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A PLEA FOR NEUTRALITY

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ABSTRACT

Almagro's book contains a set of assumptions that are not compatible with one another. The first one, the distinction between the descriptive and the evaluative, is necessary to explain what's going on in many of the examples discussed throughout this paper, in which affective attitudes are promoted under the guise of purely informative utterances. This assumption plays a crucial role in Almagro's book. Secondly, some of the book's deeper insights rest on the idea that neutrality is nothing more than a myth, that there's no epistemic vantage point. There can be epistemic nodes that are better than others, but not one from which our issues can be assessed in a way that should be convincing to everyone. Finally, the third assumption is the political turn in analytic philosophy, which invites us to evaluate our philosophical positions by paying attention to their practical consequences. When taken together, however, these assumptions turn out to be inconsistent, because the political turn may require us to reclaim neutrality.

Keywords: descriptive-evaluative distinction; analytic philosophy; value neutrality.

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1. Introduction

Manuel Almagro and I were on the same side. It was the side of those who thought that there was nothing inherently, politically wrong with human nature and our epistemic practices. It was kind of a worldview. A way of looking at things and at people, of seeing yourself in others, no matter how far away they seemed to be from you. Anyone can get polarized, anyone can be taken away from their loved ones due to the nature of their beliefs; anyone can become a radical. These processes do not make you less of a person, or irrational. They can happen to anyone, and thus there's no blame attached to them. There's nothing intrinsically epistemic about these phenomena. We had strong partners on our side (Pinedo ms.; Dorst 2023; Mercier 2020; Srinivasan 2019). Politics doesn't concern our brutish nature, but rather our rights and duties towards each other, in a society of equals.

We also had formidable friends on the opposite side. These were not any friends, these were friends with whom we shared our political heart—always in the right place, a sound respect for the history and the present of emancipatory movements, and hopes and worries about the future of democracy.

> The practice of democratic politics is not predicated on human beings being naturally inclusive, respectful, or deliberate. Nor is it predicated on human beings being little epistemic calculators, mechanically updating their beliefs to accord with the evidence no matter the political context. Engaging in democratic politics consists in creating and protecting collective practices and institutions that *correct* for our crooked timber, that make us more responsive to our democratic and epistemic aims *despite* the fact that, considered as individuals, we are shoddy reasoners shot through with bias. (Lynch 2025, 56-57)

And they didn't come alone, they brought with them heavy cavalry:

> The difficulty which the mere idea of this problem lays before our eyes is this: the human being is an animal which, when it lives among others of its species, has need of a master. For he certainly misuses his freedom in regard to others of his kind; and although as a rational creature he wishes a law that sets limits to the freedom of all, his selfish animal inclination still misleads him into accepting himself from it where he may. Thus he needs a master, who breaks his stubborn will and

> necessitates him to obey a universally valid will with which everyone can be free. But where will he get this master? Nowhere else but from the human species. But then this master is exactly as much an animal who has need of a master. Try as he may, therefore, there is no seeing how he can procure a supreme power for public right that is itself just, whether he seeks it in a single person or in a society of many who are selected for it. For every one of them will always misuse his freedom when he has no one over him to exercise authority over him in accordance with the laws. The highest supreme authority, however, ought to be just in itself and yet a human being. This problem is therefore the most difficult of all; indeed, its perfect solution is even impossible; out of such crooked wood as the human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated. Only the approximation to this idea is laid upon us by nature. That it is also the latest to be worked out, follows besides from this: that it requires correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution, great experience practiced through many courses of life and beyond this a good will that is prepared to accept it; three such items are very difficult ever to find all together, and if it happens, it will be only very late, after many fruitless attempts. (Kant 1784/2009, 15-16)

We come as humans loaded with biases, overwhelmed by murky thoughts. We fail to accomplish even the most basic tasks because of our inability to think properly, to know things, and to act accordingly. We're made out of crooked timber, and only a master can save us when we decide to live in a society. When an external master is not desirable, the master needs to come from within. For Kant, it comes as conceptual mastery, experience and good will; for Lynch, it's something that needs to be accomplished in the company of others—community is our master, and the epistemic mandate is to lock arms and walk together towards truth.[1] It has always been a pleasure to disagree with them. Until it wasn't, until we weren't foes anymore. Our side, and their side; respectful but different. And then this happened. J. D. Vance happened.

J. D. Vance, vice president of the United States, visited Europe on Valentine's Day, 2025. He gave a speech at the 61st Munich Security Conference, where he hinted at a rather peculiar argument. The argument started with the idea that the biggest threat for Europe came from within—not from Russia, China, or any other external actor. The real threat, he said,

[1] I borrow this from Michael Lynch's way better phrasing, in conversation.

was that freedom of expression was under attack in Europe. Somehow, an argument that started with the premise that freedom of expression should be defended and that people should not be silenced, ended up with the claim that "in Washington, there is a new sheriff in town", and that the new sheriff had to be respected as such. From freedom of expression to the unchecked authority of the U. S. president. What was the connection?

If you are, as we are, accustomed to grand statements about freedom of expression coming from less-than-liberal quarters (if you're not, see Almagro 2025, 42 ff.), the link between this liberal ideal and the *de facto* defense of an authoritarian presidency will not come as a surprise. What is new is that this link was presented not merely as an association but as an argument in which freedom of expression served as the premise, and the conclusion was the arrival of the new sheriff in town. But where were the other premises? Authoritarianism doesn't logically follow from freedom of expression alone, no matter how much the latter might have been weaponized in recent years. J. D. Vance framed his speech as an argument, yet only hinted at its fuller form by suggesting that "people are intelligent". We're left without crucial pieces needed to reconstruct what looks like an important ideological touchstone of the new conservatives.

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait for the argument to be completed. Only eleven days later, Martin Gurri, a former CIA officer and author of the influential *The Revolt of the Public*, had a long-format conversation with Ezra Klein of The New York Times. In it, he revealed some of the missing pieces of the argument that begins with absolutism regarding freedom of expression and ends with authoritarianism. The crucial missing piece—only hinted at by J. D. Vance—was the wisdom of the American people. The public, long dismissed by the elites, has revolted against what it perceived as oppression imposed by traditional media, political elites, and other institutions. It responded by creating a populist movement that brought particularly "talented" individuals to the White House, such as Donald Trump and Elon Musk. Trump, the "Beethoven of Twitter" according to Gurri, was elected because of his exceptional intelligence and his ability to adapt to an ever-changing technological environment. Once in power, the mandate of the wise American people must be respected, and this, Gurri affirms, requires granting special leeway to the new sheriff in town—allowing him to try new things, explore new possibilities, and eventually succeed. And this is how you move from unrestricted freedom of expression to the unrestricted power of a strongman.

Here's the kicker: when asked to recommend some books to the audience, as it's customary in the Ezra Klein Show, Gurri mentioned Hugo Mercier's *Not Born Yesterday*. Hugo Mercier! One of our own! What was he doing

in such company? Striking as it was, it was perfectly explicable. In an argument that hinges on the wisdom of the public, Mercier's defense of the evolutionary role of trust and the development of epistemic vigilance provided the necessary theoretical backdrop. His claims about human cognition had become an essential premise in an argument aimed at justifying authoritarianism. They were claiming Mercier for their side. Gurri was proposing it; J. D. Vance was selling it to a worldwide audience.

This is not to suggest that the argument itself has any merit. The problem that I want to focus on here is whether there's something Mercier could do to avoid playing a role in the defense of authoritarianism. If repeated often enough, the Gurri/Vance argument would promote an association between Mercier's ideas on epistemic vigilance and a MAGA worldview, just as had previously happened with freedom of expression. There's nothing inherently MAGA about freedom of expression, and yet here we are. How could Mercier resist this fate? How could he reclaim for himself the position of the scientist, rather than that of a MAGA apologist? If the argument gained traction, if it went even mildly viral, it would become extremely difficult for Mercier to defend his neutrality.

And yet, in cases like this, this is exactly what we need: to be able to defend the neutral character of our assertions. If the theoretical positions we defend get to be glued to the promotion of particular ideologies, getting them back for the realm of theory might be extraordinarily difficult. Consider a different case, this time from Lynch:

> […] imagine a climate scientist testifying on Capitol Hill about whether climate change is real. She says it is and adds that she is only stating what the evidence clearly illustrates. In response, a senator retorts that the "witness is playing politics" since the evidence (the senator says) is "inconclusive". In most contexts, and especially during a contentious Senate hearing, the judgment that climate change is real has political meaning, since it will contribute to the political debate surrounding what to do about climate change. Does that mean we must agree that the senator is right that the scientist is "playing politics"? No. As in the case concerning conservative defenders of Confederate symbols, the scientist's judgment can have political meaning without being made for political reasons even if its truth does not depend on anything other than how the climate actually is. As we sometimes put it, judgments about climate change have become politicized. (Lynch 2025, 52)

The scientist in Lynch's example is in exactly the same position Hugo Mercier would find himself in if the Gurri/Vance argument gained traction and epistemic vigilance became associated with a MAGA worldview—a common, conventionalized way to signaling commitment to that form of life. What can the scientist do when placed in such a position? She might attempt to reclaim her status as a member of academia, cite papers, or remind everyone of the scientific consensus; but distancing herself from any political affiliation—and defending the neutral nature of her statements—could be nearly impossible, because research on climate change is often associated with liberal views on the economy, social policy, and more. Climate denialism, on the other hand, has become one of the flagships of certain strands of conservatism. What can a climate scientist do to ensure that her statements are received in a non-partisan way?

Difficult as this may be, it is precisely what we need in order to secure the public support required when evidence-based policies are at stake. Without such support, these policies will never get off the ground. Public backing is equally important when the allocation of research funding is contested. Research areas perceived as contentious by the public risk losing funding when policymakers attempt to balance their political priorities, their need to remain in office, and the demands of other policies that they regard as valuable and that also require public support. But this, that we absolutely need, is at odds with some of the central claims in Manuel Almagro's book. So am I on Kant's side now? We'll see about that.

The problem with the kinds of cases introduced above is that they're not anecdotal, isolated exceptions to an otherwise perfectly functioning informational environment in which theoretical claims are almost never weaponized against the will of their creators. The problem for Manuel Almagro's position is that this phenomenon does not affect merely tangential claims, but some of the central tenets of his book. As we will explore in the remainder of this paper, cases like the ones presented here are possible only because of the inherent tension amongst three different commitments, without which the perspective expressed in the book—admirable as it is—becomes a waterless mill. These central commitments are: the distinction between descriptive and evaluative uses of language, the rejection of the myth of neutrality, and the political turn in analytic philosophy. We'll discuss these ideas in turn.

2. Descriptive and Evaluative Uses of Language

The book assumes that a distinction can be drawn between descriptive and evaluative/normative uses of language. This distinction is introduced, smartly, without relying on a prior separation between facts and values or on a principled difference between belief-like and desire-like mental states. Affective polarization doesn't concern what we individually carry in our heads, but our commitments—individual, social and structural—to certain courses of action. This doesn't mean that we cannot talk about people's mental states when discussing whether a community is polarized. We do discuss their mental states, and for good reason. But determining whether a given individual is in a particular mental state requires taking into account circumstances that far exceed the limits established by their forehead and their nape. This is not to say, either, that we should inspect the subject's surroundings to check whether they have a calendar, a notebook, and so on, in order to decide whether they have an appointment at four o'clock. Rather, the position assumed throughout the book is that the kinds of mental states that characterize affective polarization can only be reasonably assessed via considerations that do not concern how objects in our surroundings are represented in space and time. These considerations are evaluative in nature: they cannot be settled once and for all by appealing to any agreed-upon set of facts; they reflect a clash of standards, yet they're not about those standards either.

Two crucial components in the book's argument cannot be understood without this assumption—the assumption that there's a distinction to be drawn between descriptive and evaluative uses of language. The first concerns the discussion of cases in which desire-like attitudes, attitudes conceptually linked to certain courses of action, are expressed through statements that appear, on the surface, to be purely descriptive (Almagro 2025, 125 ff.). The second concerns the experiments on offensiveness (see ibid., 104 ff.), in which subjects display a less-than-ideal access to their own mental states. In these experiments, sentences that allow for a perfectly descriptive interpretation are introduced in contexts that lead some subjects to consider them offensive—and therefore evaluative in nature. The whole experimental design is built upon the possibility of establishing some sort of distinction between the descriptive and the evaluative.

Together, these elements of the argument allow Almagro to criticize and reinterpret some of the most common measurement tools used to assess polarization. In particular, to identify signs of affective polarization where others see ideological polarization or no polarization at all. Without the

distinction between evaluative and descriptive uses of language, these ideas lack argumentative force—they're at best useful fictions.

3. The "Myth" of Neutrality

The second assumption that I flagged earlier is the denunciation of the myth of neutrality (see Crary 2018; Almagro 2025, 71 ff.). Depending on the identity of the speaker or the topic under discussion, utterances that might otherwise be interpreted as straightforwardly factual are perceived as carrying evaluative content, contributing to the promotion of damning stereotypes about one's own group. In polarized scenarios, the tendency to interpret seemingly factual statements as evaluative grows stronger (Anderson 2011; see Almagro 2025, 125 ff.). The appearance of neutrality frequently disguises the expression of affective attitudes—attitudes that involve preferences for one group of people over others, for whatever reasons. Knowingly or unknowingly, our attempts to justify ourselves, or to persuade others of our way of seeing the world, often take the form of statements that look perfectly descriptive, statements about how things simply are. After all, who would get mad at the truth?

Good reasoning, argumentation, the pursuit of truth, being rational over being emotional—these have all become tropes repeatedly used to package extreme content. Neutrality signaling is an especially effective way of promoting damaging stereotypes: it helps to attract newcomers to our niche and pushes one's own group toward particular courses of action. The rise of the "science" of race (see Saini 2019), or the effort to present reactionary views on gender as the mere product of biology (see Butler 2024), to name just two important cases, reveals how crucial it is to have neutrality on one's side. No one can accuse you of bigotry when you're simply—neutrally—stating the facts. If you get mad at me for saying something that every rational human being should accept, then it's your feelings that are wrong, not me.

In what follows, to illustrate the role of neutrality in ideology-laden stances, we will make extensive use of an example from Didier Fassin's *The Worlds of Public Health*. In France, the number of children believed to be affected by "saturnine impregnation" rose from just a few cases in the mid-80s to 85500 cases officially recognized in children aged one to six by the mid 90's. This form of childhood lead poisoning had characteristic psychomotor effects, affected school performance, was associated with lower IQ, inappropriate behavior in class, and, in severe cases, caused abdominal pain, uncontrollable vomiting and even death. The main cause of the pathology was believed to be the lead present in

paint. Although lead content in paint had been controlled for decades in France, very old housing still preserved old walls painted before the change in regulation. The child whose case opens Fassin's exploration arrived at a hospital almost in a coma, with a level of lead in their blood more than ten times the maximum established at the time as safe.

There were no significant changes in the amount of lead present in old paint, in the air, or in water, between the mid-80's and the mid-90's. The reason for the gap lay instead in the way cases were assessed. Studies from the 80's counted only clinical cases described in the medical literature. By the mid-90's, however, a different approach had been adopted. First, the blood-lead level deemed "safe" had been reduced by two thirds. Once attention was paid to the recognizable effects of the pathology, it became clear that the amount of lead that could be considered safe was far lower than previously assumed. Besides, a projection to the whole French population was made out of a large significant sample of children aged one to six. These two factors explain how a handful of recognized cases in the 1980s turned into 85500 a decade later—despite no significant environmental changes.

What couldn't be explained was the origin of the children affected by saturnine impregnation. A large study conducted by the end of the 1980s, Fassin reports, concluded that 99% of the kids affected by lead poisoning were of African origin, most of them from families from Sub-Saharan countries. Was this accurate? What was affecting these kids in such a disproportionate way? Were the living conditions of these families so different from those of other families in France? Fassin points to two provisos that are essential to understand the explanations that were subsequently proposed. First, the kind of investment required to relocate families living in rundown urban housing was terribly expensive. Second, French society is, according to Fassin, particularly fond of a specific form of racism: color-blindness.

> Indeed, French society is particularly sensitive, not to say hostile, to any reference to race, or even more generally to anything that can lead to differentiating people on the basis of their origin. (Fassin 2023, 23)

The following explanations of the phenomenon can only be understood as expressions of an ideological stance—one that combines the assumption that fixing the effects of lead poisoning by investing a lot of money is simply not worth it, together with color-blindness or more traditional forms of racism:

Explanation 1. The study showing that 99% of the children affected by lead poisoning were of African origin was biased, because the sample was drawn from clinics mostly frequented by families of African origin.

Explanation 2. The real cause of childhood lead poisoning is poor living conditions, and thus the entire proletariat class should be equally affected by the pathology.

Explanation 3. Childhood lead poisoning is caused by cultural practices of families of African origin. The make-up they use, the pots they use to cook, or the ink of Qur'anic tablets, etc.

Explanation 4. Children from families of African origin are particularly prone to lead poisoning because they have the habit of eating paint flakes. This tendency is inherited from a cultural practice/pathological disorder (geophagy/pica), characterized by the consumption of plastic, paper, and, especially, soil. Geophagy is a common practice in certain West African countries.

Explanations 1 and 2, on the one hand, come naturally to those who think that childhood lead poisoning should not be explained by reference to the racial origin of the children affected. Color-blindness, in this context, not only obscures more accurate hypotheses but also contributes to the discrimination of families of Sub-Saharan origin by making their specific problems invisible. Even though the clinics selected for the study were indeed used by a majority of families of African descent, only a quarter of the sample actually came from families of Sub-Saharan origin. Thus, the bias in the sample is not causing the appalling result of 99%. As for Explanation 2, the vast majority of the French proletariat was not affected by childhood lead poisoning in anything like this proportion. There was something obviously peculiar about families of African origin.

Explanations 3 and 4, on the other hand, are more readily accepted by those inclined to believe that there is something characteristic—and wrong—about certain ethnicities. Culturalist explanations, in particular, assume that the problem lies not in socio-economic circumstances but in the distinctive practices and choices of these communities, which are then taken to contribute to their poor living conditions. Yet neither the cosmetics used by these families nor the ink of Qur'anic tablets could be systematically linked to childhood lead poisoning. The cooking pots used by these families were, to the apparent surprise of the researchers pursuing this hypothesis, regular pots, the same pots used throughout France. Finally, Explanation 4 was incompatible with findings on childhood lead poisoning in other countries, which showed that the pathology affected

very specific communities—Black children, in the United States—and that these communities couldn't be associated, directly or indirectly, with either pica or geophagy.

All these hypotheses were compatible with a reluctance to spend millions of euros on renovating housing and relocating families, and each in its own way helped promote racist ideologies—ideologies that were detrimental to the living conditions of already discriminated communities. Most importantly for our purposes, all four explanations advanced this damaging ideology by claiming to stand on the side of science, of neutrality. Even though they ignored obvious alternatives, and well-established facts, they purported to be offered from a standpoint free of assumptions, from a perspective that anyone could adopt. They presented themselves as objective, as speaking from that place that we can all share if we think hard enough and don't let our feelings lead us astray. This is the myth of neutrality.

Standpoint epistemology has been battling the myth of neutrality since its inception. Epistemology is not a leveled playing field; what one can do, say or know depends heavily on the socio-normative status of the node that one occupies. A random passerby is in no position to insult you by calling you an immigrant, no matter how loudly they yell at you. In many jobs, even when women hold positions of authority in charge, their orders are interpreted as suggestions. Similarly, there is in epistemology no shining city on a hill, no vantage point from which one's judgments get to be *a priori* immediately justified. "Neutral" is just another way of saying "privileged". Explanations 1-4, to our mind, clearly illustrate that privilege. They're not just false, they also fail to be "neutral".

The difference between descriptive and evaluative judgments is crucial to understand the examples discussed above—those in Almagro's book, but also how Explanations 1-4 get to promote negative stereotypes despite being presented as purely descriptive scientific statements. The myth of neutrality helps explain why certain statements are particularly effective at promoting these stereotypes: they carry the allure of the "view from nowhere". Taken together, these two assumptions can be held consistently, as Almagro's book does, even if this means making it exceedingly difficult for Hugo Mercier, or the climate scientist, to resist the association between expressing certain ideas and being committed to a particular form of life. At this point, Almagro might simply decide to live with this. Every theory has undesirable consequences; these are the ones that follow from his. Mercier and the climate scientist should try to be more careful next time, or get ready for the MAGA ride.

4. The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy

Things get a tad more complicated when we add to the mix the third assumption, announced a few paragraphs above: the political turn in analytic philosophy. This assumption, made explicit in the book (2025, 94), needs some qualification. As characterized by Bordonaba-Plou, Fernández-Castro, and Torices (2022, 20), the political turn is a philosophical practice that places particular injustices in the focus of inquiry, employs the tools of analytic philosophy, and aims at intervening on those injustices, with the ultimate goal of eradicating them. For them, this is a form of activism. Almagro and Guerra (2023) criticize this conception of the political turn, in particular the idea that philosophy can turn into some kind of activism. The political turn, under this alternative conception, is a form of non-ideal philosophy, committed to the continuous questioning of its background assumptions and oriented toward detecting and intervening in politically harmful situations.

These two conceptions of the political turn share an important feature. They both point to a different way of evaluating philosophical positions. Providing tools for detection and intervention is the main goal of theorizing, whether one thinks that what one's doing is activism, or mere non-ideal philosophy. Philosophical stances will be thus evaluated in terms of their ability to supply such tools. A good philosophical theory will enhance our ability to fine-tune and generalize our perceptions of injustice (see Pinedo and Villanueva 2022), and to intervene in oppressive practices. Philosophical stances can be compared along these parameters, rather than assessed solely on the basis of the more classic internal and external adequacy conditions. The essential aspect of the political turn is not the focus on social and political issues—philosophy under many different guises, including some strands of analytic philosophy, has long placed these at the center of inquiry, nor is it the use of the tools of analytic philosophy to tackle these practical issues, which has been part of the tradition since its inception. The novelty lies instead in a modified stance on justification. Philosophical theories can be justified not only by looking backwards, by examining their internal and external adequacy conditions, but also by looking forward, by assessing their prospective adequacy conditions—what they will enable us to do (see Pinedo and Villanueva 2022 for some relevant examples).

The addition of this assumption has an impact on Almagro's position. Philosophical stances are to be evaluated with respect to their prospective adequacy conditions, and Almagro's position makes it really hard to resist these cases in which theoretical ideas get to be conventionally associated with undesirable political alternatives. The situations in which Hugo

Mercier and the climate scientist find themselves are, as pointed above, not isolated anecdotes. They are extreme instances of a general phenomenon: the politicization of science. They are structurally similar to many other cases. The problem can therefore be generalized. Almagro's position does not only have a problem with Mercier and with the fictional climate scientist, it has a theoretical problem.

If defending our assertions as politically neutral is the only way in which extreme cases of politicization of science can be resisted—and they should be resisted, then a theory that denounces the myth of neutrality is philosophically worse than theories that allow neutrality to be deployed in such situations. Almagro's rejection of neutrality is neither context-sensitive, nor conditional in any way. Arguing that neutrality is always an instrument of privilege, across the board, because there's no epistemic perspective meant to be shared by everyone, is not compatible with claiming that there can sometimes be politically neutral standpoints. If truth is always perspective-dependent, and there's no way to distinguish among different kinds of truths, then climate science, to name one particularly sensitive case, is doomed to be bound to one political perspective rather than others. Our chances of getting the public to support policies aimed at tackling the consequences of climate change are tantamount to our chances of making partisans change their minds on any other politically charged issue. This may sound acceptable to some. It sounds remarkably demoralizing to me.[2]

5. Where the Tension Lies

It's been our argument that Almagro's book contains a set of assumptions that are not compatible with one another. The first one, the distinction between the evaluative and the normative, is necessary to explain what's going on in many of the examples discussed throughout this paper, in which affective attitudes are promoted under the guise of purely informative utterances. This assumption also plays a crucial role in Almagro's book, as we have seen. Secondly, some of the book's deeper insights rest on the idea that neutrality is nothing more than a myth, that there's no epistemic vantage point. There can be epistemic nodes that are better than others, but not one from which our issues can be assessed in a

[2] As an anonymous referee correctly points out, unmasking the evaluative nature of certain claims presented as factual seems difficult to reconcile with the vindication of traditional epistemic values. Even though the obvious alternative would be to focus on the notion of truth, and either go deflationist or pluralist, I'd rather like to explore the other side of the tension, and better understand what it is to question the descriptive appearance of a claim. This, nevertheless, far exceeds what I can accomplish in this paper.

way that should be convincing to everyone. Finally, the third assumption is the political turn in analytic philosophy, which invites us to evaluate our philosophical positions by paying attention to their practical consequences. When taken together, however, these assumptions turn out to be inconsistent, because the political turn may require us to reclaim neutrality.

Let's go back to Fassin's example. Explanations 1-4 were meant to convey purely descriptive information about the origin and specificity of saturnine impregnation in France. A biased sample, the fate of the proletariat, and various cultural features were put forward to explain why 99% of the children affected by childhood lead poisoning came from families of African origin. Descriptive only in appearance, 1-4 promoted racist stereotypes—whether in the form of color-blindness, or more traditional racist beliefs—and freed the authorities from any serious responsibility, the kind of responsibility that costs a lot of money. But 1-4 were not only subreptitious vehicles for racist attitudes; they were also, crucially, false. Strikingly, their falsity is precisely what makes them such a compelling example of an inappropriate conflation of the evaluative and the descriptive.[3] We recognize that something else might be going on because intelligent people do not make these kinds of mistakes—whether by misinterpreting the evidence or by ignoring far more plausible hypotheses to account for the phenomenon.

Fassin solves the mystery for us. Children were poisoned not only through the ingestion of paint flakes but also by inhaling lead particles suspended in dust. In other contexts, such as the United States, the inhalation of dust particles may be doing most of the heavy lifting. In addition, the highly specific living conditions of families of African origin can be explained by the history of immigration in France. Immigrant workers moved to the country only to be rendered jobless and powerless by successive economic crises. This forced families of African origin to occupy rundown urban housing, to a much greater extent than any other community in France. It's precisely this type of housing that still had lead-based paint on its walls. Finally, the number of cases seemed to multiply between the mid-80's and the mid-90's for two different reasons: changes in measurement strategies and the progressive lowering of the blood-lead level considered safe.

To understand saturnine impregnation in France, we must take into consideration not only the significant changes in how the pathology is diagnosed and described, but also, literally, the facts of the matter. The

[3] As an anonymous referee points out, I talk about the "conflation" of the evaluative and the descriptive in two different senses throughout the paper. Sometimes, it's meant to convey the idea that the descriptive is disguised as evaluative, or the other way around. Some other times it simply means that claims include descriptive and evaluative elements altogether.

level of lead considered safe might be perspective-dependent, since it's related to which effects are considered acceptable. But whether the ink used to make Qur'anic tablets has anything to do with the disease is not perspective-dependent. That the pots used to cook within these communities are exactly the same as the ones used in the rest of France is a fact, it does not depend on who's assessing it.

Being able to recognize instances in which ideology is promoted via seemingly descriptive statements requires more than noticing how often neutrality is invoked from a position of privilege. It also requires acknowledging that factual discourse can be turned into something sinister when it becomes associated with certain forms of life. Resisting this may require vindicating the neutral status of our talking about facts. It's not only about spotting evaluative stains in our factual discourse, it's also a matter of defending the neutral, factual, nature of our statements when circumstances demand it.

6. Concluding Remarks

Manuel Almagro and I used to be on the same side. Now we're bound to be beefing about neutrality. Yes, he has an outstanding book out. Not impressed. He's pushed forward this framework that I saw him develop in a way that I didn't think was possible at first. Again, not impressed. He even got shortlisted for a huge prize![4] Not impressed! He didn't win the prize after all… Still, this book offers an updated overview of the most recent literature on polarization, and a novel, thought provoking and original, take on the issue. It can be enjoyed, I imagine, by big portions of the general public, interested in politics and public opinion, especially by those with a philosophical inclination. If you appreciate getting acquainted with complex stuff on social and political issues, no matter your background, then I'd suggest you read this book. It'll be worth your time. If you're an academic working on polarization, belief update or the dynamics of public opinion, whether you are a philosopher, a political scientist or a sociologist, then I think you should read this book. If you plan to write publicly about polarization, then please read this book. Please. Read. This. Book.

[4] I'm referring to the 2025 Nayef-Al Rodhan Book Prize.

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