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**DISTINGUISHING VALUE-NEUTRALITY FROM VALUE-INDEPENDENCE:  
TOWARD A NEW DISENTANGLING STRATEGY FOR MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY**

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**Abstract:** This chapter outlines a new disentangling strategy for moral epistemology. It builds on the fundamental distinction between value-neutrality and value-independence as two separate aspects of methodological austerity introduced by Matthew Kramer. This type of conceptual analysis is then applied to two major challenges in moral epistemology: globalised scepticism and debate fragmentation. Both challenges arise from collapsing the fact/value dichotomy. They can be addressed by comprehensive disentangling that runs along both dimensions – value neutrality vs. value non-neutrality and value independence vs. value dependence. The success of this strategy rests on two factors. The first is broadening the scope of disentangling to include theoretical-explanatory values on a par with distinctly ethical values. The second is differentiating between wider and narrower conceptualisations of what value neutrality requires with respect to contested matters. The objective is to pre-empt unjust theorising, a distinctive form of epistemic injustice that derives from the exclusive methodological focus on ethical evaluations at the expense of epistemic ones. When these methodological conditions are fulfilled, opponents should gain the confidence to treat each other as fellow inquirers engaged in the same project, that of reducing the scope of unhelpful disagreements.

**Keywords:** conceptual analysis; disagreement; disentangling; fact/value distinction; epistemic injustice; moral epistemology; unjust theorising.

### ***1. Introduction***

What are the prospects of conceptual analysis as core methodology for normative theory? Could it respond to proponents of the so-called non-ideal theory highlighting such challenges as undue de-contextualisation of ethical thought and unfair differentials of power within knowledge production and recognition? In this paper, I consider the nature and scope of conceptual analysis in Kramer (2018) as promising ground for a new, comprehensive disentangling strategy that can address these and related challenges in moral epistemology.

The discussion will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I explore the distinction between value-neutrality and value-independence as two separate aspects of methodological austerity introduced by Kramer. The ambition is to show that this distinction is fundamental to understanding conceptual analysis in terms of dialogical inquiry advancing toward greater agreement. In Section 3, I make a case for expanding on this understanding of conceptual analysis toward a comprehensive disentangling strategy that would apply to theoretical-explanatory values on a par with distinctly ethical values. In the final Section 4, I focus on two major challenges in moral epistemology that arise from collapsing the fact/value dichotomy, globalised scepticism and debate fragmentation. I show that both challenges can be successfully addressed by a thorough disentangling strategy that encompasses both dimensions of conceptual analysis – value neutrality vs. value non-neutrality and value independence vs. value dependence.

### ***2. A Methodology for the Search of Justice***

The distinction between value-independence and value-neutrality is introduced within the context of a wider methodological discussion aiming to establish the nature and scope of

conceptual analysis in contemporary political philosophy. Principal theories of distributive justice are considered as a case in point. By comparing and contrasting the underlying approaches in the works of philosophers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Joseph Raz, Matthew Kramer argues that conceptual analysis rarely fits the textbook picture of specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of a concept (2018, p. 368). Properly understood, it consists instead in a multi-level collaborative progression from a thin, high-level agreement to ever thicker levels of consequent theorising that emerge as a result of philosophers taking divergent paths of moral reasoning rather than applying, more or less aptly, the same formal procedure (p. 376). The fact that conceptual analysis is multi-layered is significant on Kramer's view. For it allows us to employ the distinction between the overall concept of justice and the various competing conceptions, to which it gives rise, without assuming that they all stand, as it were, on the same plane. This bears on our ability to identify correctly the crux of the disagreements between different theories of justice. As Kramer points out with respect to Rawls's theory of justice as fairness: 'more than one level intervenes between that thin concept [of distributive justice] and ... his two lexically ordered principles that are applicable to the major legal-governmental institutions of any society' (p. 370). Thus, at a higher level, there is thin agreement across liberal as well as illiberal theories of justice grounded in the exclusion of arbitrary distinctions as unjust that both sets of theories support. At a lower level, there is thicker agreement that obtains only across liberal theories in the broad sense. This agreement is rooted in the understanding of all persons as free and fundamentally equal that these theories have in common. And at a still lower level, only fully reasonable liberal theories would achieve an even thicker agreement, covering some basic rights and liberties that every citizen should have, over and above considerations of political morality. This substantive agreement would nevertheless leave room for a vast array of important

disagreements demarcating versions of egalitarianism from one another but also from sufficientarian and prioritarian theories of justice (p. 371).

As this concise presentation shows, navigating different kinds of disagreements is an inherent part of conceptual analysis as a mainstream approach to theorising about justice. This is because, at its best, this methodology does not take the form of a single-minded argument relentlessly unfolding from first premises but presupposes what we may term a diverse community of practice. This key feature becomes apparent in Kramer's interpretation of conceptual analysis as an essentially dialogical exercise generating distinctive philosophical views on justice in relation to rivals. In the Rawlsian frame, the collaborative core of the underlying dialectic is exemplified by the idea of wide reflective equilibrium where the balancing of high-level principles and pre-theoretical convictions is undertaken in the light of competing theories, in addition to one's own. In the Dworkinian frame, any meaningful argument about theories of justice rests on a substantive pre-theoretical agreement on paradigm cases among arguing theorists.

Against this background, the distinction between value-independence and value-neutrality comes to play a crucial role in separating out disagreements of different order that might be lumped, unhelpfully, together. Kramer (p. 377) defines these two contrasting features as follows:

If a project of theoretical elaboration is value-independent in the sense specified here, it is not grounded on any ethical values. That is, the justifications for its theses do not consist in invocations of ethical values. Some values do of course underlie any such project, but they are theoretical-explanatory or logical/mathematical or aesthetic rather than ethical.

Value-neutrality, in the sense specified here, is different. If certain theses are value-neutral, then we can gauge the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of those theses in any number of circumstances without having to undertake any ethical judgments. In other words, the states of

affairs recounted by those theses can be ascertained (as present or absent) without any ethical assessments.<sup>1</sup>

The pair is further contrasted with two potential misnomers where neutrality is one of the reference terms: first, the neutrality of an abstract concept with respect to the various concrete cases instantiating it; and second, value neutrality as a tenet of political liberalism contested by the proponents of liberal perfectionism. As Kramer demonstrates, neither kind of neutrality would qualify as value-neutral in the methodological sense he articulates (pp. 377-379). For value-neutrality in this sense is a possible feature of philosophical discourse. It designates a distinct dimension of methodological austerity as opposed to methodological engagedness, that of purely factual descriptions of states of affairs as opposed to prescriptions commending the achievement of some states of affairs as just or appropriate in some other respect (p.378). By contrast, value-independence, the other dimension of methodological austerity prioritises analytic as opposed to synthetic, or formal as opposed to substantive argumentation. According to Kramer, while value-independence in the strict sense is inconsistent with a fruitful inquiry on the subject of distributive justice or any other core issue of political philosophy, value-neutrality has an important role to play.

As we shall see in the course of the present discussion, both the rejection of the former and the partial acceptance of the latter kind of methodological austerity have a common root, an underlying commitment to a version of the fact-value distinction. For instance, in Kramer (2009, p. 6), Hume's Law is formulated as follows: 'There is no valid argument in which all of the premises are non-moral (and logically consistent) and in which the conclusion is a substantive moral proposition'. Returning to conceptual analysis as applied to distributive

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<sup>1</sup> See Kurki (in this volume) for a related discussion on the distinction between value-independence and value-neutrality.

justice, the use of thin concepts would already commit theorists to some substantive moral views to the exclusion of others. This is a direct upshot of Hume's Law: extreme methodological austerity in terms of formal argumentation about justice, either leads to trivial conclusions or conceals unacknowledged value commitments. Rawls's discussion of justification as an argumentative practice that goes beyond valid proof illustrates well this idea (1971, p. 508):

Being designed to reconcile by reason, justification proceeds from what all parties to the discussion hold in common. Ideally, to justify a conception of justice to someone is to give him a proof of its principles from premises that we both accept, these principles having in turn consequences that match our considered judgements. Thus mere proof is not justification. A proof simply displays logical relations between propositions. But proofs become justification once the starting points have been mutually recognised, or the conclusions so comprehensive and compelling as to persuade us of the soundness of the conception expressed by their premises.

So, by rejecting value-independence as a possible feature of meaningful theorising about justice, we are better placed to acknowledge the significant background agreements which help focus relevant disagreements and enable the constructive exchange of competing interpretations. Hence, the key role of a community of practice we observed earlier: without the mutual recognition of participants as sharing some pre-existing common ground, the conceptual analysis of justice cannot take off.

The partial acceptance of methodological value-neutrality also derives from the Humean version of the fact-value distinction that Kramer endorses. If pure descriptions of states of affairs cannot ground, on their own, any particular evaluative stance toward the states so described, then the occurrence of valued or disvalued states of affairs can be ascertained without any reference to their alleged value or disvalue. As a case in point, Kramer discusses

the notion of measuring empirically the overall freedom individuals have in a society developed in Carter (1999). Such a measurement would not, in Kramer's terminology, be value-independent. For, to put it crudely, it presupposes valuing freedom. It would, however, be value-neutral since its extent can be ascertained without reference to any ethical considerations. Employing somewhat different terminology, Carter (1999, p. 289) articulates a related distinction:

The only basis we have for seeing comparisons of degrees of overall freedom as normatively significant lies in freedom's non-specific value. And in order to make room for freedom's non-specific value, we must understand degree-of-freedom judgements as having a purely empirical basis. We should not see such judgments as 'value neutral'; for they are, after all, judgements in terms of freedom's non-specific value. But neither should we see them as referring to the value of specific freedoms in terms of the things those freedoms allow us to do.

On one possible reading, we can equate Kramer's 'value-independence' with Carter's 'value neutrality'. This reading is further supported by the existence of another term, 'value freeness', which considering Carter (2015) seems to match closely Kramer's notion of value-neutrality. Yet, a further look at some of the earlier literature on how and why relevant facts should be established independently of value judgments in such areas of public policy as economics, might give us a pause for thought. For instance, in an extensive discussion of Putnam's *Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (2002), Long (2006, pp. 129-130) stresses a particular sense in which some economists from the so-called Austrian School have advocated value-free economic analysis: 'So long as economists can explain the effects of a particular policy without presupposing any evaluation of *that policy or its effects*, the fact that *other* evaluations must be presupposed need not perturb us.'

This sense of value freeness is consistent with a fact/value distinction. However, it does not unambiguously fit the scope of what Kramer terms 'value-neutrality'. Thus, on another



possible reading, there is a drift between two competing ways in which conceptual analysis may go ‘value-neutral’ with respect to moral and political concepts, such as distributive justice. A narrow-scope interpretation would see descriptions as value-neutral if they do not rely – either explicitly or implicitly – on taking a stance toward the specific value or values whose instantiation is ascertained. By contrast, a wide-scope interpretation would insist on descriptions that do not reference any moral values, not just the ones whose instantiation is at stake.

The discussion of value-neutrality in Kramer (2018) clearly supports the latter, more demanding interpretation. Having said that, it is important to bear in mind that value-neutrality with respect to empirical inquiry within the frame of a wider normative theory may not always be as thorough in disentangling facts from values. In such cases, the limited value-neutrality achieved could still fulfil an important methodological purpose, that of avoiding question-begging evaluations. As the next section will aim to show, distinguishing between wide- and narrow-scope value-neutrality is in fact crucial. For it enables methodological austerity to fulfil the role of a distinctive kind of disentangling strategy, in the context of acknowledged value-dependence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Disentangling’ is about the link between ethical evaluations and related descriptions of states of affairs. Philosophers committed to the fact/value dichotomy tend to interpret this procedure as complete only when the evaluative judgements under consideration have been fully separated out from the descriptive components that they have been – unhelpfully – entangled with. By contrast, authors who contest the fact/value dichotomy challenge the prospects of such a thorough disentangling. A major worry of theirs is that separating facts from values in this way leads to loss of meaning rather than greater clarity (McDowell 1998). The disentangling strategy that will be explored in the following

### 3. Revisiting the Fact/ Value Distinction

In the discussion to follow, ‘disentanglement’, viz. ‘disentangling’ will be understood in the weak (and more interesting) sense explored in Blackburn (2013). Unlike disentanglement in the strong sense where the evaluative dimension of a concept can be easily detached from its descriptive dimension without any loss of meaning, disentanglement in the weak sense does not imply or aim at a similar endpoint where the ‘facts’ are laid bare, with no trace of evaluation. According to Blackburn, undue focus on disentanglement in the strong sense has obscured and undermined the key role disentanglement in the weak sense has to play in the analysis of the so-called thick concepts.<sup>3</sup> This focus imposes a false dilemma upon theorists working in such areas as normative ethics and political philosophy where most of the discussion is bound to employ thick concepts. The dilemma is as follows: either endorse disentanglement in the strong sense or, conversely, pronounce thick concepts as ultimately unanalysable. The former would treat the evaluative dimension of such concepts as dispensable

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section is distinctive in that it offers a promising middle ground – conceptual analysis in terms of a fact/value distinction with no commitment to either the fact/value dichotomy or its collapse.

<sup>3</sup> Evaluative concepts are divided into two categories: thick and thin. The distinction highlights the different roles that descriptive components might play in the use of such concepts. For instance, ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ have minimal descriptive content. Being descriptively thin, they come as close as possible to pure evaluations. By contrast, such terms as ‘diligent’, ‘nice’ and ‘unfriendly’ rely on thicker descriptive layers, in addition to some evaluative core. The resulting thick evaluations represent a person or an action as being good or bad in a particular way. The distinction between thick and thin ethical concepts was introduced in Williams (1985). See Kirchin (2017) for an extensive discussion on interpreting thick concepts as more specific evaluations rather than separable fact/value composites.

if not altogether parasitic on their descriptive dimension. The latter would insulate from critique objectionable attitudes that the use of thick concepts may propagate. On reflection, neither option is methodologically sound. The first blatantly disregards central features of ordinary moral language, where the extension of concepts, such as ‘steadfast’, ‘determined’ and ‘pig-headed’ is partly determined by the different attitudes undertaken toward by and large overlapping representational content. The second option, by contrast, overstates the interdependence between attitudes and representation in a way that makes reasoned moral change unintelligible. If the evaluative and the factual dimensions of a thick concept cannot be disentangled at all without the loss of meaning, coming to appreciate as determined actions that one would previously qualify as pig-headed would amount to a ‘leap of faith’ or a wholesale conversion to an alternative standpoint. Yet, both everyday conversations about ethical issues and ethical theorising presuppose the idea that we can learn a lot from alternative thick conceptualisations by gradually thinning them out to expose the kinds of unspoken commitments that come with the use of this or that thick concept. As Blackburn (2013, p. 123) puts it:

The everyday metaphor of a loaded description makes salient the idea that a load is something that is put upon something else, and that can equally be taken off. Things can be said in derogatory ways, but rephrased to avoid the derogation... But the issue is whether we should see the unitary, thick concept as fundamental, or the idea of a loaded way of describing things, where the load plays a role in determining which things are so described, but where the load can also in principle be shed.

So understood, disentangling takes place whenever we get clearer and more reflective about our own moral stance. In some cases, this would involve revising, perhaps even abandoning practices we have previously followed without giving them a second thought. On such occasions, our distancing from a particular set of moral judgments and underlying attitudes

would often come as a result of newly found appreciation for the less palatable sides of the loaded, entangled concepts we might be using unreflectively. Blackburn (2013, pp. 124-125) discusses the use of ‘cute’ to compliment women as an example. While the apparent intention when describing a woman as ‘cute’ is to draw attention to a positive attribute of hers, the linguistic practice rests on some background presuppositions which portray women as decorative and subservient dependants at their best. A person might partake in this practice imagining it just a nice thing to say without ever considering what these presuppositions mean. When their offensiveness gets articulated, as a piece of everyday disentangling, they might be less inclined to use ‘cute’ with reference to women or see it as a compliment at all.

Kramer’s thesis, according to which conceptual analysis in political philosophy is inextricably value-dependent, introduces the theoretical counterpart to everyday disentangling in the sense specified earlier. When looking into substantive disagreements between different theories of justice, value-dependent conceptual analysis enables us to locate correctly the degree of thinness or thickness, at which these disagreements emerge. This is a first step toward the right kind of argumentative strategy that would speak to the relevant community of practice: theorists who have specific background assumptions in common they all may call upon. And, while theoretical disentangling, like its everyday analogue, is not expected to resolve every case of substantive disagreement among reasoners who engage in the process in good faith, it would always advance a more nuanced and reflective understanding of both one’s own and competing interpretations amongst such participants.

Importantly, neither the everyday, nor the theoretical version of weak disentanglement comes with the untenable metaphysical commitments entailed by a strict fact/value dichotomy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Such commitments are only entailed by strong disentanglement as it posits the complete separability of evaluative and descriptive components within a thick concept. The thesis that ethical values cannot

What's more, in each version, disentanglement is clearly consistent with a range of positions about the metaphysics of morals. This may lead us to believe that weak disentanglement is, quite simply, a sound, even perhaps uncontroversial, methodology that comes with no substantive commitments about the nature of values. Yet, on closer inspection, the extent of this methodology's engagedness, to follow Kramer's terminology, becomes clear. For the successful application of value-dependent conceptual analysis presupposes that disagreements about values are, overall, more difficult to settle than disagreements about facts. Since some of our beliefs and other attitudes are much more controversial than others, we can trade upon the largely uncontroversial ones to try to reach greater agreement on those that are more controversial. The discussion of weak disentanglement in Blackburn (2013, p. 135) is explicit on this point:

All that I hold is that in context, and for the purpose of enabling discussion and critique to go forward at any particular junction, the right methodological route is to distinguish as well as we may. We advance one step of fact at a time, distilling the residue of disagreements of value as far as we can, until if we are lucky (but only if) any that remain prove slight or tractable.

Value-dependent conceptual analysis exhibits a similar structure. Although the distinction between formal and substantive components it aims to achieve within and across conceptions of distributive justice is not supposed to mirror a dichotomy between facts and values (cf. Kramer 2009, pp. 236-9), the process is expected to be straightforward with respect to the order in which layer after layer of conceptual thickness can be peeled off. Yet, as Kramer's own interpretation of the wrongful conviction of Tom Robinson in *To Kill A Mockingbird* indicates,

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be part of the 'fabric of the world' because of their peculiar metaphysical properties (Mackie 1977) is an example. See also Streumer (2017) for a recent argument in support of the underlying error theory, according to which a closer look at the (impossible) metaphysics of values would lead us to see all ethical judgments as necessarily erroneous.

there can be significant methodological disagreement in assessing how thick a specific concept is – even between closely related theories of justice, both of which qualify as liberal and fully reasonable in the Rawlsian sense. Thus, if we take, in agreement with Dworkin (2011), the conviction and punishment of a person known to be innocent of any crime to be a paradigm case of injustice, we should also think that the jurors in Tom Robinson’s trial have no ‘grasp of the general concept of justice’ (2018, p. 377). For they knowingly convict a person who is innocent of the crime, of which he has been accused. By contrast, if we followed Rawls as Kramer suggests, we should instead grant these jurors grasp of the general concept of justice and appreciate that it can be, as it is on this occasion, combined with a ‘hideously illiberal understanding of what counts as an arbitrary distinction’ (*ibid.*), excluding the difference in race between the accuser and the accused, on which their verdict is based.

Could this disagreement indicate that our methodological route has finally reached a point of intractable disagreement of ethical value, that of justice? Considering how close the two theories under consideration are in their understanding of justice, a more plausible suggestion seems to be that the methodological austerity should be extended to a further application. This application would target the entanglement of two kinds of values, ethical and theoretical-explanatory. Theoretical-explanatory values, whether explicitly endorsed or not, have direct implications for the ethics of inquiry since they help determine what counts as a ‘sound’ methodological route and, as a result, which reasoners are to be treated as full participants in the community of practice. There is a growing literature on the notion of epistemic peers and its significance for differentiating intractable disagreements that ought to be taken seriously from those that can be explained away or safely ignored (e.g. Christensen and Lackey 2013). In the next section, I will say more about this. For the purposes of the present discussion, suffice to say that different theoretical-explanatory values underpin different methodological choices which in turn have different substantive implications. Some of them would amount to what I

propose to call ‘unjust theorising’. Examples include marginalising epistemic peers or ignoring alternative conceptualisations as irrelevant or incompetent. By widening the scope of disentangling to include explicitly theoretical-explanatory values on a par with ethical values, we would give ourselves a better chance to keep in check potentially unjust theorising. This commitment is of particular importance when we theorise about justice since such theorising has greater potential to replicate, obfuscate and legitimise existing unjust institutions than theorising on other subjects.<sup>5</sup>

To see how this might work, let us briefly consider an example from Dworkin (1986), the interpretation of the equal protection clause of the US Constitution in connection to racial discrimination. When this clause was adopted under the Fourteenth Amendment, it was deemed as compatible with the upkeep of racially segregated public schools. As Dworkin (1986, p. 360) highlights:

In fact the Fourteenth Amendment was proposed by lawmakers who thought they were not outlawing racially segregated education. The floor manager of the civil rights bill that preceded the amendment told the House that ‘civil rights do not mean that all children shall attend the same school’, and the same Congress continued to segregate the schools of the District of Columbia after the Fourteenth Amendment had entered the Constitution.

These schools remained segregated for some further 90 years, until segregation was ruled unconstitutional as inconsistent with the very same equal protection clause.

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<sup>5</sup> This is because the stakes we have in the outcomes of such theorising are higher than in projects that look like a ‘disinterested search for the truth’. At the very least, the conclusions we reach about justice are expected to be action-guiding. At times, the actions required might be extremely demanding. The discussion of rationalisation in the following section will aim to shed further light on this.

One possible explanation of why constitutional law scholars and judges took so long to appreciate such glaring inconsistency as the above is to insist that it is not of a logical or theoretical-explanatory order. Instead, it reflects welcome changes in ethical consensus within wider society. Like value non-neutrality in political philosophy, legal interpretation rests on specific ethical commitments. When they change, the interpretation changes too.

Here is an alternative I would like to put forward. It expands on the idea that to fulfil its intended purpose disentangling should target specifically theoretical-explanatory values, in addition to ethical values. This presupposition is consistent with recent work on epistemic injustice, e.g. Fricker (2007), Medina (2013), Pohlhaus, Jr. (2017). A central claim that emerges from various contributions is that individuals and groups are often wronged as inquirers and communicators in virtue of epistemic methods and habits conceived as independent from any value commitments by the mainstream. Moreover, such epistemic injustices are typically extremely difficult to identify because of their entanglement with epistemic norms seen as constitutive of otherwise worthwhile practices, such as democratic legislation or analytic philosophy. Medina (2013, 2017) suggests two complementary terms to designate the insidious mechanisms through which epistemic injustices tend to persist undetected: meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity. The first refers to the unshakable sense that there is ‘nothing to watch out for here’ coming in the very ‘blind spots’ that familiar unjust institutions cast over one’s theorising. The second precludes a community of practice from giving the benefit of doubt to novel approaches. In so doing, it mimics bona fide concerns over unorthodox methods. Importantly, both mechanisms – meta-ignorance and meta-insensitivity – could support instances of unjust theorising under the guise of sound methodology.

Let us now return to the case under consideration: how to explain the lawmakers’ initial thought that the equal protection clause they championed is consistent with the racially segregated education they were accustomed to? In light of the preceding discussion, a more plausible



explanation would point – in addition to the false belief that racial segregation is harmless – to insufficient scrutiny into the theoretical-explanatory commitments that might be at stake when considering such issues as relevance, salience and comparability. At first blush, these issues could seem unrelated to concerns about justice or equality, as the idea of two separate categories of values – theoretic-explanatory on the one side, ethical on the other – might imply. Such understanding, however, could inadvertently lead to unjust theorising.<sup>6</sup>

Keeping an eye on theoretical-explanatory values is of equal significance when we look at the other dimension of methodological austerity, that of partial value-neutrality. As shown in the previous section, partial value-neutrality may differ in scope. When it is narrow, the relevant factual descriptions are meant to exclude only evaluations based on the ethical values whose instantiation is currently ascertained. When, by contrast, it is wide, the relevant factual descriptions are expected to exclude all evaluations based on ethical values. Clearly, there will be some room for unjust theorising as a result of this very difference in scope. When narrow-scope value-neutrality is treated as though wide in scope, disentangling might end too soon,

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<sup>6</sup> The line of reasoning here is as follows. Defining the scope of principles and requirements of justice like the equal protection clause is the result of theoretical-explanatory choices. These choices should be scrutinised and disentangled applying a similar procedure to that we saw at work in the case of thick ethical concepts. This is because the content of such choices tends to appear as independent from ethical values. At the same time, however, it is in fact more likely to be entangled with expectations moulded by familiar institutions in virtue of their familiarity and independently of how well they are justified. These expectations may not strike the reasoners involved as distinctly ethical. They could instead be convinced that the theoretical-explanatory choices they make are only constrained by sound disciplinary standards and, as a consequence, already value-independent in the required sense. In such cases, the disentangling strategy outlined earlier should also apply to the links between theoretical-explanatory values and ethical values, in addition to those between ethical evaluations and factual descriptions.

keeping unexamined value commitments out of the spotlight. Some of these commitments might be as unappealing as complimenting grown-ups for being cute.

However, a more insidious form of halfway disentangling is encouraged by the notion that proper factual descriptions presuppose what Jane Heal calls a ‘disinterested search for truth’ (1987). According to Heal, the use of such metaphors as ‘the constitutive aim of belief is truth’ tend to be confused and confusing. For they could prompt inquirers to think of truth as having its own intrinsic value, in abstraction of the inquiries, practices and ways of life that make finding out the truth about specific matters significant to particular groups and individuals. Yet, were the search for truth fundamentally disinterested in this way, coming to believe as many truths as possible, no matter how trivial, random or uninformative should be considered as epistemic achievement. This, however, does not even remotely look like a successful inquiry. So, a possible upshot of these common metaphors is often not the promotion of truly disinterested studies but lesser awareness of the interests that a particular search for truths would help realise or, conversely, obstruct.

Importantly, the correlation that Heal identifies can be acknowledged without at the same time rejecting that truth is the constitutive norm of beliefs. As I recently argued (Radoilska 2017), the metaphors conveying such a conception of truth do not always make clear how this constitutive norm is to be satisfied; however, this oversight can be remedied by a close contrast-and-compare strategy bringing together the norms of belief and the norms of action. As a result, it becomes possible to address the concerns raised by Heal, which are neither orthogonal, nor secondary to assessing the inquiry on its own, theoretical-explanatory terms. For they help track the background assumptions about such matters as relevance, scope and method that are constitutive of the epistemic practice to which any particular inquiry belongs.

In a similar vein, by including theoretical-explanatory considerations when assessing the extent to which an investigation conducted under the auspices of an ethical or political theory is value-

neutral, we can limit unjust theorising. In this respect, it is safe to assume that any such investigation will be of narrow-scope neutrality with respect to theoretical-explanatory values even if its neutrality with respect to distinctly ethical values is wide in scope. It is beyond the limits of the present discussion to assess the prospects of a stronger claim, that theoretical-explanatory values are best understood as a semi-independent subclass of ethical values. The conclusions reached here are independent of this unduly strong claim: whether theoretical-explanatory and ethical values are different in kind or not, normative theorising as a distinctive cluster of epistemic practices exhibits close interdependence between the two. The potential for inadvertently unjust theorising derives from this interdependence. Hence, the need to employ a comprehensive disentangling strategy in the sense articulated here. Such a strategy would target theoretical-explanatory commitments on a par with ethical considerations along the complementary dimensions of presumed value independence and partial value neutrality.

#### **4. Implications for moral epistemology**

I would like now to expand on the role that the comprehensive disentangling strategy inspired by Kramer (2018) can play in moral epistemology. In particular, I will aim to show how this strategy can help address a couple of issues that have emerged in the aftermath of growing disenchantment with the fact/value dichotomy.

The first has to do with blanket responses to widespread disagreements in moral theory. While neither the existence nor the awareness of such disagreements are new, some ways of collapsing the fact/value dichotomy prompt generalised scepticism that ultimately undermines both value inquiries and the establishment of facts. In a nutshell, the thought goes as follows. The most compelling reason for rejecting the fact/value dichotomy is epistemic rather than metaphysical: judgements of value are just as contestable as statements of facts. As a result,

when we disagree about particular values, we should endorse a procedure similar to what we would deploy when we find ourselves disagreeing about states of affairs (cf. McGrath 2008). In such standard cases, the discovery of intractable disagreement with our epistemic peers should reduce confidence in our initial views leading to the suspension of any belief about matters contested in this way. Coming to appreciate the full extent of disagreements among respectable moral theories, many of them centuries-old, should have a similar effect. Yet, with respect to first-order morality, this effect would amount to corruption (cf. Setiya 2010). For it encourages lack of commitment and provides individuals with the means to spin ad hoc justifications for whatever they feel like doing, just by swapping moral theories around. This looks like a counterpart to what – according to the intersecting empirical and philosophical literatures on rationalisation – is readily happening on the side of factual beliefs. Such beliefs are often, if not overwhelmingly, formed by adapting available evidence to fit subjective expectations. Once formed, rationalising beliefs prove particularly resilient to emerging pieces of counterevidence which get discounted as irrelevant, unreliable or inconclusive. Crucially, some of the underlying mechanisms operate outside of conscious awareness, e.g. by priming or diverting attention. As Schwitzgebel and Ellis (2017, p. 170) clarify:

Rationalisation occurs when a person favours a particular conclusion as a result of some factor (such as self-interest) that is of little justificatory epistemic relevance. The thinker then seeks an adequate justification for that conclusion but the very factor responsible for her favouring it now biases how the research for justification unfolds. As a result of an epistemically illegitimate investigation, the person identifies and endorses a justification that makes no mention of the distorting factor that has helped guide her search.

One possible outcome of rationalisation is the further entrenchment of contrasting positions. Like failing commitment with respect to values, this kind of self-assurance would also hinder progress toward greater agreement. While in the former case, disagreement is taken as

compelling evidence that no position is better than the others, in the latter case, disagreement is underplayed as peripheral to the assessment of evidence. Schwitzgebel and Ellis (2017, p.171) highlight this feature of rationalisation: it not only ‘obstructs the critical evaluation of one’s own reasoning’; in so doing, it also ‘impedes the productive exchange of reasons and ideas among well-meaning interlocutors’.

The disentangling strategy under consideration is particularly well-suited to counter the globalised scepticism that underlies such responses. As the earlier discussion showed, its two strands operate in tandem to help identify correctly what we disagree about and how deep that disagreement is. At times, we are able to step back a level to a thinner, shared understanding and then advance together to reach a thicker, still shared understanding that may, or not, match any of the initial views on the table. At others, disagreement will not be as fully overcome. Yet, even then, disentangling serves a constitutive role, building a diverse community of epistemic peers. In fact, following from the argument for explicit inclusion of theoretical-explanatory values on a par with ethical and political ones in the context of both analytic dimensions, value independence vs. value dependence and value neutrality vs. value non-neutrality, this constitutive role may just as often involve bringing deeper disagreements to the surface, as a first step to ending unjust theorising. Importantly, the dialogical aspect of disentangling is as vital for value-neutral investigations, whether wide or narrow in scope, as for the conceptual analysis of thick evaluations. As outlined in our concise reconstruction of reasoning toward generalised scepticism, seemingly intractable disagreements of fact are a major motivating factor. By creating a community of practice that does not presuppose agreement but search as its common ground, the underlying disentangling strategy can effectively limit the scope for unchecked rationalisations.

The second issue in moral epistemology that this strategy can help us address is debate fragmentation. Like generalised scepticism, debate fragmentation responds to collapsing the

fact/value dichotomy in a particular way. This time, the starting point is the realisation that first-order moral disagreements are often treated as acceptable, seemingly in contrast to disagreements of fact. Deeply held convictions on the impermissibility of a particular conduct are rarely cast aside merely in virtue of learning that others have no qualms about it. At a theoretical level, there is related unease with respect to the moral knowledge acquired by testimony. Many would qualify it as ‘second-hand’ (Jones 1999) if knowledge at all. At first blush, the kind of asymmetry asserted here might look like a replay of the fact/value dichotomy. However, it does not have to be so. Returning to the literature on epistemic injustice, some of the most egregious cases identified are about the comprehensive obliteration of particular standpoints. Medina (2017) proposes the term ‘hermeneutical death’ to capture the extreme nature of the epistemic harms involved when the experiences of oppressed groups and the social reality they point to are kept unintelligible. The force of the charge derives precisely from collapsing fact/value dichotomy.<sup>7</sup> This charge also presupposes firm commitment to the idea that truth is of fundamental epistemic value. Otherwise, the harms under consideration cannot be acknowledged as distinctly epistemic rather than social or political. For they not only point to unfair inequalities across intersecting dimensions of individual and collective agency. Crucially, they converge toward a comprehensive epistemology of ignorance whereby earnest inquirers are systematically obstructed in their search for the truth and end up believing – unsuspectingly – falsehoods about significant areas of their own lives.

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<sup>7</sup> The thought goes as follows: Marginalised groups are disvalued. This social fact explains why the theoretical tools needed to understand their experiences ‘from within’ are not widely accessible, if developed at all. At the same time, however, the lack of appropriate theoretical tools feeds back into the underlying attitudes that keep marginalised experiences unrecognised or poorly understood, including by the people who live them.

According to Medina, circumstances where the threat of such hermeneutical death becomes apparent, call for the epistemic equivalent of insurrection: withdrawal from projects instigated by the mainstream, including refusal to speak out when one's testimony is bound to be misheard or co-opted. As part of this process, underprivileged knowers should aim to come together and build their own alternative epistemic communities, in isolation from the mainstream.

While epistemic insurrection is a compelling approach to the extreme cases Medina discusses, such as the suppression of indigenous languages, it could also be counterproductive if extrapolated beyond the means of last resort it is supposed to be. For, once the idea of alternative epistemic communities labouring in isolation from one another settles in, epistemic achievements that challenge the status quo would become easier to ignore, fragmenting the notion of epistemic peers to identify only those whose standpoint one already shares. A disentangling strategy that pays particular attention to signs of unjust theorising can offer a promising framework for epistemic peers in the making. In so doing, it would place the rational hope of collaborative inquiry on the horizon of epistemic insurrection as a distinctly epistemic engagement.

## ***5. Conclusion***

Reflecting on the nature and scope of conceptual analysis in Kramer (2018), I outlined the contours of a new, comprehensive disentangling strategy for moral epistemology. This strategy builds on the fundamental distinction between value-neutrality and value-independence as two separate aspects of methodological austerity introduced by Kramer. The significance of this project for moral epistemology becomes apparent when we consider two major challenges that arise from collapsing the fact/value dichotomy, globalised scepticism and debate

fragmentation. I showed that these challenges can be successfully addressed by a two-pronged disentangling strategy that encompasses both dimensions – value neutrality vs. value non-neutrality and value independence vs. value dependence. The success of this strategy rests on two factors. The first is broadening the scope of disentangling to include theoretical-explanatory values on a par with distinctly ethical values. The second is differentiating between wider and narrower conceptualisations of what value neutrality requires with respect to contested matters. Both aim to pre-empt unjust theorising, a distinctive form of epistemic injustice that derives from the exclusive methodological focus on ethical evaluations at the expense of epistemic ones. When these methodological conditions are fulfilled, opponents should gain the confidence to treat each other as fellow inquirers engaged in the same project, that of reducing the scope of unhelpful disagreements.

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