Chapter 92
Rethinking the Fact–Value Split:
A Place for Religion in the Public Square?

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural, western societies are quite secular, and the secular-sacred divide has been shaped by the fact-value split. But, the fact-value split also influences many other cultures, including in Latin and South America and East Asia. On it, science yields knowledge, but religion and ethics yield opinions and values. Closely related is the public-private split: governments should act on public reasons (ones based on science), and not private ones (ones based on religious and ethical views). Such science is methodologically naturalistic, bracketing anything supernatural or non-physical. This science usually presupposes ontological naturalism: what exists is natural, or physical. But, the author will contend the fact-value split is mistaken; on naturalism, humans cannot have knowledge. At best, people only have interpretations, even in science. However, the author also will argue that people can have moral and religious knowledge. If so, there will be many practical implications for public policy and religious practice.

INTRODUCTION

At least in multicultural, western societies, people clearly live in a secular age. That does not mean that religion is no longer playing active roles in many westerners' lives, for obviously it does. But how religion should interface with the public square has changed significantly over the years, such that in these societies, the secular-sacred divide now is driven by an ideology that often functions simply at an axiomatic level. This ideology is about what counts as knowledge, for which, in this essay, the author will utilize the standard, philosophical definition of justified true belief.

This ideological assumption is the fact-value split, according to which science gives us knowledge of facts, but religion and ethics are not really subjects in which humans can have knowledge; rather, they belong to the "realm" of opinions, preferences, and values. Now, the fact-value split relates closely with the public-private split, on which governments are supposed to act on public reasons, i.e., ones that are

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based on what can be known from science, and not merely private reasons, which are taken to stem from religious and ethical views. So, by appealing to scientific findings, policy makers can be seen as grounding their decisions in knowledge that is objective and neutral, and not in sectarian, religious opinions.

The kind of science presupposed in the fact-value split is methodologically naturalistic, to say the least. Such scientific practice should bracket any religious or supernatural considerations, and anything not knowable by the senses (such as essential natures, and mental states like thoughts, beliefs, desires, and experiences), as well as immaterial causes (e.g., God, angels, and/or humans' souls as agents). But, this view also usually presupposes ontological naturalism; i.e., all that exists in the actual universe is natural, or (usually) just physical; there is nothing supernatural or immaterial. Combined, we can call this overall view scientific naturalism.

Thus, it is relatively easy to explain why the fact-value split marginalizes religious voices from the public square. They simply cannot offer knowledge, whether for policymaking on ethical issues, education, constitutional-legal interpretation, etc. Still, in public policy, societies must address several moral questions, just as a practical fact of life. To do so, it seems their basis must be scientific reasons, to which (allegedly) all people can assent. Furthermore, if policy makers were to use religious reasons for their decisions, they thereby could be endorsing the existence of various immaterial entities, which simply cannot be known to exist on the basis of scientific naturalism.

But, it is not only people in multicultural, western societies who are affected by the fact-value split and ontological naturalism. Indeed, their influences have spread to many other cultures and societies, such as in Latin and South America. There, the political and cultural patterns of the United States are followed closely. So, naturalism and the fact-value split influence academics, political elites, and those with higher levels of education and purchasing power. And, in post-World War II East Asia, western science and its attitudes were brought to former British colonies, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as to Korea and Japan through U.S. led reconstruction.

However, perhaps people should reconsider the fact-value split. Though they often assume its validity, can it withstand scrutiny? The author will argue that it cannot; historically, people have made several crucial mistakes that have led to the current mindset. Indeed, the author will argue that people cannot have knowledge given the ontology of naturalism. If so, the "fact" side of the split will be undermined. But, on the "values" side, it seems there are many things people can know in ethics and even religion. These findings will require a reevaluation of public policy making, for since religiously-based arguments can give us knowledge of truth, they should not be excluded *a priori* from the public square.

To help develop this thesis, the paper will explore the rise of the fact-value split in its historical context, to help show why it arose to its present status. Then the author will use the work of John Rawls as an example of how the fact-value split can function to segregate the public from the private realms in society. Rawls (1993) develops a secular, "public" basis for political liberalism, and he relegates moral, religious, and philosophical views to private, "competing doctrines," which he thinks should not be the basis for public policy. But then the paper will shift to examine critically humans' abilities to have knowledge based on the ontology of naturalism. Indeed, a key finding will be that knowledge is not indifferent to ontology, and that a different ontology than that of naturalism is necessary for knowledge. In turn, those considerations will lead to an argument that shows humans can have knowledge in the fields of ethics and religion. Then the paper will focus upon several implications for public policy and religious practice.