boundaries in logical space (Smith 1996; Jackson 1998; Pettit 2020), allowing an iterative process of then checking to see how that concept matches entities in the world. A successful analysis would satisfy desiderata like extensional adequacy, parsimony, or developing concepts that cleanly divide the conceptual terrain 'at the joints' (Nado 2020; 2021; Biggs and Wilson; Carnap 1962, etc)

Yet proponents of ameliorative analysis are not merely interested in describing the nature of social concepts. Following Marx, they are also changing the social world by shaping the conceptual terrain. Rather than working with these flawed social concepts, ameliorative analysis enables philosophers to start over and design the best conceptual tools possible. These revisionist conceptions of social concepts should not only satisfy theoretical desiderata, but they should also advance justice.

Sally Haslanger's influential work provides many helpfully illustrative examples of ameliorative analysis. For example, Haslanger writes that the category of 'woman' is a social concept that has been shaped by patriarchal social forces (Bloom 1990, p. 2, ctd. in Haslanger 2020, p. 231). Since the concept's genealogy includes the pervasive oppression of women, theorists discussing feminism or public policy that addresses women's issues are at risk of entrenching patriarchal patterns of oppression simply by deploying the prevalent social understanding of 'woman'. In cases like this, ameliorative analysis can call attention to what existing theorization is obscuring from view (cf. Geuss 1981; Anderson 1995).

Haslinger writes, "Importantly, the goal of the project was not to capture *what we have in mind* when we use the terms 'woman,' or 'man,' 'Latinx,' or 'White' to describe ourselves or others" (Haslanger 2020, p. 235, italics in original; cf. 2000,). Instead, the project is to develop concepts that draw attention to social processes oppressing certain groups of people. Shifting the conceptual focus from identity to that social context would provide a morally more useful concept because the concept itself would provide a resource for understanding how oppression has been perpetuated (Haslanger 2020, p. 236). If the historical purpose of race and gender concepts has been to facilitate subordinating groups of people, then we might as well make attention to that fact a matter of conceptual truth (Cf. Richard 2020, p. 375).

To further illustrate the distinction between a standard approach to conceptual analysis and ameliorative analysis, consider the following prevalent examples of ameliorative analysis, where an analysis of a concept is partly deployed to produce social change. First, some self-described antiracist scholars have recently advocated for a revisionist understanding of racism that does not tie racism to individual prejudicial attitudes or discriminatory conduct:

> *Racism:* Jamie is a committed antiracist. Occasionally, Jamie hears people claim that behaviors such as buying a home or driving a car are not racist. When this happens, Jamie tells them that these behaviors are racist because they do not actively undermine structural racism. "For example," Jamie says, "when people buy homes, they may perpetuate patterns of residential segregation that contribute to racist disparities in wealth or promote gentrification and raising rents. When people drive gas-powered vehicles on highways, they pollute the air, exacerbating health disparities between whites and people who live in communities of color, which tend to be closer to highways." This definition of racism is broader than the definition that Jamie's interlocutors initially held.

Or, consider the example of sexual harassment:

> *Sexual Misconduct:* Jeff has noticed that people in his workplace often discuss sexist podcasts that are skeptical of #metoo. Jeff also noticed that several of the programmers on staff have computer backgrounds that feature illustrations of young women in sexualized poses. The company has a policy that prohibits sexual misconduct at work. Jeff submits a complaint, arguing that the programmers are engaging in sexual misconduct by promoting sexist viewpoints and exposing their coworkers to sexualized material. This definition of sexual misconduct is broader than the definition that the human resources department initially specified in its policy documents.

In these cases, ameliorative analysis can be controversial because people use morally charged terms to describe conduct that people did not previously identify as immoral, at least not in those ways. This is because, as noted above, concepts are social facts shared between agents. So, using a concept involves coordinating with others in a way that presupposes that concepts' meanings are shared. Deploying these concepts in a revisionist way is difficult because people who are using the concept no longer invoke it in similar ways. When proponents of an ameliorative analysis then hold other people accountable for using their favored concept (e.g., by correcting people who report meaning something different by the concept), they introduce further controversy about the conceptual terrain. This controversy can be exacerbated when an ameliorative concept analysis invokes reactive attitudes like anger or resentment. There is evidence that some concepts, themselves, elicit reactive attitudes (Braddon-Mitchell, 2020). For example, because the concept of 'racism' is already moralized, an ameliorative analysis of racism that takes a more expansive view of the concept is likely to make people who hold an alternative understanding of racism feel that they are unfairly being accused of wrongdoing.

2. Counterproductive Concepts

Proponents of ameliorative analysis deploy the tools of conceptual engineering to make the world more just. Such projects implicitly rely on the empirical assumptions that 1) ameliorative analysis and the accompanying revisionist uses of language can effectively prompt social change and 2) ameliorative analysis will prompt a social change in the way that proponents of ameliorative analysis intend. There is scant evidence for either of these empirical assumptions, however. Rather, the available evidence suggests that ameliorative analysis is likely to be superfluous where it seems to have the most influence because language often changes to reflect the underlying social reality, not the other way around. And in cases where meaningful social change hasn't already happened, ameliorative analysis is counterproductive. Any explicit attempt to engage in ameliorative analysis encounters these dual problems of superfluousness and ineffectiveness. These problems are particularly salient when considering attempts at ameliorative analysis for politically salient concepts.

Quite roughly, concepts are the constituents of thought. Concepts are commonly identified with their meaning or intension, where an intension is a function from possible worlds to extensions. To possess a concept is to be able to divide up logical space so as to sort out what kinds of things in the world fit the concept, and distinguish them from things that would not (Haslanger, 2020, pp. 238–244; Schroeter & Schroeter, 2014; Yalcin,

2018).[2] Folk concepts are widely shared psychological structures that are anchored in common use (Machery 2021). Our claim is that engineered concepts are either so close to their folk counterparts that attempts at conceptual engineering are superfluous, or they are so distant from their folk counterparts that any attempt at conceptual engineering cannot facilitate social uptake of the intended transfer (Richard 2020; Koslow 2022). These dual problems arise because if people do not converge around a new concept and use it, then an engineered concept cannot function as a replacement for the old folk concept. Convergence on a new concept requires what Richard (2020) calls "interpretive common ground." Even if people disagree about the specific meaning of a concept, their understanding of the concept can still converge enough for the concept to facilitate communicative coordination. Where such communication is possible, it makes sense to say that the concept was shared between speakers. If conceptual engineering is successful, people will converge around a new conceptual understanding instead of the old folk concept.

The dual problems of superfluousness and ineffectiveness are especially salient for politically charged topics because conceptual change only works when it can improve the conceptual terrain by the lights of the people who are using the concerts, e.g., by making a concept more coherent or removing inconstancies. In these cases, people are open to revising their folk concepts because the folk concepts are inadequate by their own standards. Richard writes:

> An extension shifting answer strikes me as difficult to make stick—as very difficult to get people to accept—if it is not grounded in something about prior usage that can be adduced to make plausible that the answer "simply reveals what we were talking about all along," or that the answer is an apt response to some ambiguity, confusion, or inconsistency in prior use. (2020, p. 375)

When amelioration doesn't begin on a shared interpretive ground, it is much more difficult to pull others toward a new proposal. And in politics, people often lack shared interpretive ground for normatively charged concepts due to conditions of contemporary polarization.

Much has been made over how Americans on opposing political sides no longer live near each other, don't attend shared social functions, avoid dating or marrying, inhabit separate media ecosystems, and share more affective antagonisms than sympathies. The pool of materials for shared interpretive traditions around normative concepts has been shrinking for decades. These losses are now reflected in the increasing tendency of opposing partisans to have dueling "fact perceptions" of normatively charged phenomena (Marietta and Barker 2019). A similar phenomenon happens in the way people perceive concepts. For example, citizen's conceptions of terrorism, racism, or even climate change depend considerably on their broader normative outlook (Marietta and Barker 2019, pp. 145-156), which in turn depends (more than the other way around) on their political side (Hatemi, Crabtree, and Smith 2019).

Against these charges of ineffectiveness, conceptual engineers may point out that large-scale linguistic or representational practices do change over time (Podosky, forthcoming; Shields 2021). Haslanger describes her ameliorative projects in this way. She writes, "I believe that conceptual amelioration has occurred [regarding the concept <family>], both as a result of pressure by social movements and by the development of reproductive technology" (2022, pp. 237, 250). Other philosophers also regard ameliorative projects as empirically realizable.[3] Engineers might modify the linguistic landscape "in regular but inconspicuous ways" or alternatively in "memorable and politically charged ones" (Koslow 2022; cf. Kitsik 2022).[4]

Despite these reasons to believe that conceptual engineering can successfully shift folk concepts to make them more favorable to the engineers' political agenda, there is little evidence that conceptual engineering is, in fact, responsible for the social changes that proponents of ameliorative analysis often reference. Political antagonists

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[2] We prescind from a host of questions here, including whether concepts are mental entities or social entities, whether they involve competence in the use of a set of associated platitudes, a suite of representational capabilities, a way of carving logical space, a mapping between intensions and possible worlds, etc. We recognize these possibilities and hope to remain roughly ecumenical among the available options.

[3] For critics see Shields (2021) and Queloz and Bieber (2022); For a general discussion of the experimental literature bearing on feasibility issues, see Fischer (2020).

[4] Kitsik (2022) discusses paternalistic ameliorative reform at length, considering moral considerations for and against the practice.

rarely, if ever, adopt their opponents' favored concepts (Koslow, 2022). Rather, these examples of conceptual change are examples of concepts catching up to social changes, not causing them.

Proponents of ameliorative analysis cannot credibly claim that their attempts at conceptual reengineering will effectively advance their conception of justice by changing people's conceptual frameworks. This is not to say that ameliorative analysis never makes a difference in the world. Rather, ameliorative analysis can change people's attitudes about politics – just not by promoting conceptual change. Here we have in mind cases where ameliorative projects are counterproductive at promoting their intended political ends because people are suspicious and resentful of elites' attempts to re-engineer concepts.

People want to side with their own group, and they actively oppose the political projects of outgroups (Classen, Djupe, Lewis, and Neiheisel 2019; Connors 2020). If a proposed concept lacks a plausible story about why it is based on a shared interpretation already, that is a good indicator in contemporary society that it is coming from an outside political tribe. We should predict that it will meet with resistance rather than passive acceptance. And in these cases, politically salient conceptual proposals are likely to be counterproductive.

There are several lines of evidence in support of our prediction that ameliorative analysis is likely to backfire. First, *moralization*. When political questions are presented in more – rather than less – politically charged ways, politically charged presentations of questions deepen partisan divisions, sour antagonists against compromise, and induce harder bargaining strategies (cf. Ryan 2019; Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2019). Introducing concepts that moralize a political dispute can impede progress that was otherwise possible.

Second, *outgroup cues*. Even if people don't understand the meaning of an ameliorated concept, they are very likely to understand its political origin. People regularly oppose concepts and beliefs they associate with out-party advocacy, even when they might otherwise have accepted them (Merkley and Stecula 2021; Nicholson). To the extent that elites are the main proponents of ameliorative reform, attempts at ameliorative analysis are likely to invoke resistance from people with anti-elite sentiments as well. Regardless of academics' and other elite langue users' actual motivations – non-elites perceive their very participation in a project, including ameliorative analysis, as politically charged (cf. Cramer 2014). And in light of increasing educational polarization, this dynamic may exacerbate elite/non-elite divides and culture-war politics. If so, then elite attempts to engage in a project of ameliorative analysis may make it *less likely* that people will adopt a reformed understanding of a concept.

Third, *threat resistance*. Many conceptual proposals involve not only moralizing a domain but also implicitly holding others accountable for how they use concepts and for how their behavior would be coded under a new conceptual understanding. For example, expanding the use of concepts like racism or terrorism may entail that individuals can be blamed in ways they might not have otherwise been blamed or may at least perceive they might be blamed in new ways. Most people value themselves as good citizens, so may be primed to perceive ameliorated concepts as a threat to a valued self-aspect. Seeing oneself as a target of blame or reactive attitudes by political opponents is strongly aversive, amplifying the prospects for antagonistic reactions (Cikara et al).

In this section, we've argued that ameliorative political projects are unlikely to meaningfully shift the conceptual terrain because they are either ineffective or superfluous to whatever ongoing social changes eventually prompted conceptual revisionism. We've also argued that ameliorative projects in political contexts can be counterproductive because when a proposal hails from a perceived opponent, people often react with antagonism. One of the conditions for success in conceptual engineering is concordance – fit with the speech of the group that is the target of conceptual change Koslow (2022, p. 94). But in political cases, conceptual engineering can be actively discordant. Not only do these proposed conceptual reforms fail to fit with the target group's speech, but these proposals also signal the conceptual engineers' opposition to the target groups they are addressing. In these political cases of ameliorative analysis, we should therefore expect backlash rather than successful uptake.

3. Concepts and Equality

Proponents of ameliorative analysis who purport to hold more egalitarian political views face an additional challenge. Conceptual engineering is an elite-driven phenomenon. Elites promote new conceptual understandings by insisting on specific definitions and usages for terms, often involving policing other people's speech and stigmatizing non-elites. For this reason, even if an attempt at ameliorative analysis were causally efficacious and even if it did not backfire, and even if attempts to engage in conceptual engineering were in the service of egalitarian political priorities, egalitarians would still have presumptive reasons to oppose the practice.

Our argument is simple. First, egalitarianism objects to differences in opportunity for influence over political outcomes among different groups of citizens. Second, ameliorative projects give elites greater opportunity for influence over politically meaningful conceptual change. So there is an egalitarian-based complaint with ameliorative projects.

The first premise is uncontroversial. Egalitarians hold that political institutions should promote an equal distribution of resources, opportunities, social status, income, political power, or well-being. Egalitarians disagree about how the value of equality weighs against other values, but they agree that public institutions should narrow hierarchies along some dimension. For this reason, social practices that consist of elites monitoring and controlling non-elites are presumptively inegalitarian to the extent that they entrench hierarchies that egalitarians oppose.

For the second premise: there is ample evidence that ameliorative analysis is an elite-driven phenomenon of this sort. In discussions of efficacy, conceptual engineers take for granted that politically successful ameliorative projects will be led by elites. Shifting concepts requires getting a "high-profile group" to accept the ameliorated t concept (Pinder 2021, p. 157). The key is not general uptake, but elite uptake. "We stand a realistic chance to realize social norms apt to induce conceptual changes under our actual conditions" even if only a few speakers are driving the change – so long as those speakers are "the right ones" (Nimtz 2021, p. 25).

One might object to premise 2 by denying that elites really have greater conceptual resources. Certainly elites have more influence in various ways, but could they really have concepts that non-elite speakers lack? Surprisingly, perhaps, there is some evidence that they do. For example, elites are more likely to be sensitive to nuanced differences in language and subtle linguistic and social cues that non-elites are more likely to miss. Consider, for example, empirical findings about the political effects of racial dog whistles. Some studies have found that only whites with college degrees respond to 'dog whistle' political messaging with increased racial animus.[5] Researchers' explanations for the elite/non-elite divide in sensitivity to dog whistles are somewhat speculative. But it's plausible that educational divide mirrors a further, conceptual divide. "The simple answer is that education imparts social and political knowledge that prepares people to better read the signals provided by political leaders and the mass media."[6]

Might this knowledge include specifically conceptual knowledge? As always, multiple interpretive frames are available. In any such case, communicative failure could result from differences in belief, or differences in conceptual possession. So see the idea, compare two ways of misunderstanding another's use of the concept <fish>. If one language speaker sees a whale and mistakenly identifies it as a fish, they might possess the modern scientific concept <fish> but merely not know, as a matter of fact, that the specific creature in question is a marine mammal. (Maybe it doesn't look big enough to them to be a whale, rather than a fish.) Alternatively, they may possess the old folk concept <fish> rather than the modern scientific concept <fish>. If, for example, you were to learn that the person making the error was on a sailing vessel in 1750, you might switch from assuming the first kind of error to assuming the second.

Analogously, the dog whistle caste might involve differences in belief, or differences in conceptual possession. Perhaps elite and non-elite speakers share the relevant concepts, but members of the latter group simply lack understanding of how educated speakers are using them in the relevant context. For example, maybe non-elite speakers *would* hear political ads criticizing health care expansion as a dog whistle for extending some special benefit to racial minorities, but simply lack the policy level beliefs to make the connection. Alternatively, however, non-elite speakers might not have the concepts to "map" the world in this way. That is, perhaps they listen to an advertisement saying new programs are "not for them," they wouldn't hear this as racialized even if they knew all the relevant facts. They may lack the concepts to foreground race at all, and instead hear this as suggesting exclusion categorized in some completely different way (wealth, status, geographic location, etc). For this reason, elite-driven attempts to discourage racial dog whistles in politics may inadvertently stigmatize non-elite speakers who repeat racialized political messaging but are unaware that their speech could be interpreted as racist.

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[5] Christopher Federico (2005) https://directory.cla.umn.edu/items/publication/304524.pdf . Even more puzzling, more recent work has found that only racially resentful white liberals are responsive to implicit racial appeals. (Wetts and Willer 2019).
[6] Federico, Lavine, and Johnston (2012)
https://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/10/the-unexpected-impact-of-coded-appeals/

Of course, many elites may assume that the public's understanding of racial dog whistles is universal.[7] This presumption is always tempting, given the shared nature of concepts generally. But it's not just a curious irony that those citizens most commonly thought to be the *most* intended recipients of such a messaging may, in fact, be *least* likely to understand it. Leveling morally serious charges against others on the assumption that they must use concepts in the same ways as elite speakers is, itself, fraught with moral risk. It could involve blaming citizens who are not only not liable to blame, but also systematically blaming others who lack conceptual resources available to elites, and so are already at a significant political disadvantage. In the toy example about misunderstanding <fish>, learning that another person is from a distant time shifts attention to the possibility that their conceptual map may differ from one's own. Likewise, we suggest, in the real life examples of misunderstanding political messaging, learning that person is inhabits a different social and linguistic community, that their community's traditions of interpretation differ significantly from others, that they lack linguistic and social contact with members of other groups, etc, should lead one to consider whether the misunderstanding might be due to a difference in concepts. And of course, the conditions just mentioned are just the ones created by political polarization. Let's call this hypothesis *conceptual polarization*: members of different political groups may lack sufficient shared interpretive ground in their political concepts to ensure communicative success across groups. They may have common political terms, but lack shared concepts. While we certainly can't claim there is something like conceptual polarization in the contemporary United States, we should be alert to this possibility – especially in issuing moral charges against political adversaries on either side of an issue.

Non-elite listeners may also lack the interpretive common ground to understand the broader context behind political messaging. Take, for example, dueling concepts of racism in contemporary America. While elite speakers may understand racism as power+prejudice, as a structural phenomenon that perpetuates disparate outcomes between racial groups, or as a set of internalized implicit attitudes that subtly shape people's opportunities, these specifications of the concept may be unfamiliar to non-elite listeners, who understand racism as an explicit, avowed, prejudicial attitude toward any racial group. These different conceptual understandings prevent speakers and listeners from progressing from a place of interpretive common ground. For example, consider conversations where non-elites say that affirmative action is racist, and elites respond that affirmative action cannot be racist because it benefits marginalized groups. In this example, each side insists on maintaining its own conception of racism, and this conceptual divide impedes efforts at persuasion and prevents people from establishing a shared understanding of the ethics of affirmative action.

So proponents of ameliorative projects cannot credibly claim to propose something that "simply reveals what we were all talking about all along" unless they understand the 'we' to be their fellow elite speakers. Whenever an ameliorative project is seemingly necessary, it is because there is not yet a social basis for conceptual convergence. And in cases where there is no social basis for conceptual convergence, ameliorative projects typically reflect elites' conceptual frameworks and not the non-elite folk concept.

Proponents of ameliorative analysis may balk at these accusations of elitism. Yet, at the same time, conceptual engineering is self-consciously a way of controlling a conversation and changing how people use language. That is, conceptual engineering assumes that the elites who are engaging in these projects are both entitled to define the conceptual terrain and to engage in social practices that would promote or enforce their definition of the conceptual terrain. In other words, conceptual engineering involves imposing an elitist view of how language *should* be used on people who are very likely to use it differently.

Another hazard of this elite/non-elite divide in how people define concepts is that conceptual disputes can mask substantive disagreement. To the extent that elites are successful in shifting the terms of a disagreement to verbal questions, they limit the conceptual terrain. In these cases, they may prompt people to comply with their preferred terminology, but this compliance prevents them from engaging with alternative views. Relatedly, the intentional policing of other people's vocabulary can make the language less precise. When elite speakers prefer to make linguistic corrections over engaging in a conversation about pragmatic questions, non-elite speakers may comply with these corrections without changing their minds about substantive questions. In these cases, the appearance of linguistic compliance can give the illusion of agreement when people are really talking past each

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[7] When this issue took center stage in the election of 2012, Chris Matthew told RNC chair Rince Priebus, "You know what game you're playing, and everybody knows what game you're playing: It's the race card." ("Who Racializes Welfare Reform?," 2012)

other (Deigan, 2022). There is some empirical reason to think this may be common, given the widespread aversion to political conflict in conversation (Chen & Rohla, 2018; Karpowitz et al., n.d.; Santoro & Broockman, 2022)**.**

The hazard of masked disagreement is especially worrisome because elite/non-elite conceptual divides are common for terms that are moralized and for terms that carry a lot of social meaning, which means that the imposition of elite linguistic norms on non-elite speakers can obscure substantive disagreements about class, hierarchy, and power in ways that prevent elites from understanding how more marginalized speakers see these issues. In the worst cases, this practice could amount to an imposition of a substantive theory of justice on people who disagree with that view of justice without engaging with any of their reasons for disagreement. Consider words like 'racism,' 'liberalism,' 'violence' or 'assault.' In these cases, arguing that a word should (or shouldn't) be used in a certain way can distract from arguments about what we should do or how we should treat each other.[8]

To see how this dynamic impedes understanding, a young, college-educated elite speaker, James, and a non-elite speaker, Betty, who has wisely opted not to spend the last decade of her life on the internet. One day, Betty describes the man who cleaned her gutters, Jose, as an illegal immigrant from Guatemala. James corrects Betty, pointing out that "no human is illegal." Betty, not wanting to get into a conversation with James about the legitimacy of immigration restrictions that she's sure will go nowhere, makes a mental note not to use the term "illegal immigrant" anymore. Later, Betty mentions that her hairdresser is a very nice transgender woman named Angeline. James replies that there's no need to call Angeline a transgender woman because trans women are women, and Betty should just call Angeline a woman. Again, Betty makes a mental note not to say 'transgender woman' anymore because she didn't go to college, but it sure seems to her that there is a difference between transgender women and the other women she knows.

In this example, James has secured Betty's linguistic compliance by correcting her, but James did not change Betty's conceptual understanding of immigrants or transgender women, nor did James make any progress in convincing Betty to support open borders or trans inclusivity. But James may experience the *illusion* of persuasion or concept-shifting if he no longer hears Betty say things like "illegal immigrant" or "transgender woman" in his company. And in light of this false belief, James may forego opportunities to understand Betty's views on immigration and trans-inclusivity, James will never be prompted to question or revise his own conceptual categories, and James will miss out on the opportunity to persuade Betty about his views or to be persuaded by Betty.

A related egalitarian worry about conceptual engineering is that the imposition of elitist linguistic norms serves to entrench elites' advantages. Conceptual engineers aim to shift social norms. Social norms shift through patterns of association and exclusion, praise and blame, and compliance and correction. When elites use these terms to promote elitist conceptual understandings, non-elites bear the burdens of exclusion, blame, and correction. Sometimes non-elites will respond by engineering their own concepts. Consider, for example, people's attempts to popularize the phrase "All lives matter" in response to the widespread adoption of "Black lives matter" in elite corporate and political circles. In at least some of these cases, "All lives matter" wasn't intended as an anti-Black statement or as a way of opposing BLM; it was meant as an expression of solidarity.[9] But like other non-elite linguistic transgressions, these attempts mark out the people who use language in these ways as non-elite, misinformed, clueless, subversive, or, worst of all—cringe. In these cases, non-elite speakers misunderstand the role that these phrases are playing in the discourse, and they are disadvantaged because of it. People who cannot master the subtleties of how language is used in elite spaces can be locked out of opportunities for professional advancement, managerial roles, or inclusion in elite organizations more generally.

These examples show that when the use of conceptual engineering advances a controversial political agenda without arguing for it, it can also be counterproductive to the egalitarian causes that so many conceptual engineers seek to advance. Elite-driven attempts to shape political language are often inegalitarian in various ways. First, elitist attempts at ameliorative analysis are only successful if they can effectively secure non-elite compliance. These elites' efforts to secure non-elites compliance may expose non-elites to threats of blame, exclusion, or

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[8] For example, partisans on opposing sides do largely agree – in principle – about the wrongness of sexual assault and sexual misconduct, even if they are more inclined to inflict punishment on their opponents (Craig & Cossette, 2022).

[9] In one publicized case, a student invoked "All Lives Matter" as a way of ironically criticizing the slogan (Al-Arshani, 2022, p. al)

correction, which only further entrenches the disadvantages that non-elites already face. At the same time, elites cannot tell if the people who comply with their proposed linguistic reforms do so because they changed their conceptual understanding or if they comply to avoid future blame, exclusion, or correction. For this reason, attempts at conceptual engineering often obscure more than they illuminate because they shift the terms of moral and political disputes away from discussions about substantive disagreement towards discussions of linguistic disagreements, where elites may have advantages at controlling the conversation but where they miss out on information about ethics and politics that could be relevant to their cause.

4. Objection: Ceding the Field?

Taking stock, we've argued that ameliorative projects in politics are unlikely to effectively advance the political projects of the conceptual engineers who undertake these projects because they will either fail to secure uptake in revising the folk concepts that people are using or, if people do revise their conceptual frameworks, the linguistic reform is likely to be a consequence of political change rather than a cause of it. At the same time, ameliorative projects have other drawbacks. Specifically, ameliorative projects can provoke a backlash from people who are resistant to conceptual engineers' political goals, and they can also unfairly burden and stigmatize non-elite speakers.

In their defense, proponents of ameliorative political projects might reply that we are too quick to reject the potential of conceptual engineering as a tool for social change. They might cite, for example, the way that 19th-century English social reforms advocated for a reconceptualization of rape. Before the 19th century, legal authorities had a concept of rape that excluded the conceptual possibility of a woman being raped by her husband. Prior to social reform, the concept of rape was shaped by elites (men), and it reflected their ideological commitment to patriarchy. Marital rape was conceptually impossible because the wrong of rape was viewed more like a property violation than as a violation of women's bodily rights. And since husbands were generally viewed as having a property-like entitlement to their wives' bodies, forced sex in the context of marriage was not viewed as a morally serious violation. Securing rights against rape for married women, therefore, required a shift in the elites' conceptual understanding of rape.

In light of examples like these, proponents of ameliorative political projects may then argue that to disavow or discourage conceptual engineering is to cede the conceptual field to elite perpetrators of injustice, thereby preventing disadvantaged populations from challenging patterns of language that effectively facilitate their own oppression. So let's grant, for the sake of argument, that it's possible that ameliorative political projects could play an important role in social reform. Still, to justify the practice, one would need to show both that conceptual engineering is at least sometimes necessary for social reform and to show that conceptual engineering, if effective, is more likely to advance positive social reform than to set it back. On both counts, proponents of ameliorative political projects have little reason to think that these conditions will be met, even if we grant that conceptual engineering sometimes has an independent causal effect in politics.

Returning to the example of marital rape, even if we grant that conceptual reforms to the dominant understanding of rape were instrumental in prompting people to recognize married women's rights against sexual assault by their husbands, it doesn't follow that the conceptual reforms were necessary. After all, people adopted many other social reforms during the same period without revising any of the relevant concepts. For example, during the nineteenth century, married women were also not permitted to own property under the doctrine of coverture. Social reformers advocated against this practice by raising awareness of the harmful effects of coverture for widowed mothers and by appealing to men's interests in having the option to transfer property to their wives to avoid debt collection and bankruptcy. Coverture ended without any reconceptualization of property rights, marriage, or women. Rather, it happened through the ordinary work of political persuasion and appeals to stakeholders' self-interest. Given that the doctrine of coverture and the view that men could permissibly rape their wives were two practices that arose from the same patriarchal institutions, this example demonstrates that even if social reformers ended legal marital rape in part through a project of conceptual engineering, they could have effectively reformed rape law without advocating for a change in the language. For example, in an alternative historical timeline, reformers could have maintained the nineteenth-century folk concept of rape that referred only to sexual assaults that occurred outside of marriages while defining a new category of wrongdoing to capture sexual assault by husbands.

And even if proponents of ameliorative political projects could establish that conceptual engineering was necessary and effective, there's no reason to think that the tools of conceptual engineering are especially well-suited

to promoting justice, egalitarianism, or leftist causes. Non-egalitarian elites are equally as capable of advancing their own proposals for conceptual reforms, which have all the egalitarian drawbacks of conceptual engineering more general and which also, if successful, would undermine egalitarian justice or leftist causes.

Returning to the example of "Black Lives Matter," consider the popularization of 'Blue Lives Matter" as a response. To an outsider, the phrase Black Lives Matter sounds obvious and uncontroversial. But to someone familiar with how policymakers and activists have used the phrase, Black Lives Matter represents a controversial political movement and an organization. As a political movement, Black Lives Matter has called for public officials to reduce police funding or disband police departments entirely. Whatever the merits of these policies, they clearly entail more than the bland affirmation that Black Lives Matter. In response, the "Blue Lives Matter" movement aims to appropriate the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter to directly oppose Black Lives Matter's views on policing, but policymakers and activists who state this phrase also rarely explicitly argue for their pro-police positions.

Here the issue is that if egalitarian or more leftist elites can use conceptual engineering to advance their political agenda, elites on the right can use the same tools to advance their agenda as well. Unlike the people who say "All Lives Matter," the people who say "Blue Lives Matter" are not naively attempting to affirm their support for lives mattering. Rather, the Blue Lives Matter movement is also an elite-driven counter-point to progressive politicians' and activists' attempts to reform policing. These examples are drawn from the norms that are common in leftist circles because, due to educational polarization, educational elites are increasingly committed to a leftist political agenda. But elites on the right and in the libertarian wherever pull the same tricks. For example, if a conservative says, "marriage is a union of a man and a woman," they aren't saying that it's conceptually impossible for a marriage to not be heterosexual; they are saying that they don't think that gay people should be permitted to legally marry. When libertarians say "taxation is theft," they are not advancing a neutral definition of what taxes are; they are making the substantive moral claim that public officials are not entitled to take people's property.

Another example. People in more progressive circles sometimes say, "Women's Rights are Human Rights" in an attempt to emphasize that abortion access is a morally urgent political cause. To a non-elite listener, this statement sounds uncontroversial, but it also is unlikely to change how they understand the abortion debate because they lack the background conceptual understanding of "women's rights" that the slogan references. Elite listeners who oppose abortion rights are likely to pick up on this controversial conceptual specification of women's rights but will reject it. Anti-abortion elites also engage in their own attempts at conceptual engineering when they say things like "Life begins at conception." Here again, someone who is not steeped n the abortion debate may hear the statement as uncontroversial. At the same time, elite listeners who support abortion rights will understand that "Life" in this slogan refers to a property that confers moral status on a benign, but they will reject that conceptual framework.

A final worry about conceptual engineering for the sake of egalitarian political projects is that even if it is successful, and even if it is more successful than inegalitarian efforts at conceptual engineering, there are no guarantees that egalitarian attempts at conceptual engineering will then advance egalitarian causes. For example, consider how some conceptual reformers today argue that changing the folk concept of 'disability' to not connotate a bad bodily difference but rather to connote a mere bodily difference is important for securing disability justice. The 'bad difference' conception of disability, they argue, perpetuates the idea that there is something inferior about disabled people; it suggests that disability is something that people have reason to avoid, and the bad difference conception of disability fails to make sense of disability pride movements. On the other hand, adopting a mere different view of disability comes with risks to disabled people. If a disability is merely a difference in how people's bodies can be, then this conceptual shift in the folk understanding of disability could undermine political support for providing benefits for people with disabilities.

Similarly, other conceptual reformers advocate for a conception of racism wherein racism is a property of discrete actions or inactions or a property of structures that create institutional disparities. Ibrham X Kendi is a proponent of this position, for example. In this view, a person can be racist simply by failing to challenge institutions and practices that cause disparities between racial groups. Say that this ameliorative project was successful in changing the folk concept of racism. It would not necessarily advance the cause of antiracism. Rather, as critics of Kendi's ameliorative project note, it might make people more complacent about racism by making it seemingly impossible for an individual to avoid racism.

Return to the concept of rape. Some sexual assault prevention advocates argue that the folk concept of rape, or sexual assault, is overly narrow. Instead, they argue that the concept should include all unwanted sexual advances or sexual contact and any sex with a person who lacks decisional capacity. However, critics of this conceptual shift argue that expanding the folk concepts of rape and sexual assault could diminish popular conceptions of rape as an especially egregious crime.

In light of these considerations, *even if* an ameliorative project successfully changed a folk concept, proponents of ameliorative analysis may not be happy with the social consequences of their proposed conceptual shifts. Even if people change the ways they use words and think about concepts like rape, disability, or racism, these conceptual shifts could ironically fail to advance the causes that conceptual engineers intend.

5. Plain Language Politics

We have argued that, like other efforts at language policing, the use of conceptual engineering in political language empowers elite speakers to police other people's language in ways that can unfairly burden and stigmatize non-elite speakers. Ironically, this practice is so common in communities that claim to value restorative justice, egalitarianism, and forgiveness. In light of their stated values, egalitarians who use political language should avoid definitions and stipulative slogans that insinuate that people who disagree are either uninformed or immoral. Instead, an important precondition for genuine political equality is to reject the kinds of political language that proponents of ameliorative analysis so commonly promote.

In this section, we present an alternative to conceptual engineering in politic**s**, which is a more inclusive, egalitarian, and tolerant approach to political language. In "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell pointed out a similar problem with how people spoke and wrote about politics. Orwell complained that political language "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Orwell's complaint focused on people who used language to obfuscate the truth of their moral and political positions instead of using language to clearly and straightforwardly argue for their preferred conclusions. Orwell attributes this defect partly to underlying conceptual confusion in the political culture, which he views as a cause and consequence of obfuscatory political language. Orwell writes,

> "A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts."

To remedy this defect, Orwell encouraged people to write as clearly as possible and to resist the temptation to repeat political slogans or to use trendy but pretentious jargon.

At the same time, it might be difficult for elites who aim for clarity in their political language to recognize the myriad ways that their conceptual categories are shaped by their elite position. For example, in the introduction of Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Donaldo Macedo identifies how calls for clarity can themselves be a tool of elite-driven political language. Macedo writes,

> "I am often amazed to hear academics complain about the complexity of a particular discourse because of its alleged lack of clarity. It is as if they have assumed that there is a mono-discourse that is characterized by its clarity and is also equally available to all. If one begins to probe the issue of clarity, we soon realize that it is class specific, thus favoring those of that class in the meaning-making process.

Here Macedo is responding to people who claim that critical theory is unclear in the way it uses Marxist jargon like "subordination" and "praxis." As Macedo points out, the very same elites who are critical of Marxist jargon rarely object to the jargon that is endemic within their elite circles. Elites have no problem understanding euphemistic terms like "collateral damage" or "ethnic cleansing" but claim to be distracted or confused by language that challenges their ideology and language that fails to define the conceptual field in a way that legitimates their own advantages.

Macedo's point is a necessary intervention against elitist ameliorative projects. At the same time, a proponent of clarity in political language may take Macedo's claims about elite hypocrisy on board while also rejecting Macedo's endorsement of Marxist jargon. The solution to a lack of conceptual common ground in politics is not for elites and non-elites to extend the class conflict to the realm of political language until non-elites reclaim the linguistic terrain. Rather, a more fruitful path to linguistic common ground is for both elites and non-elites to find shared terms for political debate.

The challenge, then, is for proponents of clearer political language to take care to ensure that calls for clarity do not amount to the same project of political language policing as the conceptual engineers we've argued against. To see the way forward, we must first identify the problem for what it is. Consider the political language of our time. Many of our fellow elite speakers say things like "science is real," "healthcare is a human right," or "love is love" In a sense, these statements are just assertions about the definitions of words. But each statement represents a use of language that is, in a different sense, strategic and controversial. People who say "science is real" mean that they oppose fossil fuel pipelines out of concerns about climate change. When they say "healthcare is a human right," they mean that they think that public officials should establish a single-payer healthcare system. When they say "love is love," they are not asserting that a single concept <love> is reflexive. The slogan makes no sense except as proposing a new concept. A first, ameliorated concept <love> is identified with a second, more globally accepted folk concept <love>, so as to suggest that anyone who accepts the folk version should accept the ameliorated proposal as well. In plain language, they mean that they think that the government should force religious bakers to cater gay weddings. Likewise, someone who says "life is sacred" means that they think the government should use force to deny people access to abortion.

Calling attention to the advocacy behind these political slogans reveals a kind of recipe for translating proposed ameliorated concepts into terms that are more accessible – or what we're calling "plain language." There are four steps:

(1) Identify the contested concept.
(2) Discharge the contested concept.
(3) Replace the contested concept with its most linguistically neutral constituent components.
(4) Attach moral judgments to propositions through explicit moral predicates.

Step (1) is to identify the contested concept. A concept is contested when we have reason to suspect that the ameliorated proposal for the concept sufficiently changes the meaning as to create a separate concept from the folk version otherwise in use, or at least otherwise in use among some quarters of the political community. Step (2) is to remove the contested concept, at least in contexts where one is trying to communicate across a conceptual divide. Step (3) involves locating a language to express the conceptual claim that aims at communicative success. Communicative success is more likely when the concepts involved in making a claim are not, themselves, a locus of controversy. Call these the "linguistically neutral" constituents of a concept. They are linguistically neutral in the sense that those on both sides of the political or moral dispute will readily agree to their meaning. This may involve finding simpler concepts, or more determinate policy level proposals, or explicitly separating claims that might otherwise be conflated. Exactly how to find this language is a further issue, but our proposal here draws on analogous suggestions for disentangling substantive from verbal disputes (cf. Chalmers 2011). Finally, step (4) involves clarifying one's moral attitude toward some proposition by stating it directly, rather than using "think" moral concepts that mesh together empirical description and normative valence.

In response to our examples above, some readers might miss our point about language by defending the specific policies included in these examples. We are not criticizing any of these political claims. Rather, we are criticizing the practice of advancing a controversial political view by asserting a definition or by defining a term in a particular way. Instead of these slogans, people could say whatever policy position they are advocating for without also advocating for an additional reform to the language we use to talk about policy. So, following up on the earlier examples, instead of saying 'Black Lives Matter," someone could state that they object to how policing is practiced in America. Instead of saying "Blue Lives Matter," someone could state their opposition to Black Lives Matter. People who say 'racism is power plus prejudice' might as well say that they think that discrimination against straight white men is not problematic. People who say "trans women are women" should instead directly say that they think that public officials should include trans women in any organization, facility, or competition that includes cis women. People who say that 'no human is illegal' could instead say that policies designating unauthorized migrants

as criminals are unjust. People who say that 'women's rights are human rights" should instead say that abortion merits legal protections. People who say "life begins at conception" should say that they think abortion access should be restricted because early fetuses have moral status.

Why don't people directly say what they think? Why do they instead shift the terms of debates to conceptual questions, inviting verbal dispute while avoiding the real issues at stake? We suspect a variety of factors conspire against plain language. First, resolving substantive disagreement through stipulated conceptual truth offers a way of parrying controversy. Given that people find political disagreements aversive, conceptual claims present a safer way of navigate possible differences in identity (Dias & Lelkes, n.d.; Klar et al., 2018). Second, conceptual frames signal political identity, which dramatically outpaces the importance of argument or ideology in determining putative issue positions (Barber & Pope, 2019; Claassen et al., 2021; Gerber et al., 2010; Martherus et al., 2021). Third, conceptual claims carry a patina of objectivity, since they do not explicitly assert any empirical claims. Conceptual proposals thereby promise to maintain the pretense of intellectual deference while subverting any real possibility for encountering opposition to one's favored view. For partisans who prize intellectualism and exhibit strong directional reasoning, conceptual arguments promise the perfect combination of bias-protection and identity preservation (cf. Barker et al., 2022). Fourth, conceptual arguments afford the satisfying opportunity to act as if one's opponents have simply misunderstood the terms of argument, in effect gaslighting those who happen to use concepts differently (Beerbohm & Davis, n.d.). In sum, while these considerations are conjectural, we anticipate that there are several factors that make conceptual proposals politically and psychologically appealing, especially in an elite driven, highly polarized political environment. We note also that none of these explanations requires positing that conceptual reforms are particularly apt to achieve political success. Indeed, to think of partisans as aiming at achieving a policy-level agenda is already to misunderstand the phenomenon (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022).

The linguistic innovation of ameliorative analysis invites many of the problems with political language Orwell warned against. Orwell wrote that "the great enemy of clear language is insincerity." When people on both sides of the political aisle use the tools of conceptual engineering to gaslight people who disagree about public policy into thinking that they just don't understand the relevant concepts, they are insincerely asserting that the conceptual terrain and the language we use to describe it necessarily supports their politics. We use the term gaslighting here deliberately. Proponents of ameliorative analysis aim to raise doubts about their interlocutor's ability to use language competently by making it seem like she misunderstands a concept when instead, she really disagrees about which words to use to describe something.

6. Conclusion

Proponents of ameliorative projects in politics implicitly and sometimes explicitly assume that they can effectively reform folk concepts in ways that will advance their political aims. Often, these political aims are egalitarian. We've argued that ameliorative projects are unlikely to effectively change folk concepts, but they could have other bad effects, including inegalitarian effects. And even if ameliorative projects are successful, proponents of these projects cannot rest assured that their proposed conceptual reforms will, in fact, advance their political agendas. For all these reasons, the benefits of conceptual engineering in politics are not worth the moral risks involved. Instead, we propose an approach to political language that prompts people to explicitly state what they are arguing for and then to straightforwardly grapple with disagreement. This approach is more likely to effectively persuade people because it doesn't require them to change their minds about concepts and language in addition to changing their minds about ethics and public policy. This approach is also a less morally risky way to achieve egalitarian political benefits because it does not require non-elite speakers to adopt elitist linguistic norms, nor does it gaslight non-elite speakers into thinking that they are not competent users of their language when they talk about politics.

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