

# Liberal Democracy and Epistemic Neutrality<sup>#</sup>

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## 1. Epistemic Neutrality

It will have escaped notice of no one that liberal democracies in the western world feature fiercely debated disagreements over vital matters of fact. Celebrated recent examples include the clashes over the existence and causes of climate change, the disputes between supporters of intelligent design or creationism on the one hand, and Darwinian evolution on the other. Another well-known example is the argument over the existence of weapons of mass destruction and links to Islamic terrorist networks in pre-war Iraq. At a lesser but still important level, people argue about the benefits of complementary and alternative medicine, the possible health hazards of GM-crops, possible danger of electro-magnetic radiation from mobile phones, possible links between certain vaccination programs and certain mental disorders, or which diets will cause weight-losses, and many, many other factual issues that matters for the way we conduct our daily life.<sup>1</sup>

Disagreements over factual matters come in many varieties, of course. In some cases the disagreements are entirely intra-scientific, in other cases the disagreement is between the scientific establishment - the experts - and smaller or larger parts of the population. In some conflicts, each of the opposing views count a substantial number of supporters, whereas in cases such as Holocaust-denial, the minority view counts as supporters only a tiny fraction of the population. Some cases of factual disagreement feature sensible proponents on each side, whereas other disagreements are better described as crazy attacks on common sense. There are disagreements whose mere existence are abhorrent, and indeed the rift over the nature and magnitude of the Holocaust is one, as are various conspiracy theories that have evolved in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Very often, of course, factual disagreements are tightly interwoven with political, ideological or religious controversies. Consider for example the genocide of the Armenian population in Turkey, the existence of which is

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<sup>#</sup> Thanks to John Lyne, Stephen Turner, Thomas Brudholm and Lars Binderup for comments to this material at various stages.

<sup>1</sup> An amusing opinionated guide is provided by (Taverne 2005)

vehemently denied by successive Turkish governments. Often, in such cases, one can rightly suspect that ideology and politics comes before the facts: factual propositions are denied or asserted, not for epistemic reasons, but for political, religious or ideological reasons. In these cases epistemic and non-epistemic elements of factual disagreement are not easily disentangled. Yet, this doesn't show there is no conceptual distinction between the epistemic and non-epistemic ingredients of even such disagreements.

In this essay I want to ignore most of these otherwise interesting features of factual disagreements and focus on a question which is partly epistemological and partly within the domain of political philosophy: what stance should liberal democracy adopt to factual disagreements about vital matters, such as those referred to above? Should liberal democracy somehow be neutral in such conflicts? After all, liberal democracy aims to be neutral in an important range of disagreements of value? Consider for example the controversy between supporters of creation and evolution. Are each of these views entitled to 'a balanced treatment', as supporters of intelligent design sometimes claim? Or is the liberal democracy entitled or even obliged to choose sides?

I will discuss this question in terms of what I call *epistemic neutrality*. Epistemic neutrality is some sort of neutral attitude towards conflicting views of the facts; say between the view that evolutionary theory is largely correct and the views of proponents of intelligent design. Roughly, to be epistemically neutral between these two views is to adopt some sort of attitude by which one loosely imply both views to somehow equally valid, as having the same merit, that they should be accorded the same attention and space in public discussion, or should enter into our practical deliberation with the same weight. Below, I shall say much more about what epistemic neutrality can consist in.

The aim of this essay is to offer the beginnings of a systematic discussion of epistemic neutrality. The general question before us is whether the liberal state is obliged to neutrality in factual questions, given the deep commitment to neutrality on other parts of citizen's worldviews? The remainder of section 1 offers some remarks to place the issue of epistemic neutrality within the wider territory of liberal democracy. Section 2 offers a more detailed analysis of the forms that epistemic neutrality can take. Section 3 address the question: Should the liberal democracy adopt epistemic neutrality in some of these very crucial factual disagreements, just as liberal democracy favors neutrality with respect to views of the good? I shall argue that this is not so, or at least sketch the outline of a position that deny epistemic neutrality in favour of what I call scientific non-neutrality, though the issue is surprisingly difficult and impossible to settle within a paper of this length. Section 4 ends the essay with a few concluding remark and wider implications.

Why is epistemic neutrality relevant for liberal democracy? A crucial feature of liberal democracy is its emphasis on various *cognitive freedoms*, as we might call them. These includes freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry, freedom to criticize, ridicule, promote or defend whatever view one wishes, and to distribute (almost) whatever information one likes. There are well-known

reasonable limitations to these freedoms, say in the form of legal restrictions against hate-speech, but that need not detain us here. Experience shows that in part because of the cognitive freedoms, liberal democracies will embody a plurality of different views and opinions, and this includes disagreements that even concern very fundamental factual issues. The diversity of doctrines, as Rawls says, is not a mere passing feature of liberal democracy, and though what Rawls had in mind with this remarks was mostly disagreements about normative, religious and metaphysical issues, it is no less true regarding (other) factual questions.<sup>2</sup>

A second feature of liberal democracy is a distinctive division of cognitive and deliberative labor. Very roughly, different kinds decision procedures are applied to questions of facts, questions of basic rights, to political questions, and finally to questions of individual values.<sup>3</sup>

Observation or some other forms of truth-conducive inquiry decide facts. When the facts are plain, there is no reason to defer to experts. When, as is very often the case, the facts are not readily accessible, the task of establishing the facts is deferred to experts. Though liberal democracy considers parliamentary decision, as, in a sense, the highest authority, questions of facts are nonetheless never appropriately decided by majority vote in parliament, or by political negotiations. Neither are questions of fact left to individual value judgements, though of course everyone is entitled to his or her own view of the facts. There is a rationale behind this, of course. Truth matters for practical deliberation, hence we want to rely on the most reliable methods for acquiring true belief about factual matters. Parliamentary discussion or majority vote is not such a method.<sup>4</sup>

Some questions are treated as factual questions, though they may not really be. This concerns questions of basic rights. These are treated by providing a constitution, the content of which is not negotiable by ordinary parliamentary processes, and by delegating the competence to decide matters of interpretation to a the courts which are outside parliamentary control.

Political questions, on the other hand, concerns a range of non-factual issues, issues concerning what the state or society at large should do: they concern what aims we should have, or what policies or laws we should adopt, rather than what the facts are. A defining feature of liberal democracies is that political questions are ultimately decided by some sort of voting procedure, be it direct or indirect, possibly preceded by attempts to seek compromises or forge coalitions, or by some element of rational discussion. The rationale

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<sup>2</sup> See (Rawls 1993), p. ???

<sup>3</sup> This largely follows the account set out in (Turner 2003), especially Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> In some cases voting procedures may be very reliable, such as made clear in Condorcet's theorem (insert references). But the main point remains: when interested in a factual matter, we want decision procedures that are reliable. In certain cases, voting procedures may be very reliable, and in those cases, and for that reason we should employ them.

behind these decision procedures is generally egalitarian, not epistemological: it is a decision procedure that can be said to give each citizen equal power, an equal say, or pay each equal respect. Justice, not truth, is the prime virtue of democratic decision procedures.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in liberal democracies, an important space is left for a range of questions that are neither apt for political decision nor for delegation to experts, but where a neutral stance is appropriate. We can refer to this range of questions as individual value questions, and leave it open exactly what this includes. At least it includes a vast range of life style decisions, as well as many questions of political observation and religious confession. Many liberals would include some questions of sexual orientation, and a range of moral issues, say questions of permissibility of abortion and euthanasia. A defining feature of liberal democracy is that the state remains neutral on these questions of individual values. I shall refer to this as *value neutrality*. Any liberal democrat thinks that we should adopt value neutrality, though commentators differ rather widely on the scope and justification of value neutrality.

The picture drawn is formal in the sense that it largely refrains from specifying what domains of questions are properly treated as factual, political, or as belonging to the realm of individual values. To do so would be beyond the scope of this paper, and moreover, there is hardly any non-controversial way of doing so. It is nonetheless a distinctive feature of liberal democracy that some version of this scheme of division of cognitive and deliberative labour (as we might say) is operative, though different liberal democracies, and different liberal thinkers, may want to draw the boundaries between the various domains differently.

The relation of all this to epistemic neutrality is this. We disagree about certain value questions. In liberal democracy this problem is partly solved by the principle of value neutrality, within the framework of a set of basic rights. We disagree about political aims, and this problem is solved by parliamentary deliberation, including political compromise and majority voting. Ideally, knowledge of the facts should aid both individual and parliamentary deliberation. This would work fine if there were no serious disagreement about factual questions. Yet, there clearly is. The state may base its political decisions on factual views that are rejected by individuals affected by those decisions. Experts may disagree about factual matters, or they may disagree with parts of the population, and when this is so, it is not trivial which views of the facts should be assumed in parliamentary deliberation. Once we realise that we disagree about important factual matters, we can raise the question of epistemic neutrality. Should the liberal state extend the neutral attitude to cover at least some factual disagreements? Epistemic neutrality is, after all, very similar to value neutrality. Hence, for liberal democrats the question arises: why not epistemic neutrality? If not, why not?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rawls remark in (Rawls 1972), the opening page.

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that religious differences may well concern disagreement over factual beliefs, or at least this will be what many believers

In itself it is interesting that, in the vast literature on liberal democracy, the question of epistemic neutrality has never been analyzed in much detail. Yet, in recent literature on the nature and problems of expertise, allusions have often been made various questions that include the problem of epistemic neutrality. For example, in his very stimulating book *Liberal Democracy 3.0*, Stephen Turner in effect identifies the question of epistemic neutrality as a basic challenges faced by liberal democracy because of its dependence expertise:

If the liberal state is supposed to be neutral with respect to opinions, that is to say it neither promotes nor gives special regard to any particular belief, world view, sectarian positions, and so on, what about expert opinion? Do they enjoy a special status that these things lack?<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the present account of the question of epistemic neutrality is much influenced by Turner's book. Several other recent publication air the question of epistemic neutrality or sufficiently similar questions. In a recent volume on the philosophy of expertise, the editors Selinger and Crease write of a fundamental tension between democracy and the dependence of expertise:

The fundamental tension can be posed most simply as follows: Democracy depends not only on an educated citizenry, but also on educated decision making in the myriad judgements that have to be made on the day-to-day operations of government. The United States and other countries attempt to accomplish this in a practical way by incorporating experts into governmental operations through their participation in various agencies, regulatory and review panels, committees, and advisory capacities. Yet the authority so conferred on experts seems to collide with the democratic and antielitist urge to accord equality to all opinions; it also risks elitism, ideology, and partisanship sneaking in under the guise of value-neutral expertise.<sup>8</sup>

Note that Selinger and Crease refer the 'democratic and antielitist urge to accord equality to all opinions', which suggest that the problem is not just that of finding a legitimate place for expert opinions within the framework of liberal democracy, but the wider problem of how to accord equality to all opinions within that framework.

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will assume. Similarly, it is a well-known and entirely respectable position in meta-ethics that moral views are essentially factual beliefs that may be true or false, just as beliefs about the causes of climate change are. On this assumption, many if not all disagreement over value question will be special cases of factual disagreements. Nonetheless, I shall for the most part set aside neutrality with respect to moral and religious views, as well as the related issues of neutrality regarding matters of taste and aesthetic judgements, and discuss only disagreements concerning uncontroversially factual questions outside the domains of ethics, aesthetics and religion.

<sup>7</sup> (Turner 2003), p. 19

<sup>8</sup> (Selinger and Crease 2006), p. 3

Though the problem of epistemic neutrality is identified in various recent writings, even if not under that heading, it has to the best of my knowledge never been systematically discussed in ethics, political philosophy or epistemology.<sup>9</sup> Yet, there is no question that, at least outside the circles of academic philosophy, various forms of epistemic neutrality are frequently endorsed while appealing to the ideals of liberal democracy. For example, Charles Seife, Professor of Journalism at New York University, writes this on a web site dedicated to various debates over science and science politics:

In fact, science clashes with the democratic ideal. Though it is meritocratic, it is practiced in the elite and effete world of academe, leaving the vast majority of citizens unable to contribute to it in any meaningful way. Science is about freedom of thought, yet at the same time it imposes a tyranny of ideas.

In a democracy, ideas are protected. It's the sacred right of a citizen to hold — and to disseminate — beliefs that the majority disagrees with, ideas that are abhorrent, ideas that are wrong. However, scientists are not free to be completely open minded; a scientist stops becoming a scientist if he clings to discredited notions. The basic scientific urge to falsify, to disprove, to discredit ideas clashes with the democratic drive to tolerate and protect them.

This is why even those politicians who accept evolution will never attack those politicians who don't; at least publicly, they cast evolutionary theory as a mere personal belief. Attempting to squelch creationism smacks of elitism and intolerance — it would be political suicide. Yet this is exactly what biologists are compelled to do; they exorcise falsehoods and drive them from the realm of public discourse.<sup>10</sup>

The crucial point is that Seife holds the ideal of democracy to include a particular form of epistemic neutrality. As Seife says, science 'imposes a tyranny if ideas', implicating that this tyranny is at bottom incompatible with ideal of democracy.

Another plea for epistemic neutrality might be found in the controversy recounted by Paul Boghossian in his recent book *Fear of Knowledge*. Here Boghossian recounts a conflict between two views about the origins of the native American population:<sup>11</sup>

According to the standard, extensively confirmed archeological account, humans first entered the Americas from Asia, crossing the Bering Strait some 10,000 years ago. By contrast, some Native American creation myths hold that native peoples have lived in the Americas ever since their ancestors first emerged onto the surface of the earth from a subterranean world of the spirits. As Sebastian LeBeau, an official Cheyenne River Sioux, a Lakota tribe based in Eagle Butte, S.D., put it:

We know where we came from. We are the descendants of the Buffalo people. They came from inside the earth after supernatural spirits prepared this world for humankind to live here. If non-Indians choose to believe they

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<sup>9</sup> In itself, it is worth asking why, in the vast literature on liberal democracy, hardly any attention has been devoted to this issue.

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008 from [http://www.edge.org/q2008/q08\\_3.html](http://www.edge.org/q2008/q08_3.html)

<sup>11</sup> (Boghossian 2006), p. 1 ff.

evolved from an ape, so be it. I have yet to come across five Lakotas who believe in science and evolution.

What is equally interesting is a common reaction to such conflicts that Boghossian notes:

Roger Anyon, a British archeologist who has worked for the Zuni people, was quoted as saying:

Science is just one of many ways of knowing the world [The Zunis' world view is] just as valid as the archeological viewpoint of what prehistory is about.

Here Anyon seems to be saying that two views, one of which is based on extensive scientific evidence and the other not, somehow have an equal standing, or an equal right to be heard. This can clearly be seen as an appeal to epistemic neutrality.

Boghossian's stimulating discussion of these issues concerns various forms of relativism and constructivism, holding that the truth or validity of claims about prehistory somehow depends on, say, the cultural norms of those making the claims. Clearly, relativism and constructivism of these sorts might one way to motivate certain forms of epistemic neutrality. But, as I hope will become clear below, one can at least attempt to motivate epistemic neutrality in other ways not dependent on relativism or constructivism, which remains highly controversial views. In fact, my impression (which I will not try to substantiate here) of the bitter exchange known as *The Science Wars* is that much of it didn't concern relativism or constructivism about truth or knowledge, as these views are understood by academic philosophers specializing these areas. Rather, a main impetus was a sense that all views, or at least not just view based on conventional empirical science, have some sort of equal right to be heard, or to be taken seriously, or to be regarded as true or properly justified. Science has no right to a privileged status. If this is right, the debate was in part fuelled by a disagreement about the proper scope of epistemic neutrality, which was in turn motivated by certain democratic ideals.

Someone who cannot be accused of adopting relativism about truth or knowledge is Henry M. Morris, who has been called the founder of modern twentieth century "creation science". He argues for what is called a 'Balanced-Treatment approach', according to which evolution and creation should 'both be taught in the schools and other public institutions our country, and that this should be done on an equal-time, equal-emphasis basis, in so far as possible'.<sup>12</sup> As Morris goes on to say, 'This is obviously the only equitable and fair approach, the only one consistent with American principles or religious freedom, civil rights, freedom of information, scientific objectivity, academic freedom, and constitutionality.'<sup>13</sup> What Morris calls a balanced-treatment

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<sup>12</sup> Quoting from (Scott 2005), p. 212. Scott reprints an excerpt from Morris, Henry M. 1975, *Impact* 26, August, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> (Scott 2005), p. 212.

approach is nothing less than one form of epistemic neutrality, as I shall explain more fully later.

Morris hints at several quite different considerations that might mandate this kind of epistemic neutrality, among them the issue of constitutionality and religious freedom. However, as several Supreme Court rulings have shown, there is no reason to think that the appeal to constitutionality and religious freedom favor of the sort of balanced treatment demanded by Morris; indeed the Supreme Court has several times ruled *against* balanced treatment legislation adopted by individual states exactly on the ground that ‘creation science’ is clearly religiously motivated, which makes a balanced treatment approach thus motivated conflict with First Amendment principles.

The fact remains, however, that the balanced treatment approach looks intuitively appealing. And it seems uncertain that legislations based *solely* on the alleged fairness of balanced treatment principles, and not on religious motivations, would have been struck down by the Supreme Court.

There are, then, strident proponents of epistemic neutrality. Note that epistemic neutrality is not merely a question of freedom of speech, freedom of inquiry, or free exchange of information. Indeed, these basic cognitive freedoms constitute one form of epistemic neutrality, though a rather minimal one, as I shall elaborate below. Everyone agrees that the cognitive freedoms should be secured, but the question is whether other more demanding forms of epistemic neutrality are also required.

Epistemic neutrality concerns not only what the liberal democratic state, its government, or its officials acting on the behalf of the state or the government, may legitimately do. Epistemic neutrality very much concerns the norms and practices regulating societal culture, as Kymlicka calls it.<sup>14</sup> Though responsibility for what happens in societal culture is not easily attributable, one may nevertheless ask if norms and practices that are part of societal culture are just, or what the norms ought to be. Consider for example norms for equal representation of views. As we have seen, it is often considered fair that each side of a disagreement is provided the opportunity expressing their views. Clearly, this raises many questions. Who should be invited to give their views in privately organized public meetings? In the interest of preserving a societal culture that manifests the right form of neutrality, should holocaust deniers be invited to a meeting on the extermination of the Jews? Should climate change deniers be invited to private meetings on what to do about global warming? Clearly, these questions concern norms that are part of societal culture.

Note moreover that the question of epistemic neutrality is not that of separating science from junk-science.<sup>15</sup> The issue concerns the legitimacy of preferring science to non-science or junk-science. Similarly, the question of epistemic neutrality differs from and is prior to another well-versed question: which experts should one trust? This latter question usually presupposes that epistemic non-neutrality is a legitimate attitude. But this is just what is at issue

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<sup>14</sup> (Kymlicka 2002), p. 346,

<sup>15</sup> See Goldman’s remarks on this.

here. The problem here is not that of picking the right experts, but the legitimacy of picking.

Finally, it should be noted that the issue is not whether a government or anyone else is entitled to present a distorted view of the facts, or the available evidence in support of the facts. In arguing against epistemic neutrality, for the permissibility of non-neutrality, one is not arguing *for* the legitimacy of manipulating and distorting the evidence, say when doing so suits one's political ends. One thing is to be epistemically non-neutral in the sense that one takes sides in factual disagreements, for example over the nature and cause of global warming. It is an entirely different thing to present a distorted view of the evidence in favor of (or against) certain views about the nature and cause of global warming. Similarly, the rejection of epistemic neutrality does not entail the permissibility of opting for any factual view that best suits your preferred political ends, irrespective of the epistemic credentials of that view.

## 2. What is Epistemic Neutrality?

It might be thought that epistemic neutrality as a basis for practical deliberation doesn't even make sense, and that the idea can be dismissed for that reason. I shall address this concern first, and then turn to various kinds of epistemic neutrality.

It is easy to get the sense that epistemic neutrality is really not a viable option. It seems a basic norm of practical rationality that deliberation about what to do must proceed from a unified view of what the facts are. So, if the truth of the proposition  $p$  has a bearing on whether to  $A$ , then practical deliberation on whether to  $A$  must proceed from some definite assumption about whether  $p$  is the case or not. Or, more carefully, practical deliberation must be based on a definite epistemic attitude to  $p$ , where epistemic attitudes are expressible by tokens of 'p is known to be the case', 'it is highly likely that p is the case' or 'while p might be the case, it seems unlikely'. Practical deliberation cannot take place on strange combinations of epistemic attitudes such as those expressed by: 'p is known to be the case' & 'it is highly questionable if p is the case'. Hence, practical deliberation about whether to  $A$  requires that one makes up one's mind about the epistemic status of the assumption that  $p$ , given that  $p$  is relevant for the deliberation. Otherwise practical deliberation is rendered incomprehensible, or at least epistemic attitudes to  $p$  cannot play any role.<sup>16</sup>

This is correct, I think, as far as one-agent cases is concerned. But as I shall now argue, this norm of practical deliberation does not always apply to groups of agents. To get a better sense of what epistemic neutrality is, I here want to explore some general forms it could take. To be sure, not all forms of epistemic neutrality that I mention below will be equally *prima facie* plausible, or plausible at all. But for the sake of exploring the issues, I want to describe them in some detail nonetheless.

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to John Lyne for pressing this point of the presentation.

Let's consider factual disagreements consisting of two views, adopted by different individuals or groups of individuals S1 and S2, and call the two views V1 and V2. Assume throughout that V1 and V2 concern the same domain of facts F, and that there is a definite truth of the matter regarding how things stand in F. Assume that V1 and V2 are incompatible; they cannot both be true, although in some conflicts of this sort, both contenders could be false. The conflict between evolution theory and intelligent design is a case of this sort. Our question is what it is to adopt a neutral attitude towards V1 and V2, or to the subjects holding these views, S1 and S2. In the various cases to be discussed, the parties adopting a neutral attitude may be the liberal state considered as a subject, government officials or bodies, or individual subjects or groups of subjects whose actions and attitudes partly constitute the public culture, or it may be the parties to factual disagreement.

We can distinguish at least three modes of epistemic neutrality, and they are roughly the following:

- (1) Assessment neutrality: neutrality with respect to epistemic assessment of V1 and V2
- (2) Deliberative neutrality: neutrality with respect to the role V1 and V2 is accorded in practical deliberation.
- (3) Neutrality as fairness: neutrality in the sense that S1 and S2 are given equally good opportunities to promote their views.

I shall now consider each of these in turn. My aim is only to explain what these neutral attitudes may consist in, and some conditions under which it makes sense to apply them. It is a different question when, if ever, any of the specific forms of epistemic neutrality are justified.

### **2.1 Assessment Neutrality**

Regarding a proposition as known is one very important epistemic assessment, and it differs in crucial respects from, say, that of regarding a proposition as merely enjoying some evidential support. Assessment neutrality is a neutral attitude with respect to the epistemic assessments that is accorded to some proposition. As I shall now discuss, there are several different ways in which one can be assessment neutral.

The most obvious one is what one might call *epistemic egalitarianism*, according to which all competing views are accorded the *same* epistemic status. No view should be accorded a higher epistemic status than any other view. So if V1 is regarded a plausible hypothesis, then V2 should be accorded the same epistemic status. Egalitarianism implies that neither V1 nor V2 can be regarded as known, since regarding a view as known implies regarding it as true, and no two contrary views can both be regarded as true. At most, they can receive the status of being believed (by different subjects) with whatever good reason. So, if parties to a dispute adopt egalitarianism, this entails that they must refrain

from insisting that any particular view (including their own view) is known to be true, since doing so would entail that contrary views have a different and lower epistemic status.

Epistemic egalitarianism may seem appropriate, or at least applicable, in some contexts. In some conversational contexts there is a moral norm urging us not simply to declare that some view is known to be true, since this might be disrespectful to holders of competing views. There may be non-moral reasons backing a similar stance. In a disagreement between V1 and V2, it seems inappropriate to settle it simply by declaring one view to have a higher epistemic status than the other. In such cases, even if each of the disagreeing parties insist that their own view is known to be true, as will often be the case, the egalitarian attitude would be to ignore this, and regard each of the competing views as, say, a plausible hypothesis. In such cases, epistemic egalitarianism may seem to be the proper default stance to take.<sup>17</sup>

There are other forms of assessment neutrality. A different option, though much in the same spirit, would be to let defenders of various views have their own say regarding the epistemic status of their views. To use another term from political theory, we can call this form of neutrality *epistemic anarchism*. The idea would be that not only should one respect the diversity of views regarding some controversial matter, one should also respect the epistemic status that defenders of these different views accord their own view. In other words, proponents of each view are permitted to decide the epistemic status of their own view, and others should accept the epistemic status that defenders themselves apply.

It might seem that there are no practical problems in which epistemic anarchism could be relevant or even applicable. But this is not so. Consider a situation in which one has to organize an exhibition about American pre-history.<sup>18</sup> Assume that the artifacts and texts put on display convey certain views about the origins of the American native population. Suppose that stakeholders, be it the group of organizers, or members of the public who take an interest in the exhibition, disagree about American pre-history along the lines exemplified earlier. Neither party will accept that what they regard as known is presented as a mere plausible hypothesis. One way to solve this problem would be to not only present different different views of American pre-history, but also to remain faithful to the parties own epistemic assessment of their views. The competing views would then not be displayed as mere beliefs, or plausible hypotheses, but as views assumed to have whatever epistemic status that their proponents regard them as having.

Yet a third form of assessment neutrality is what one might call epistemic nihilism. This may seem strange, but it simply corresponds to the Rawlsian idea that ideas of the good 'are not evaluated all all from a [public]

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Larmore considers a defence of value neutrality that makes use of similar themes. See (Larmore 1987), p. 53 ff.

<sup>18</sup> To expand Boghossian's tale (look up if he actually uses this example!).

standpoint'.<sup>19</sup> Not evaluating ideas of the good is different from evaluating each idea of the good equally highly, and from an attitude of accepting the self-assessment of each proponent of an idea of the good. As before, epistemic nihilism may look as if it can have no practical application. This is not so, however, as I shall return to below.

## 2.2 Deliberative Neutrality

Turn now to the second main form of epistemic neutrality, what I called deliberative neutrality. Factual views enter into our practical deliberations in distinct ways. Compare a situation in which we regard ourselves as *knowing* that cutting the emission of CO<sub>2</sub> will significantly reduce the risk that global warming will reach a critical threshold, to a situation in which we merely regard this as one among several plausible hypotheses, neither of which are known to be true. Clearly, the political steps that seem reasonable to take will be very different in these two cases, and the sort of counterargument needed for blocking suggested political steps will also be very different in these two cases.

Epistemic neutrality can concern the roles different incompatible views are permitted to have in practical deliberation. Consider again a situation in which there are two incompatible views V1 and V2, held by different subjects S1 and S2. Consider a practical decision problem in which the V1 and V2 will be deliberatively relevant.

One way to be neutral between incompatible views in practical deliberation is to exclude the controversial views, and base practical deliberation only on *shared* factual views. I shall refer to this as *exclusion*. Exclusion is, of course, partly analogous to Rawls idea of a overlapping consensus.<sup>20</sup> If we apply the norm of exclusion, we get a rule of practical deliberation along these lines: if the proposition that p is not universally shared among the participants, then no appeals can be made to it. Deliberation must proceed on the basis of factual views that all participants can accept.

One could adopt a more refined rule of exclusion holding that beliefs in propositions can enter into deliberation only with the highest epistemic assessment that everyone agrees it to have. So, if one party thinks that we know the relevant proposition that p, and the other party thinks that p is merely a reasonable hypothesis, then the assumption that p can enter into common deliberation only as a reasonable hypothesis. We cannot ground our practical deliberation on the assumption that p is known. Epistemic assessments exceeding what everyone can accept are excluded.

To exemplify, consider a group of agents who consider what policy to adopt regarding safety measures for a particular GM crop. It is highly relevant for these deliberations, of course, whether this particular GM crop has health hazards or not. One side holds that we know this GM crop to be entirely without health hazards. The other side insists that while this is a reasonable

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<sup>19</sup> (Rawls 1982b, p. 172, quote from Kymlicka, Look up!).

<sup>20</sup> See also Larmore's defence of a principle of neutrality, (Larmore 1987), p. 53 ff

view to take given the evidence, we do not yet know this. For all we know, there might be health hazards that we haven't yet been discovered. In that case, exclusion (in the more refined version) will dictate that deliberation about what regulations to adopt cannot proceed on the assumption that we know this particular GM crop to be entirely without health hazards. At most, this can be regarded as a plausible hypothesis.

In some cases, exclusion may not be feasible, or at least it will not seem very attractive. Suppose S1 and S2 deliberate what regulative measures to adopt regarding the use of mobile phones. Assume, that the possible health hazards of mobile phone is the pivotal issue for the regulations under consideration, and that there are no other relevant considerations. S1 holds that electromagnetic fields produced by mobile phones are known to pose no health hazards at all, while S2 holds that a significantly increased risk of developing brain tumors as a result of the use of mobile phones is well documented, and is therefore known to exist. In this case it is hard to see how exclusion could lead to any fruitful deliberation about regulations for the use of mobile phones. If S1 and S2 exclude what they disagree about, there is no basis of a decision.<sup>21</sup>

It might be worth noting that we can think of the first form of exclusion as a way of implementing the stance of epistemic nihilism mentioned above. Views that are not shared are simply excluded from considerations, whatever epistemic status their proponent thinks they have. From the standpoint of the relevant deliberation, the controversial views are simply not accorded any epistemic assessment because they are simply ignored. Interestingly, we can think of the second form of exclusion as a way of implementing a kind of epistemic egalitarianism: views are accorded the highest unique epistemic status that everyone agrees them to have.<sup>22</sup>

Another general form of deliberative neutrality is to include all views in a controversy in deliberation. Call this *inclusion*. Where exclusion seeks neutrality by according controversial views no role at all, inclusion seeks epistemic neutrality by providing each view in a factual disagreement an equally important role in practical deliberation. Perhaps Seife refers to inclusion in his comment cited above: "This is why even those politicians who accept evolution will never attack those politicians who don't; at least publicly, they cast evolutionary theory as a mere personal belief. Attempting to squelch creationism smacks of elitism and intolerance — it would be political suicide."<sup>23</sup> Though the neutral attitude that Seife refers to may be adopted for strategic reasons rather than reasons of fairness, it is still something like epistemic inclusion that seems to be at stake. Controversial views are not prevented from having a role in parliamentary deliberation; on the contrary,

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, in liberal societies the default stance in such a case will then be a permission to use mobile phones as one likes.

<sup>22</sup> Note that this form of egalitarianism is actually slightly different from the second form of exclusion above.

<sup>23</sup> See reference above.

they are included, while the attempt to challenge or refute such views is excluded.

Inclusion may appear to be a non-starter, as it may seem to make a havoc of any attempt to let factual views play a role in practical deliberation, since, as we saw above, practical deliberation must proceed on uniform epistemic evaluations of relevant propositions. Exclusion achieves this uniformity by simply disregarding controversial views, and it may seem that there is just no way in which inclusion could achieving the same. This is not so, however, as some examples may illustrate. Suppose S1 opposes a ban on smoking in public places on the ground that he rejects that passive smoking has any harmful effects. Inclusion implies that while S2 can disagree with S1's factual views, and with S1's favoured policy on smoking, in their deliberations about what policy to adopt, S2 should not *challenge or dismiss* the factual views on which S1's opposition is based. Unlike exclusion, S1 and S2 are free to appeal to each of their controversial factual assumptions, but not to dismiss the factual assumptions they disagree with. Or consider again the problem of deciding what should be on the school curricula. Suppose that S1 and S2 are both member of the board charged with making this decision, and that S1 is a firm believer in creation, and S2 is an equally firmly accepts evolution. One way to reach a decision is simply to be neutral between those views, and the obvious choice would then to include both on the school curricula. The same goes for the structurally similar problems about which of several controversial areas of research should be funded. Suppose a board of a funding body consider whether to fund only conventional scientific medical research, or also to fund research in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). Suppose that research in CAM is carried out on metodological assumptions which are incompatible with the metodological standards of conventional scientific research, and acceptable only to people who in any case have high regards for complementary and alternative medicine. If the members of the board disagree about the truth of the metodological assumptions underlying conventional medical research and CAM, or if they want their decision to reflect the existing popular disagreement on this issue, the practical decision problem can be solved by funding both lines of research. This is a form of inclusion, which is practically feasible. Again, I do not say that this is a good solution to the problem at hand, just that it makes sense.

The kind of inclusion just exemplified can be said to be an instance of epistemic anarchism: each proponent of different views is permitted to assert and stick with his or her epistemic evaluation of that view, and defend whatever seems reasonable on those factual assumptions. But we can also point to forms of inclusion that feature epistemic egalitarianism rather than anarchism. If we combine the general idea of inclusion and epistemic egalitarianism, we get that all views relating to a controversy should be permitted to enter into practical deliberation, and they should all be assigned the same epistemic assesment. No view in a controversy can be assigned a higher epistemic status than any other. As mentioned, this will imply that no one can regard a view a known if someone else holds an incompatible view. So everyone must rest content with

regarding their views as, at best, reasonable hypotheses. In principle, this could lead to a solution of many decisions problems, since one could simply agree on assigning each competing view the same likelihood of being true. Of course, this is not to say that this form of inclusion will ever lead to good solutions. My point is merely to explicate one kind of epistemic neutrality that takes the form of epistemic inclusion.

There are other strategies for inclusion, though these are perhaps more bizarre. Sometimes epistemic conflicts have a structure that permits a sort of compromise. Suppose that S1 thinks that certain concentration of a chemical substance C in food is toxic at a low level L1, whereas S2 thinks that toxic effects occur only at a much higher level L2. One strategy of inclusion would be for S1 and S2 to accept a *compromise* regarding their factual views. Or more precisely, S1 and S2 may agree to base a common practical decision on a compromise regarding the factual disagreement, say, the mean of L1 and L2. Or, slightly differently, if there are several factual disagreements involved in a decision problem, S1 and S2 might enter a *bargain*, i.e. trade a concession regarding one factual question in return for a concession regarding another. Again, to exemplify, suppose that S1 thinks that there are no weapons of mass destruction in pre-war Irak, and no links to Al Queda terrorist networks. S2 vehemently disagrees and thinks that there are both weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Queda. If S1 and S2 are engaged in practical deliberation where the truth of these assumptions matters, they may settle their factual disagreements by deciding to trade a concession regarding one factual question in return for a concession regarding another. S1 and S2 might for example decide to base practical deliberation on the assumption that there are weapons of mass destruction in Irak, but no links to terrorist networks.

Basically, this form of inclusion accords each factual some bargaining power, and the factual views are then simply treated as akin to preferences or goals - the kind of things that we normally consider apt for compromise and bargain. In a sense this requires that we simply abstain from issuing any epistemic assessment of the views at stake. Interestingly, we may therefore view this form of inclusion is an instance of epistemic nihilism, the kind of neutral attitude consisting in not issuing an epistemic evaluation at all.

### 2.3 Epistemic Fairness

Deliberative neutrality concerns cases in which a group deliberates about a common decision, and where a factual disagreement is relevant for the deliberation. Epistemic neutrality as fairness, by contrast, concerns the conditions that different views, or proponents of different views, are accorded in a community. So principles of epistemic fairness primarily concern norms for communities, and are not principles of group deliberation.

An example of epistemic fairness is balanced treatment doctrines, holding that evolution theory and creation must be given equal time and equally serious attention in schools. The basic idea in epistemic fairness is that opposing views, or perhaps rather proponents of opposing views, must be given a fair treatment. Of course, this is not limited to decisions regarding school

curricula, or research funding bodies. One can imagine similar epistemic fairness principle regarding education in general, journalism, publishing, broadcasting, and research policy. Principles of epistemic fairness could also be applied to question of how expert commissions should be appointed, what their mandate should be, and to the general problem of which groups of disagreeing experts should receive the attention of the government and the public. Moreover, neutrality as fairness not only concerns policies and decisions, but also institutional design and legislation.<sup>24</sup>

Fairness principles may, as we have seen, result from decision procedures that observe some principle of deliberative neutrality, but clearly they need not. Even groups not disagreeing on some factual matter *F* may, in the name of fairness, opt for policies or institutional designs that feature neutrality as fairness regarding differing concerning *F*. One may, that is, adopt epistemic neutrality as fairness for moral reasons.

Systems of epistemic fairness can very roughly be ordered on a scale from minimalist to maximalist fairness. A minimalist form of epistemic fairness simply consists of our cognitive freedoms: freedom of speech, opinion, inquiry and the free dissemination of information. These are negative freedoms always secured by the liberal democracy. Apart from steps necessary for securing the cognitive freedoms, epistemic fairness in this form is really a doctrine of non-interference, a doctrine of benign neglect, leaving the extent to which factual view spreads and gains support entirely to the marketplace of ideas.<sup>25</sup>

A slightly more demanding version of epistemic fairness is to endorse a specific very familiar set of norms regarding public deliberation and formation of opinion, in addition to the set of cognitive freedoms. The set of norms I have in mind holds roughly that no view put forward in public debate is exempted from the requirement that it should be supported by proper reason or evidence, and that no view is exempted from critical argument, and so on.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the liberal democratic state cannot directly enforce a system of rules governing the public debate, among other reasons because it would conflict with our cognitive freedoms. But as individuals we can nonetheless support this system of rules by observing it ourselves, and by requesting that others do so as well. In this way we can make a contribution, albeit a very small one, to shaping societal culture in a particular way. And the state can in more indirect ways support the same societal culture through its educational policies and research policies.

Again, our cognitive freedoms and the set of norms just alluded to, constitute one system of epistemic neutrality. This set of cognitive freedoms and norms of societal culture is epistemically neutral in the sense that no substantive view is given special treatment. Nonetheless, one might object to a system like that one the ground that it is non-neutral. It favours particular conceptions of reason and evidence, and these standards are themselves

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<sup>24</sup> See (Goldman 1999), chapter 7.

<sup>25</sup> See (Goldman 1999), chapter 7, for a discussion of the market-place of ideas.

<sup>26</sup> My intention here is not to specify this set of norms in any detail.

controversial. Or more carefully stated: for any sufficiently precise rendering of the content of the relevant norms of reasons and evidence N, it will be possible to disagree with the propriety of N. And those who thus disagree will charge that a societal culture endorsing N is not neutral.

Another worry about this system of epistemic fairness (our cognitive freedoms and a set of norms for the proper running of public debates) is that it need not secure that all views gets the attention that they deserve, not to say equal attention. Some views may simply disappear from public view, or fail to attract the attention of any but very few people. This even goes for views that are both true and supported by very strong evidence or good arguments. Other views may get far more attention and enlist far more supporters than they deserve.

In such cases one can imagine more active interventions from governments, or other powerful bodies, for that matter – note the initiative that Al Gore has launched regarding climate change. For example, the government may intervene by funding public education regarding a certain issues, thereby implying that otherwise predominant views are false or questionable, and in western liberal democracies we have witnesses such interventions concerning nutrition, transmission of sexual diseases, or hazards of GM-crops, and many other issues. Proponents of the disfavoured views can complain of not playing on an even playing ground. But in defence of this policy, one may say that it aims to redress an imbalance, a market-failure in the market-place of ideas. Another form of intervention would be to impose certain obligations on newsmedia and other vehicles of information ‘to ensure that a diverse range of positions are presented’.<sup>27</sup> Such systems of epistemic fairness would be further towards the maximalist end of the spectrum.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. Does Liberal Democracy Require Epistemic Neutrality?**

Turn now to the question whether the liberal state is committed to some form of epistemic neutrality. Do citizens in a liberal democracy somehow have a right to epistemic neutrality? Are people wronged when the state enforce policies that are justified by reference to factual views that they strongly disagree with? Are people subject to unjust treatment if societal culture does not recognize their factual views as correct or worth taking seriously, or provide equal opportunities for promoting these views, beyond what is constituted by our basic cognitive freedoms?

Note first that there seems to be no obvious way in which value neutrality as such entails epistemic neutrality. Hence, the question will be if arguments thought to favour value neutrality also count in favour epistemic neutrality. Though I tend to think that this is not so, I do not find the question easy or the proposed answers obvious, and the discussion below is quite

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<sup>27</sup> See (Goldman 1999), p. 209, where Goldman attributes this sort of view to Owen Fiss and Cass Sunstein.

<sup>28</sup> Which is not to say that there is unique ordering, of course. Systems of epistemic fairness can tend towards being maximalist in many different ways.

exploratory in its nature. Moreover, as we have seen, there are a number of distinct forms of epistemic neutrality. The debate over value neutrality is itself very complex with a variety of rather different arguments for distinct forms of value neutrality being advanced. Hence, we can in principle envision a matrix in which different kinds of epistemic neutrality combined with the various different reasons for adopting neutrality. Of course, I cannot canvas this large discussion here. What I can do is merely to state and comment upon certain considerations that one might propose in favour of epistemic neutrality.

Consider first consequentialist considerations, and how they bear on epistemic neutrality and our cognitive aims. Surely, in many domains we have the aim of acquiring true beliefs or knowledge (or avoiding false beliefs).<sup>29</sup> These cognitive aims may in part justify policies regarding education, research, and the regulation of the media, among many other things. It may be thought that the cognitive aim of truth and knowledge requires certain forms epistemic neutrality, beyond what is provided by our cognitive freedoms. More precisely the idea would be that our cognitive aims of promoting truth and knowledge are furthered better if we adopt certain more ambitious notions of epistemic neutrality, moving in the direction of maximalist versions of epistemic fairness.

Is this so? Does epistemic neutrality, in particular the richer versions of epistemic fairness, tend toward truth? Probably there are no general truths to be had regarding this. Sometimes the aim of promoting truth or knowledge is best furthered by interventions that support views that are otherwise ignored or insufficiently attended to. At other times, the converse is true.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the existence of a variety of different views on display for public discussion promotes the wide acceptance of the true view. But this need not be the case. False and unsubstantiated views may get the upper hand, and in those cases interventions may promote truth.<sup>31</sup>

It is an important task to investigate the relation between the aim of truth and knowledge on the one hand, and various forms of epistemic neutrality on the other. My point here is merely that there is no simple relation that would make for an argument for a *general* norm of epistemic neutrality. This is not to deny that there are specific circumstances in which consequentialist considerations and our cognitive aims of truth and knowledge very strongly favour certain forms of epistemic neutrality. Consider for example Condorcet's Jury Theorem. What this theorem says is that under certain circumstances of factual disagreement, we can, in the interest of promoting truth or knowledge, simply accord each view the same weight, and decide the factual issue by

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<sup>29</sup> It is not trivial to state precisely and plausibly what the proper cognitive aims are, but for the purpose of the present discussion we need not worry about that.

<sup>30</sup> Recall that Bjørn Lomborg's institute was funded by the government with the explicit intention of having what the government considered a more balanced set of views on public display.

<sup>31</sup> For a very helpful discussion of these issues, see (Goldman 1999), chapter 7.

majority vote. Note also that this is an epistemically *non-neutral* justification of a circumscribed form of epistemic neutrality, but in itself this doesn't invalidate the argument, of course.

Another consequentialist consideration concerns the aim of maintaining social peace and stability. No doubt, this is also a valid aim. In some cases, factual disagreement may make them harder to achieve, as has been the case with religious disagreements. Of course, the reason why factual disagreements may lead to social tensions is that factual beliefs sometimes play a crucial role in the justification of political or individual values, or in the justification policies or moral norms adopted on the basis of such values. In addition, factual beliefs may be important parts of peoples' senses of identity, and this may itself be part of the reason why factual disagreements can generate social tensions. Again, however, there is likely to be no topic-independent relation between factual disagreements and social tensions, and therefore no argument for any *general* norm of epistemic neutrality can be found here. But surely there will be specific circumstances in which pragmatic considerations speak in favour of various forms epistemic neutrality, in particular, one would think, various forms of deliberative neutrality.

Let us now turn to another and perhaps more influential set of ideas that might, initially at least, suggest epistemic neutrality. Historically, an important class of arguments in favour of value neutrality asserts non-cognitivism about moral discourse, holding that moral claims cannot be true or false, and hence not the object of knowledge or justification.<sup>32</sup> Since this is so, no one can be in an epistemically superior position with respect moral claims vis-a-vis anyone else, and this provides a reason for value neutrality. A similar but distinct line of reasoning holds that while moral claims can indeed be true or false, we are hardly ever in a position to know when they are. Again, this might favour value neutrality on the ground that with respect to value questions, no one can claim to be in a better epistemic position than anyone else.

There are well-known difficulties with these purported justifications of value neutrality. One major problem is that if otherwise successful, these lines of reasoning lead to neutrality with respect to any question of value, not just the circumscribed set of individual values that the liberal democrat is concerned about. Another difficulty concerns the initial plausibility of non-cognitivism and skepticism, though opinions are quite divided here.

A related but distinct epistemological argument avoids some of the alleged pitfalls of non-cognitivist or skeptical defences of neutrality. It begins with the premise that one cannot be mistaken about the values underlying one's own conception of the good, or at least the chances that one is mistaken regarding this are much more remote than the chances that others are mistaken. Since this is so, it would be wrong for the state, or indeed for anyone, to impose

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<sup>32</sup> See the writings of Ayer, Hare, Blackburn, Gibbard and the subsequent literature on non-cognitivism.

any particular set of views about the good upon one.<sup>33</sup> This, in turn amounts to a form of value neutrality.

Consider now the bearing of these arguments on epistemic neutrality. It is clear that, in addition to the concerns already mentioned, there is the added concern that non-cognitivism and skepticism are not plausible at all in the wider domain of facts that we are concerned with here. Neither is the general asymmetry just mentioned generally found in this wider domain of facts. Hence, whatever the merits of these arguments for value neutrality, they don't easily translate into general arguments for epistemic neutrality.<sup>34</sup>

But perhaps one can discern an underlying principle in all three lines of reasoning that *does* apply to cases of factual disagreement. Consider this principle:

- (D) If S1's epistemic position with respect to some proposition p is no stronger than S2's position with respect to p, then S1 is wrong to set S2's view regarding p aside, should they disagree.

I shall say more about how this principle is to be interpreted in a moment. Note first that it is obvious how the arguments for value neutrality alluded to above *may* be viewed as relying on this principle.<sup>35</sup> How else should, for example, the epistemic asymmetry with regards to views about one's individual good transfer into the injunction not to impose such views on others? Note next, that the cases of factual disagreement we are concerned with here might be just cases in which principle D applies. We might then, after all, have a decent argument for epistemic neutrality. The idea would not be that the liberal democracy should in general be neutral with respect to questions of fact, or even certain domains of fact. Rather the idea would be slightly different one that in cases of disagreement, principle D applies, and this in turn justifies various forms of epistemic neutrality.

I shall now offer some brief comments on this line of argument. As principle D is stated, it is left unspecified whether it is an epistemic principle or a moral principle (or both). That is, it is not specified whether it claims that one commits a moral mistake by violating the principle, or an epistemic mistake (or both). It will be helpful to discuss each of these interpretations in turn, starting with the epistemic principle.

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<sup>33</sup> This argument is often attributed to J.S. Mill (find references).

<sup>34</sup> Note that recent proponents of value neutrality do not endorse epistemological arguments. See the writings on neutrality by Nagel, Scanlon and Rawls.

<sup>35</sup> It would be interesting to explore more in detail if the epistemological arguments for value neutrality can even run without this principle. And, it is worth exploring how well it could run with just this principle, while not making any particular general metaphysical or epistemological assumptions about value.

Consider a case of peer-disagreement about a factual matter. Suppose that S1 and S2 possess the same evidence and are equally good at assessing the evidence. Nonetheless, they end up disagreeing about some matter of fact. S1 believes that *p*, and S2 firmly rejects that *p*. It seems very reasonable that if S1 and S2 become aware of this situation, including the fact that they are epistemic peers, S1 and S2 should at least not dismiss the view of their opponent out of hand. Hence, an epistemic version of D does seem plausible.

Consider then a case in which S1 and S2 are epistemic peers with respect to some domain of facts, and with regard to which some third individual S3 is epistemically less well suited. Again, S1 firmly believes that *p*, while S2 firmly rejects that *p*. Knowing that this is a case of peer-disagreement between S1 and S2, the reasonable stance for S3 to take in this situation seems to be to suspend judgement about *p*, or at least to accord each competing view the same epistemic assessment. This isn't exactly an instance of principle D, but we can envision a principle very much in the spirit of D covering these cases.

What we see here, of course, is that principle D and similar principles support certain forms of epistemic neutrality. It is immediately clear, however, that this is of limited applicability considered as a *general* argument for epistemic neutrality. First, many actual cases of factual disagreements are not simply disagreements between peers. Rather, they are cases in which S1 disagrees with S2 over some factual matter because, very roughly, S1 does not possess the same evidence as S2, or is not equally adept in assessing it. This may come about because S1 is just not well-informed about the evidence available, or because S1 adheres to faulty methodological standards (and therefore rejects relevant evidence, or places too much weight on worthless evidence), or because S1 is simply isn't sufficiently good at assessing the evidence. In these cases, principle D doesn't apply. Similarly, as a bystander to the disagreement between S1 and S2, S3 is not obliged to suspend judgment, or accord each of the competing views equal weight.

It is an added complication that actual cases of factual disagreements are often complex in the sense that not only do S1 and S2 disagree about some matter of fact, they also disagree about whether or not they are epistemic peers in the sense outlined. So, S1 may think that S1 and S2 are indeed epistemic peers, while S2 vehemently denies this, and regards herself as being in a much better epistemic position with respect to the relevant facts. Or S1 and S2 may each regard herself as being in a better epistemic position than the opponent. Moreover, it is a further complication that assertions or denials of epistemic peer-ness (as it were) are often very hard to justify, not least if the justification is to proceed independently of views about the matters of fact that the basic disagreement concerns.

As D is stated, this principle does not apply to these more complicated cases. It will take us too far afield to investigate how D might be revised to cover these cases, if this is possible at all. Let me just add one further comment. Consider a situation in which S1 and S2 disagrees about some matter of fact, and in which S1 and S2 are not epistemic peers – S2 is in a much better epistemic situation with respect to the relevant facts than S1. However, in

addition to the first order disagreement, S1 and S2 face a second order disagreement about their status as epistemic peers. Either S1 holds that they are indeed epistemic peers and S2 denies this, implying that S1 is less than her epistemic peer. Or S1 and S2 each thinks that the other is less than an epistemic peer. Consider then S3, who takes her self to be less than an epistemic peer to either of S1 and S2. Suppose there is no way that S3 can canvass the evidence concerning the first order disagreement, and no way in which S3 can decide who is right in the second-order disagreement about epistemic peerness.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, S3 is now in the very common situation of having to choose between conflicting expert claims. What can S3 do? What should S3 do? Or, to focus on two possibilities relevant for our discussion here: Is S3 somehow obliged to be neutral between S1 and S2? Or is S3 permitted to make a choice on the basis of trust, which in the nature of the case is the only basis upon which S3 could make a choice? My suggestion is that as far as her epistemic concern goes, S3 can decide on trust. After all, S3 knows that she might very well *not* be facing a case of peer-disagreement, though she is unable to tell by her own evidence who is the epistemically better positioned expert, S1 or S2. Suppose that S3 for some reason trusts S2 more, and therefore accepts her view, rather than that of S1. There is obviously an element of luck in S3's getting it right here, but it is not clear that it is the kind of luck that makes trusting S2 epistemically inappropriate. If this is right, it follows that epistemic neutrality of some form, which would otherwise be the alternative, is *not* required in situations of this kind. Clearly, much more discussion of this issue is needed, but I'll have to leave it at that.

We have now considered D as an epistemic principle, but as noted above it may be at least as plausible as a moral principle. On this reading, the principle says that if one rejects another person's factual views out of hand, while not being in a better epistemic position, one commits a moral mistake, perhaps in addition to an epistemic mistake. It will prove useful to discuss this interpretation of D after having gone over another major class of arguments for value neutrality, the argument from autonomy, to which I now turn.

The theories of autonomy are rich and complex. On the standard view autonomy requires that one live in accordance with one's conception of the good, i.e. one's individual values, desires, or preferences. Organizing one's life in this way is (part of) what it is to be autonomous, and what it takes to bring about the value relating to being autonomous. *Respecting* an someone's autonomy, in turn, requires that others observe some measure of neutrality regarding this individual's conception of the good. It is a complicated and much discussed question to what extent respect for autonomy supports that states or societal cultures should be value neutral, or which domains of values this neutrality applies to. Fortunately, we can ignore this difficult issue and focus on the question relevant for epistemic neutrality. Does autonomy require that one live in accordance with a subset of one's considered views of the facts? And

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Goldman's paper on how to identify the experts in (Goldman 2002).

would *respect* for autonomy for that reason require some measure of neutrality with respect to individual's views of the facts?

At a first look it might seem as if the answer to both questions is 'No'. The exercise of autonomy and the value of autonomy is decisively connected to living in accordance with our individual values, not beliefs about the facts. Individual values have specific roles in our lives, and this is why respecting autonomy requires on value neutrality, and it also serves to show why respecting autonomy does not require *other* forms of neutrality.

However, on reflection, things may be less clear. In some cases it may seem that factual beliefs may sometimes have a role in one's life that is *similar* to that of individual values. This can happen because factual beliefs may be an important part of one's justification of individual values, or because factual beliefs may be part of an one's identity (one's perception of who one is). One class of factual views surely do matter a lot to some people for these reasons, and this is of course religious views, but there are many other cases.

Consider first that no-one thinks that liberal democracy should be neutral with respect to any conception of the good. In Kymlicka's words, neutrality is only required with respect to *justice-respecting* conceptions of the good.<sup>37</sup> From the perspective of the autonomous agent the rights and institutions required by justice remains fixed. These are the boundaries delimiting the space in which autonomy is to be exercised. What is variable, and in a sense for the individual to choose, is the conception of the good that one wishes to pursue, but this is to take place withing the constraints of the rights and institutions required by justice.

In other worlds, liberal democray does not require neutrality with respect to conceptions of justice. In just the same way, one might suggest, does liberal democracy not require epistemic neutrality. To expand Kymlicka's terminology, neutrality is only required between conceptions of the good which are both justice-respecting and fact-respecting. The general idea would be that the state (and societal culture, to some extent) is obliged to remain neutral between different conceptions of the good, or sets of individual values, but not between different different conceptions of what the facts are. Some work would be needed to explain would amount to, but for now some examples will have to suffice. Suppose that the state adopts certain policies based on controversial views of the facts. For example, suppose the state refuses to fund alternative medicine in public health care because of the lack of evidence for efficacy, or refuses to include intelligent design in school curricula on the ground that intelligent design lack proper scientific basis, or launches an educational initiative to convince the population that political action is needed in response to climate change, and thereby implying that climate deniers lack proper scientific grounding. Individuals who disagree with these decisions, but are nonetheless forced to comply with them in the relevant sense, have no ground for complaint, then, because the requirement of value neutrality does not extend that far. Those who firmly believe in the efficacy of alternative medicine, for

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<sup>37</sup> (Kymlicka 2002), p. ???

example, do not have a just complaint that it is not available in a publicly funded health care system. Or put it differently: people have a right to hold and act upon the belief that alternative medicine is highly effective, of course, but they must themselves bear the cost of these beliefs, and they have no ground for complaint if public policy is based on incompatible factual beliefs.

Now, I have merely indicated how one might in principle respond to the fact that certain factual beliefs may play a role for individual autonomy similar to that of individual values. I haven't argued that liberal democracy *should* adopt epistemically non-neutral attitudes (though I believe that it should). I have merely indicated how epistemic non-neutrality is a possibility within the general framework. Moreover, I haven't argued that the liberal state should side with best science, when adopts policies in areas of factual controversies, and commits itself to non-neutral stances on these controversies (though this is also what I think the state should). In fact, it is useful to have a general term for this particular very familiar non-neutral attitude, so let me simply refer to it as *scientific non-neutrality*.

It is interesting to note a parallel to the idea that the liberal democracy should be neutral only between justice-respecting conceptions of the good, not between any conception of the good. They I will not try to argue the point here, it is likely that any justification of scientific non-neutrality will appeal to controversial facts about the importance of basing one's views about the facts on reliable methods. Moreover, it is likely that scientific non-neutrality cannot be defended without appealing to certain scientific views about the properties of a range of ways of acquiring beliefs about the world, in particular the properties that explains the reliability of these methods. Moreover, the explanation that scientific non-neutrality does not constitute a lack of respect of individual autonomy, again, is likely to appeal to controversial views about the nature of autonomy and the different roles that value and factual beliefs occupies in one's life. If this is right, the defence of scientific non-neutrality will be question-begging or epistemically circular vis-a-vis those who reject scientific non-neutrality, or those who do not think that science represents a privileged way of inquiry.

This is not as bad as it looks, however. This doesn't show that one cannot rationally endorse scientific non-neutrality. It only shows that there is no completely neutral standpoint from which this can be done. The same is true, I think, of (another) basic tenet of liberal democracy: the insistence on a certain scheme of individual rights that takes priority over individual values. These issues concerning the justification of scientific non-neutrality deserve a much fuller discussion, but I will nonetheless move on to a different issue.

Suppose we hold that respecting autonomy only requires neutrality with respect to sets of individual values, not that one pays any special neutral attention to factual views held by individuals. That is, suppose that there are no *autonomy-related reasons* to respect factual views, unlike what is the case with individual values. The question might still be raised if there are other reasons. After all, respect for autonomy might not the only kind of respect that we owe to each other. Consider again principle D, stating that in a sense one wrongs a

person by setting aside her factual view when one is not in a better epistemic position. As discussed above, this principle can be given an epistemological interpretation, as well as a moral interpretation to which I now turn.

Consider a situation in which S1 takes herself to know that *p*, while S2 considers the proposition that *p* to be completely implausible and false. Suppose moreover that S1 and S2 face a common decision problem like the one's we have discussed above, say concerning what should be on the curricula in biology classes in the local school, or about what attitude to take to certain kinds of alternative medicine. Suppose that S2 simply dismisses S1's view out of hand, say by not bothering to considering it at all. As discussed above, we can refuse the claim that this is a violation of S1's right to autonomy, even if the decision has a bearing on S1's opportunities for living in accordance with her chosen values. But one might insist that this is nonetheless disrespectful.

I think that this is right, but it is important to distinguish two different moral wrong that might be at stake. The first and most obvious is that S2's dismissal of S1 might wrong S1 as a *cognitive agent*. This is the familiar idea that insofar as we occupy the roles of agents in the pursuit of truth, we should treat each other in certain ways: offer reasons for our views, take seriously criticism, respond to counter-arguments if one can, and consider revising one's own view if one cannot, and so on. We do not need a precise rendering of the norms of this form of argumentative deliberation to know what it is about. To wrong someone as a cognitive agent is a moral wrong that roughly consists in not treating this individual in accordance with the norms of argumentative deliberation. Clearly, depending on various specifications of the exact circumstances, S2 may wrong S1 as a cognitive agent in the case at hand. It is clear, however, that observing the norms of argumentative deliberation does not in general require more demanding forms epistemic neutrality. In argumentative deliberation, one can decide, after due reflection, that some factual view not worth taking seriously, beyond what this very reflection requires, and this need not constitute a moral wrong to anyone in their capacity as cognitive agents.

Consider then a different issue. Factual views may play a role for our sense of identity, just as values, cultural norms, political observations, or religious views often do (religious views being, of course, on some interpretations just another class of factual views). For example, the belief that certain forms of alternative medicine are highly effective may, for some people, be a part of their identity, that is, their sense of who they are. Thus, individuals may adopt and endorse factual views for *identity-related reasons*. It is often assumed that liberal democracy should, in some sense, respect individuals' senses of identity. If factual views held by individuals are sometimes a part of this identity, then there might be a case for certain forms of epistemic neutrality that rests on respect for identity, rather than on respect for autonomy.

Consider now S2's dismissal of S1's factual belief in this light. One important thing to note is that if one holds on to a view for identity-related reasons, then one does not accept is merely for epistemic reasons. This, if S1 adopts the belief that *p* for identity-related reasons, S1 would, in the nature of

the case, hold endorse this belief, even if there were enough epistemic reasons not to do so. Of course, this is because the identity-related reasons take over when epistemic reasons run out. This implies, I think, that if S1 persists in believing that *p* for identity-related reasons and despite sufficient reason to reject that belief has emerged in argumentative deliberation, then S1 fails to observe the norms of argumentative deliberation. Second, if one dismisses S1's belief that *p*, then one might not be wronging S1 as a *cognitive agent*, if it is abundantly clear in the context that the belief in question is held for identity-related reasons.

Should one respect other people's factual views, when they are held for identity-related reasons? More specifically, is there a specific identity-related ground for certain forms of epistemic neutrality, just as there are autonomy-related grounds to uphold certain forms of neutrality with respect to individual values? Space does not allow any discussion of this question here, but I will just venture the view that whatever grounds there are for respecting identity, they are constrained by justice and the best or most qualified view of the facts. As before, this form of non-neutrality cannot be supported in a way which is itself neutral, but that need not detain us from adopting it.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The most important conclusion of this discussion is the following. Though I have by no means argued all the steps in the argument in sufficient detail, I think it has been indicated why we need not view liberal democracy as wedded to any general principles of epistemic neutrality, beyond what is required by our basic cognitive freedoms. This means that contrary to what is asserted by many commentators, there is not inherent conflict between democracy and the inherent non-neutrality of science. Hence, Seife and others are wrong to think that science and democracy is necessarily at odds. Liberal democracy can adopt the inherent non-neutrality of science. This is not yet to hold that liberal democracy ought to embrace scientific non-neutrality. I haven't argued that any particular epistemically non-neutral stance adopted by the state or by societal culture is justified, or how one should state a satisfactory defense of a non-neutral policy, though I do think we should endorse what I called scientific non-neutrality. I have indicated that even if the best arguments for scientific non-neutrality are epistemically circular, though does not prevent us from rationally endorsing scientific non-neutrality.

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