

Amelioration vs. perversion

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Words change meaning, usually in unpredictable ways. But some words' meanings are revised intentionally. Revisionary projects are normally put forward in the service of some purpose – some serve specific goals of inquiry, and others serve ethical, political or social aims. Revisionist projects can ameliorate meanings, but they can also pervert. In this paper, I want to: (i) draw attention to the dangers of meaning perversions; (ii) argue that the self-declared goodness of a revisionist project doesn't suffice to put forward a viable new meaning. I'll briefly consider whether power or authority play a role in viable revisions; (iii) show that the self-declared goodness of a revisionist project doesn't suffice to avoid meaning perversions. The road to Hell, or to horrors on Earth, is paved with good intentions. (iv) I will then point to problems for ameliorative conceptual engineering projects. Finally and more importantly, (v), I want to demarcate what meaning perversions are, and offer a working hypothesis about how they contribute to “destroy facts of shared reality”. I will consider how dogwhistles and code words contribute to corrode social norms, and what lessons we can draw for meaning perversions more generally from these cases.