Civic Learning When the Facts Are Politicized:
The Value of Not Insisting on the Full Truth and Nothing but the Truth

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It's hard to deny that the social debate about climate change depends in large part on disagreements about values. After all, simply knowing a person's party affiliation is enough to make a very good guess about whether that person thinks climate change is happening and is caused primarily by human activity.[1] It wasn't always this way, but over the last decade or so, the issue has been a defining feature of the political landscape: to accept Al Gore's "inconvenient truth" is to position oneself as liberal.[2]

But values are not front and center in the debate. However important the values may be, people mostly talk about the *facts* when they debate climate change. Skeptics describe the inconvenient truth as a hoax perpetrated by China or a mistake of error-prone experts. At most, they agree that the climate is changing but assert that it changes all the time and that the science doesn't show that the current change is anthropogenic. Those who accept the reality of climate change call the skeptics "deniers" and respond to their skepticism by pointing to new information.

Social debates about highly technical topics are often like this: driven by values—sometimes merely about the relative weight or applicability of values that both sides accept, sometimes about differences over the driving values—but dwelling on facts. The debate about whether genetically modified organisms are acceptable in the food chain focuses on causal claims—the consequences for consumers' health or for the environment—but the language and imagery surrounding it often point to underlying misgivings about the human relationship to nature or the use of science. The debate about vaccination seems to feature an extraordinary amount of unshakeable misinformation, but the very difficulty of correcting these mistakes—of "myth-busting"—suggests that the underlying problem has more to do with value commitments than with providing accurate information.[3]

One common view of what's needed for better civic learning is that we need to dwell on the facts even more: The truth is submerged or misrepresented, and the first step is to bring the truth to light. The view here is the "deficit model" of public understanding: the public just lacks understanding of the technical complexities of an issue, and if we can figure out how to correct that lack, then we can turn to the truly unending issue of value disagreements and see if we can find a way of compromising on policy decisions. This is one way of interpreting the assertion that public policy should be "science-based": we should start the debate by setting out a good factual grounding and work from there toward good policy—a process that presumably will require addressing some disagreements about values. Some people hate having the government telling people what to do, for example; good policy-making will somehow have to involve a discussion about the reach of individual liberty. (Sometimes, however, people seem to talk about "science-based" policy-making as if the values drop out of the process altogether: if the facts are settled, then the right course of action will quickly be pretty clear.)

But this picture of science-based policy-making is implausible. As the debates about climate change, GMOs in food, and vaccination show, insisting on good facts as a way of settling debate is implausible and may even undermine debate. Effective civic learning requires a

more nuanced approach. To some extent and with some important caveats, we should open up the facts to the same debate we envision having about values.

Facts and Values

The problem is that the facts are bound up with values in ways that make it impossible to discuss them without implicating one's commitments about values.

One comparatively simple and straightforward way in which facts are bound up with values has to do with some of the cognitive biases that have been described in behavioral economics and moral psychology. We humans appraise the world in ways that often do not seem to make sense, at least in light economic theory about how people make decisions.[4] For example, we tend to assign a thing more value if we already have it and are contemplating whether to give it up than we do if we are contemplating whether to acquire it. We generally tend to prefer the status quo so much that we may prefer the status quo more than an alternative state of affairs even if simple economics says the alternative is better. We also tend to dislike risk and uncertainty more than game theory says we should. Such biases can indirectly influence our basic understanding of the facts, since they can give us reasons to opt for one theory of what's going on in our world rather than another: a theory that gives assurance of stability and lets us carry on with business as usual will tend to look better to us. That puts an "inconvenient" truth instantly at a disadvantage. (_____'s essay in this report explores the role of biases with respect to the formulation of scientific knowledge.)

Because these tendencies are often seen by experts as irrational, it's tempting to try to find ways of overruling them. From the layperson's perspective, however, they do not necessarily conflict with reason. In standard impact assessment mechanisms such as cost-benefit analysis, which are highly mathematical, risk is understood merely as the likelihood of an outcome and is represented as a percentage by which an outcome can be discounted to determine its expected impact: if one possible outcome is a 55 percent chance of death or joblessness, then the formula for its impact would be 0.55 times whatever weight is given to that outcome. Uncertainty just means we're not sure about the percentage, making the calculation of impact vague or impossible. The problem is that when real people make choices, they attach a deeper disvalue to risk and uncertainty than is modelled in the formulae: even if two outcomes turn out to be the same once one does the math, people tend to choose the outcome with less risk and less uncertainty.

Biases are also linked to cognitive heuristics. The core insight here is that rationality is bounded: when we make decisions, we cannot independently investigate every relevant factual issue in the way a perfectly rational agent might do, and we rely—must rely and rationally rely—on cognitive shortcuts: we develop standard responses to certain kinds of scenarios; we simplify choices by setting good-enough goals for the decision, somewhat arbitrarily gravitating toward some alternatives and not bothering to investigate every possible alternative (the "satisficing" strategy); and we allow ourselves to be guided by some of our cognitive biases (such as the "availability" heuristic, according to which people gravitate toward ideas that come most quickly to mind). These shortcuts therefore reflect, to some extent, some of our values.[5]

Taken together, the variances between how the public thinks about a scientific topic and what experts say about it can mean that the experts' claims are very much up for debate. People may be acting perfectly reasonably—if "acting reasonably" means something like *thinking in a way that is typical of intelligent, well-informed people*—when they are suspicious about how a company or a government agency presents the outcomes of, say, a proposal to release genetically

modified mosquitoes in a community to control a public health risk, or how scientists talk about the long-term global effects of climate change.

A second set of reasons that the facts are value-laden has to do with the very nature of facts. At the most basic level, the very naming and classification of facts depend on human interests.[6] The point here is not that facts are made up or imaginary; it's that most interesting phenomena can be described and explained in many different ways and that which of these are appropriate will depend on the questions we are asking and the linguistic and scientific tools we have for answering our questions (and those tools themselves depend on what we're interested in). Whether a given sea level rise is "normal" or "unprecedented" will depend on how we make the comparisons on which those terms are based and how we examine and classify the causes of the rise. Whether it is "natural" will depend on how we understand "natural"—as equivalent to normal, as contrasted to "artificial," as contrasted to "human-dominated," or as contrasted to "supernatural," to list a few possibilities. Whether it is "dangerous" will depend (for starters) on what or whom we want protected, how we discount harms that will not happen until decades have passed, and how we think about risk and uncertainty. And all the assumptions guiding our use of these terms are connected to what we are looking for and what we are trying to prove. Moreover, the facts about socially important issues such as climate change are almost always hard to discover, hard to understand, incomplete, and revisable. (_____'s essay emphasizes the way in which different perspectives influence fact-finding.)

Sometimes, the interplay of facts and values is overplayed and taken to call facts into question more deeply than it should, leading people to deny the very possibility of truth.[7] We need not go there. To recognize that different people will frame a factual issue differently is not to say that every possible claim about sea level rise is on the same epistemic footing as every other possible claim. But the variances in how people frame an issue do mean that every claim is open in principle to cross-examination and restatement. They also generate a burden of argument, a possibility of mistrust.

Yet another way in which facts are bound up with values has to do with the role of trust. The underlying issue is that assessments of facts are almost always social processes. For an individual thinking about an even moderately complex topic, much of the information must be taken on faith: it is assumed to be likely accurate because it comes from sources that the individual regards as trustworthy. To trust somebody is in part a kind of epistemic calculation: a given source is deemed trustworthy because it has proven accurate or reliable in the past, for example, or because it engages in the right kind of social processes for generating and testing claims (as Solomon explains in this issue). But it is also a function in part of social affiliations and allegiances—where we were raised, what groups we attach ourselves to, who our friends and peers are. These have a profound influence on where we get information and how we regard it. And social and economic trends have broken or redrawn some of these epistemic lines. There is an ever-deeper distrust on both the right and left of expertise, privilege, and power. Expert-presented facts are therefore likelier to be up for debate. And epistemic trust is won, in part, precisely by not appearing to manipulate the handling of information and by making it possible to test claims about facts.

Trust is therefore connected to identity. Indeed, all these fact-value entanglements—cognitive biases and shortcuts, choices between different ways of framing a problem, decisions about whom to trust—are matters in part of identity. People tend to see things and think about things in the way others in their group do.

Debating Facts

When the idea known as democratic deliberation was first proposed, the case for it was that we needed a better way of creating policy that touched on foundational moral disagreements such as the interminable political battle over the permissibility of abortion. It was largely assumed that factual disputes, though they may be significant, are more easily addressed than moral disputes. Factual claims were treated (at least in the real world settings that the theorists of democratic deliberation were interested in) as being in principle true or false because of how they square with the world. Today, however, factual disputes are sometimes perceived as having the same "foundational" quality that can make moral disputes so hard to address, and factual claims are sometimes treated in real world settings as being merely social phenomena—accepted or not because they have won a kind of social contest. Facts have, in a sense, been assimilated in the public mind to values: they were always connected to values in the ways described above; now, increasingly, they are *seen* by participants to a public debate as depending on and reflecting values. This complicates the task confronting anyone describing or promoting public deliberation. In 1996, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson began their book on democratic deliberation with a chapter about "the persistence of moral disagreement"; today we apparently must also contend with the persistence of factual disagreement.

What to do about factual disagreement must be analogous to what Gutmann and Thompson proposed for moral disagreement. "The core idea [of democratic deliberation] is simple," they wrote. "When citizens or their representatives disagree morally, they should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions."[8] Factual disagreements that have collapsed into moral disagreements require no less.

The relationship of facts to values suggests one strategy for opening the facts up to debate: sometimes, it may be helpful to turn first to values. In short, it doesn't always make sense to think of deliberation as occurring in two sequentially distinct phases—a fact-finding discussion to get clear on the scientific parameters of the problem followed by a discussion of values to discover different perspectives and work toward policy recommendations. The facts and the values are to some extent inevitably introduced simultaneously, given how they are entangled with each other, and discussing the values up front can help address the factual disagreements.

The values that need discussing are not, of course, just the values that might be mentioned in a philosophical discussion of an issue—in a discussion about vaccination policy, for example, the choice between parents' range of freedom to make health care decisions about their children versus the state's interest in ensuring public health. Because questions of identity are at stake, the relevant values include foundational questions about who we are, why we want to participate in a debate, and how we stand with respect to other people. It may be helpful, that is, both to recognize our particularities—to allow that we are sharing our own perspectives and that our perspectives may have been shaped in thus and such ways—and to assert the commitments that in a liberal society should bind us together—what Bruce Jennings refers to as practices of recognition, of care, and of citizenship. Given how entrenched identity can be, and because beliefs associated with identity can even locate one outside the ambit of liberal society altogether, turning to values in this way is far from a perfect solution. If somebody is motivated in a policy debate partly by a belief that whites or Christians should be privileged in the law, then they are outside the ambit of a liberal democracy, and talking about values may do little good. The gaps may be unbridgeable. But, possibly, a respectful treatment of another person's concerns can help avoid or defuse disagreement about the facts. For that person, a sense that their moral

perspective is recognized and taken seriously might foster some level of trust and some willingness to let their factual claims be reassessed. For a scientific expert, being clear about values is humanizing.

In part, this is a psychological point, but in part it is also a conceptual clarification: turning to the underlying values might allow for some disentanglement of factual claims and values. It might help establish that the values' fate in public debate does not depend on conclusions about the factual claims with which they are associated, which might then make it easier to talk about the factual claims.

At the very least, turning to the values is necessary to achieve the mutual respect that is widely accepted as a hallmark of successful public deliberation: by recognizing what motivates someone, we give them full presence in a discussion. This complicates public deliberation; it is easy to suppose that what mutual respect requires in advancing and listening to factual claims is chiefly just truth-telling. We ought to tell the truth, and we have a right to demand truth-telling from others. This is not wrong, of course, but it is also not complete. No one should be lying or deliberately misinforming people, but given how facts are connected to values—and how they are *seen* as connected to values—treating factual premises in good faith also requires a recognition that facts are sometimes enshrouded in values and that the appropriate response to what seems a factual error is sometimes to turn momentarily away from the facts and ask about values. In the climate change debate, perhaps some skeptics are driven in good measure by concerns about loss of livelihood and culture and misgivings about academic experts who are seen as representing a culture that disdains their culture and ignores their interests. It may not be possible to have a productive public debate about greenhouse gases without first talking a little about what's going on in "hillbilly" culture.[9]

Another possible lesson from the relation of facts to values is that—notwithstanding the need for continuing to reason about facts—it might be wise, even necessary, to disengage to the extent possible from obviously politicized factual claims. Often, it does not help to insist up front on naming, framing, and explaining facts in ways that are practically inseparable from the underlying value positions that are driving the factual disagreement—and often, there is little need to do so.[10] As mayors in some Midwestern cities have apparently concluded, a lot of work can be done on the civic and economic problems posed by heavy rains and flooding rivers without getting into whether the local water problems are due to global climate change.[11] A debate about civic planning for sea level rise in Miami does not have to start by considering whether rising levels of greenhouse gases are to blame.[12] At the end of the day, an adequate response to sea level rise arguably requires addressing the global causes of climate change, but initially, it may be possible to start by considering zoning ordinances and drainage plans. Looking at the global problems in their local context can shift attention from national political commitments to local shared vulnerabilities, and it can locate the discussion in person-to-person conversations rather than in national political debates.

In part, this is a practical point, but in part it is also an attempt to live up to the goal of recognizing and taking seriously participants' potentially different values. One should try not to exclude others' values, but some factual claims are so tightly connected to value stances that to accept them would be seen as accepting the connected values. To the extent possible, then, one should not insist on laying out the facts in a way that would tend to exclude some of the values right from the start. It might be helpful to try to approach them indirectly, by focusing on more local, personal, immediate problems.

Disengaging from politicized facts is not always possible, of course. A discussion of the merits of a cap and trade plan for greenhouse gases can go only so far without a discussion of the evidence that human-generated GHGs are the driving factor behind climate change. The third lesson, then, from the connection of facts to values is that the factual claims must be engaged—"that we should continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions"—and that when we do so, how we should debate the facts is more like how we should debate values than may at first appear. The different values held by participants in a debate deserve to be aired and discussed; so do the different factual claims associated with those values, at least if they are offered in good faith.

This is not to say that out and out lies and impossibilities deserve equal time with the views of recognized scientific experts or that social media companies should take no actions to limit the deliberate spread of misinformation. It is only to say that sometimes, claims that are widely debunked in the halls of science should still get a hearing in the court of public opinion. We should not allow Russian hackers to get us to believe wild impossibilities, but George Will should be allowed to challenge the going expert view about how the climate is changing,[13] and Bret Stephens should not have been ridiculed for saying that "Claiming total certainty about the science traduces the spirit of science and creates openings for doubt whenever a climate claim proves wrong."[14] As Stephens goes on to explain, "Demanding abrupt and expensive changes in public policy raises fair questions about ideological intentions. Censoriously asserting one's moral superiority and treating skeptics as imbeciles and deplorables wins few converts."

Accuracy and Legitimacy

The implication of the embroilment of facts with values is that the civic values that are required for and advanced by public deliberation—trust, equality, mutual respect—require respectful consideration of competing factual claims in somewhat the way they require respectful consideration of competing values claims. We cannot just shut down people who distrustful of important and accurate factual claims. The practical goal that motivates public deliberation in the first place—that is, of producing guidance that has a chance of being taken up in public policy—generates a reason to open up the facts for discussion, insofar as debate seen by the public as addressing the important issues is likelier to win public acceptance.

Exactly what is required to allow for a respectful and productive debate about the facts will depend on details—the goals of the discussion, the questions discussed, the views represented, the audience, and so on. In practice, it might not turn out to be a very radical idea. A "mini-public"-style public deliberative project about climate change would bring in experts representing a range of views and would allow participants to put any good-faith question to them. The experts might be limited to explaining what _____ describes as "legitimate science," but the nature of legitimate science and the limits to the idea of "objectivity" should be recognized and perhaps explicitly explained.

If experts to be regarded as experts, it's important that they relate to their audiences appropriately, which suggests one final point. The common but mistaken picture of good public debate as requiring good facts right at the outset supposes that debate is legitimate only if it is factually accurate. Legitimate public debate, then, prioritizes expertise, because after all the experts know better. But the theory of public deliberation suggests that the relationship of legitimacy and expertise goes both ways. If we think of the legitimacy of public policy as requiring that the public has in some sense endorsed it, perhaps even participated in the decision-making that led to it, then legitimacy requires that the public has been able to have the kind of

debate that is necessary for public endorsement, which requires that the public's views be aired—which requires that the public's views of the facts be debated. Legitimate public debate requires expertise but also leaves the status of expertise open to public debate, on the theory (which is very Deweyan) that knowledge acquisition is a social process (_____ develops this point in more detail).

The bottom line is that we cannot address the public distrust of expertise by simply insisting on importance of expertise. Now that we have realized that facts are entangled with values, we must find ways of opening up disagreements about facts to public debate, just as we earlier realized should be done with values. We must hope that the bad claims will eventually be eliminated—and to make that hope realistic, we must develop processes that encourage the kind of give-and-take that can weed out bad claims and discourage the outrage- and shock-based communications that foster misinformation. Developing the right processes for debating facts, it turns out, is how science itself works, and it is therefore what the phrase "science-based policy-making" should mean.

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