Improving concepts, reshaping values: pragmatism and ameliorative projects

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that positions from the historical tradition of pragmatism can offer insights into the role that values play in ameliorative projects. By focusing on Sally Haslanger's ameliorative project regarding gender, I will try to show how the Deweyan idea of the circuit provides a convincing understanding of the mutual interplay between values and conceptual revision within ameliorative approaches. I propose to understand this circuit as a process of articulation, through which our understanding of an initially vague value becomes more detailed and fine-grained. To this end, I will focus on a specific aspect of Haslanger's recent intellectual production, namely the idea that ameliorative projects are inspired and organized by partially indeterminate values. In the final part of the paper, I will discuss a potential moral and political pitfall associated with ameliorative projects – i.e. the proliferation of cultural bubbles which are mutually exclusive and unable to communicate among themselves. This discussion addresses a further challenge for implementation, which is connected to the field of values, and not merely to the domain of concepts.

In their guided tour to conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics, Cappelen and Plunkett (2020) effectively sum up the nature and the aims of projects in conceptual engineering. According to their definition, conceptual engineering is concerned with the assessment and improvement of concepts. Conceptual engineering understands concepts and representational devices as tools that serve different aims – e.g. epistemic, social, moral, political aims (Cappelen 2018; Cappelen and Plunkett 2020; Brigandt 2011; Burgess and Plunkett 2013). Consequently, one of the main concerns of conceptual engineering is to assess defects that hinder the use of a specific concept or produce undesirable

consequences. Potential defects include: cognitive defects undermining our ability to reason properly; moral or political defects undermining moral or political values of various sorts; theoretical defects undermining progress within some theoretical field, or semantic defects, where the semantic value is incoherent, incomplete,

or missing (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020). This paper will engage with the discussion regarding potential moral and political defects.

The idea that values inspire and organize various kinds of conceptual engineering projects is uncontroversial. However, the exact role played by values in these projects is not clear. Do values work as external criteria, assessing the outcomes of conceptual revision from an outward position? Or do the outcomes of conceptual revision involve a feedback effect on the definition and the understanding of these values? Do the ways in which revised value-laden concepts are used involve a reshaping of the inspiring values?

In this paper, I will tackle these issues by arguing that not only do values motivate projects in conceptual engineering, but conceptual revisions also contribute to reshaping the value that motivated the revision in the first place. Specifically, I propose an iterative process based on Dewey's account of a value-concept-circuit.[1] This means that values inspiring specific practices of conceptual engineering should not be understood as purely external normative criteria. Rather, the outcomes of value-laden conceptual inquiry can have a feedback effect in our understanding of these values.

In section 1, I will present Haslanger's ameliorative project regarding gender, introduced in her 2000 paper Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be? focusing on how this project is clearly inspired by a value – i.e. social justice. In section 2, I will show how our understanding of the role played by values in ameliorative projects can benefit from a discussion with Dewey's idea of the values–concepts circuit. In section 3, I will discuss how the mechanism of the values–concepts circuit can be nicely captured by the idea of articulation. This means that the application of revised value-laden concepts has the possibility to further enrich the meaning of the starting value by revealing new and unexpected situations in which this value is relevant. Finally, in section 4, I will investigate potential further complications concerning the interaction between values and conceptual amelioration. Specifically, I will argue that

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[1] In recent times, various authors have discussed the relation between pragmatism and conceptual engineering. For a Rortyan perspective on the incompatibility between pragmatism and conceptual engineering, see Gascoigne (2016, 2021). For a more reconciliatory perspective on this point, directly inspired by C.I. Lewis and Frank Ramsey, see Misak (2022). In this paper, I will focus more specifically on Dewey's perspective, which I believe can be particularly productive for the issues discussed in this context. Yet, the Deweyan approach adopted here shares at least three aspects highlighted by Misak's pragmatist reconstruction, according to which a concept: (A) is evolving, social, and contested; (B) is captured by a set of practices played out and assessed in action; C) can be changed by our practices, so that it fits better with the world and our values (Misak 2022). For an interesting critical reading of Haslanger, see Gregoratto (2020).

ameliorative projects do not necessarily impede communication between cultural bubbles, each one characterized by values and concepts which are incompatible with those endorsed by other bubbles.

1. Social justice and inclusion: amelioration and gender

One of the most discussed and debated projects in conceptual engineering is the one focusing on the concept of gender. The starting point of this debate is Sally Haslanger's 2000 paper Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?. Haslanger's proposal runs as follows: instead of asking 'What is gender?', let us ask ourselves: What is the point of having this concept? What work do we want this concept to do for us? (Haslanger 2000, 33). This is the theoretical and methodological core of what she calls an ameliorative project.[2] This approach aims at assessing and revising concepts, rather than tracking their external referents (descriptive approach), or at singling out what we have in mind when we use these concepts (conceptual approach). Haslanger proposes to define women as human beings who occupy a subordinated social position on the basis of some observed and imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction (Haslanger 2000, 42). This definition leads to the – at least at first sight – controversial idea according to which we should imagine a future world without women. By this Haslanger means that if we want a society free of oppression, we should get rid of conventional gender concepts, and imagine non-subordinated genders.

In a subsequent paper, Haslanger provides further clarification of the ameliorative project presented in her 2000 paper. Haslanger clearly states that her definition of races and genders in terms of social positions is motivated by 'the quest for social justice' (Haslanger 2005, 11). The adoption of the standpoint of subordination sheds light on some facts about the lives of women that cannot be ignored by those who seek social justice. Social constructivism should be then preferred to biological essentialism not because it provides a more accurate and truthful representation of social phenomena. Rather, social constructivism does a better job in tracking those social injustices that are actively concealed by the naturalization of genders. Haslanger's

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[2] In her 2000 paper, Haslanger defines this project as analytical (Haslanger 2000, 34). Since in her following works the label 'analytic' is replaced with the term 'ameliorative', I will use the latter term throughout this essay.

revision of the concept of woman is thus instrumental to a value-laden concern, such as the fight against social injustice:

> to say that I am a white woman is to situate me in complicated and interconnected systems of privilege and subordination that are triggered by interpretations of my physical capacities and appearance. Justice requires that we undermine these systems, and in order to do so, we need conceptual categories that enable us to describe them and their effects. (Haslanger 2005, 11)

It is evident that values play a determinant role in both Haslanger's project and in the alternative proposals formulated by her critics. In Haslanger's ameliorative perspective, a definition of woman in terms of social subordination should be preferred to a biological reductionist one exactly because it sheds light on facts and social arrangements that are relevant for social justice. At the same time, contextualist alternatives to Haslanger's definition are evidently inspired by a value-laden concern, i.e. the inclusion of trans women.[3] Saul maintains that disagreements over who counts as a woman should be settled only by appealing to moral and political principles, and not by unified standards of truths providing uncontroversial facts of language (Saul 2012, 204). According to Díaz-León, the way in which we engineer and revise the concept of woman should be determined by 'our best normative and evaluative considerations concerning the putative subject, including theoretical, moral, and political considerations' (Díaz-León 2016, 251). In all these cases, moral and political values provide a standard for the evaluation of the different gender concepts.

Yet, while it is quite clear that all these projects are inspired by specific values, it is not equally clear that the process works in one direction only. We should consider the possibility that it may be best understood as working in both directions: namely, that values are reshaped by the outcomes of the processes of conceptual revision. In the following paragraphs, I will defend this hypothesis by retrieving conceptual resources from Dewey's model of the circuit.

2. Pragmatism and the values/concepts circuit

Different pragmatists have quite different ideas about the cognitive content of values: Dewey's position (Dewey 1939) could appear as excessively cognitivist from a Jamesian standpoint (James 1891). Nor is there agreement regarding the viability of relativism – Joas' position on this topic (Joas 2000) is very far from Locke's relativist standpoint

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[3] Among the most significant contributions to the discussion prompted by Haslanger (2000) one must necessarily mention Saul (2012); Díaz-León (2016; 2020); Mikkola (2008); Jenkins (2016); Bettcher (2013).

(Locke 1935). However, despite these significant differences, pragmatists generally agree on understanding values as an 'emotionally laden notion of that which is desirable' (Joas 2008, 4). This definition unites at least two significant features:

(A) Values are emotionally and affectively laden. When something is a value for us, then we will be emotionally attached to it. It would be contradictory to say: 'x is a value for me. But I don't care about x'. This affective dimension distinguishes values from norms. We can respect a norm even if we do not feel captivated and emotionally connected to it. Conversely, norms cannot produce values in themselves. We cannot value a person – e.g. by loving her – simply because of a norm.[4]

(B) Values also have a conceptual dimension: they conceptualize something as desirable. Desirability means here that values are not merely something that we actually desire, but rather something that it is worth desiring. They 'cause us to appraise our desire', either positively or negatively (Joas 2008, 4).

The conceptual dimension of values is well exemplified by Dewey's concept of circuit (1896). As Dewey makes clear in his Theory of Valuation (1939), values cannot be reduced to the mere expression of feelings, devoid of any conceptual content. On the contrary, they are provided with cognitive and conceptual content, as they help in shedding light on new unexpected facts and in selecting the facts that are relevant for our purposes. In turn, this acquired empirical knowledge helps us in gaining a more thorough and fine-grained understanding of our values. By adopting the standpoint provided by a given value, we can discover new facts and new situations that were epistemologically unavailable to us before. In addition, these new facts and situations can in turn enrich and ask for further revision of our idea of this value.

Dewey's idea of circuit can help us attain a more detailed understanding of the ways in which values and concepts interact in the case of ameliorative approaches. Haslanger's revision of the concept of woman is clearly inspired and organized around the value of social justice. Adopting her revised concept of woman might provide access to facts about our social arrangements which were previously outside the gaze of social groups and individuals.

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[4] In this context, I will not engage in a thorough analysis of the difference between norms and values. On this topic, see Railton (2003).

An example may help clarify the concept. Let us imagine that after reading Haslanger (2000) I revise my concepts of men and women along the lines introduced in her paper. In understanding these concepts in terms of asymmetrical power relations, I will become particularly attentive to the dimension of power and subordination involved by relations between men and women. After having acquired this revised concept of men and women, I take part in my family's traditional Christmas celebration with a critical spirit: I want to check whether the female members of my family are treated differently as women than the male members. After a close empirical observation, I realize that: (1) my sister is more often interrupted when she speaks than my brother; (2) my mother's opinion on political issues is given less weight than my father's, although my mother has a degree in political studies and my father has a degree in chemistry; (3) my grandfather continues to refill my male cousin's wine glass, while he is reluctant to pour wine to my female cousin when she asks for more. At the end of the Christmas lunch, I thus come to the following conclusion: revising my concepts of women and men along Haslanger's lines is a good idea because these revised concepts help me track some relevant information about social reality which had previously escaped my attention.

But then I realize that something more has occurred. If Haslanger's revised concepts are relevant in the case of Christmas lunch with my family, and if these revised concepts are inspired by the value of justice – the 'quest for social justice'; then I have to admit that some aspects of this event can be framed in terms of social (in)justice. Now it might be the case that before revising my concepts of men and women along Haslanger's lines, I had considered the value of social justice as something which applies only to public and institutional situations, and which can be settled through a legal or political procedure. This explicit definition of justice conflicts with the fact that I am implicitly framing some aspects of a private event – a family lunch – as relevant for social justice. This conflict prompts me to reflect: should I enrich and revise my explicit institutional understanding of justice, or should I keep it as it is? After thorough reflection, I take my decision: I will use the value of justice in a wider and richer sense, encompassing both public situations which have to be settled through a legal or political procedure and private relationships in which one is unequally treated according to the attribution of a socially conventional gender role.

The example suggests that revised concepts inspired by social justice must also prove useful in describing social reality, encompassing what social injustice is, how it functions and how it affects people. A concept

that enables critical reflection on social injustices without providing an effective description of how social injustice works would be in need of further revision. Therefore, the framework of social injustice does not simply provide an external moral standpoint for the evaluation of our concepts. Quite on the contrary, the reconstruction of a gender concept such as woman which is supposed to help us in the quest for social justice should be a productive tool with which to understand and describe new situations of social injustice. As Dewey (1939) argued, values are internal factors in inquiry, and not merely a set of external criteria of evaluation. But if values are not external to inquiry, then a new possibility emerges. The process of enrichment of our knowledge about social injustice may not leave the concept of social injustice itself untouched. By discovering new and unexpected situations and practices having to do with social justice that we could not have imagined previously, our values can be reshaped. The idea of the circuit thus makes us aware of the potential mutual influence of values, concepts and conceptualizations. It is not simply that values help us to frame situations, inquiries, and projects of conceptual revision. In turn, through an iterative process[5], the application of the revised concepts ignites a potential re-articulation of the value through its application to the unexpected situation.

We can schematize the idea of the value-concepts circuit as follows:

a value V inspires and organizes a project of conceptual revision;
b social group/individual G uses the concept C1 which is the outcomeof conceptual revision to define and understand some situations;
c in doing so, G frames – either implicitly or explicitly – these situations as relevant for V;
d the idea that these situations are relevant for V might strike G asunexpected, and prompt G to re-articulate our understanding of V. The new version of V is V1;
e V1 inspires/organizes an assessment of C1, which might lead to a con-
   ceptual revision of C1.

3. The value-concepts circuit as a process of articulation

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[5] There are important analogies between this pragmatist idea of the circuit and the processes of iteration studied by Hasok Chang (2004). See e.g., Elliott (2012). See further Kitcher (2001).

This schematic representation of the value-concepts circuit might suggest that every time one finds that a value is relevant in an unexpected situation, she automatically reshapes her understanding of this value.[6] For instance, I am very sensitive to the issue of corruption, and I take transparency to be an important anti-corruption value. I take transparency to mean something like 'acting in an open, public and legal way'. Moreover, let's say that I believe that corruption takes place exclusively at the political level. But it might be the case that I discover that corruption takes place also in public and private schools. The issue of transparency proves thus to be relevant also to an unexpected domain. Does it mean that this extension of the domain of corruption automatically reshapes my concept of corruption and my anti-corruption values?

On the one hand, it might seem evident that a simple extension of the domain of application of a value does not automatically reshape this value. In the case of anti-corruption values, it is surely possible that I discover a new unexpected social domain involved by corruption, and yet my anti-corruption values basically remain the same – I still take transparency to mean 'acting in an open, public, and legal way'. On the other hand, it is possible that differences come in degrees. There are cases in which framing an unexpected situation in terms of a specific value directly challenges my explicit definition of this value – e.g. the previous case of injustice as something concerning also private relations. In cases such as the present example of corruption, this tension remains present, potentially leading us to extend the domain in which corruption is relevant, thus enriching our idea of what does it mean to be anti-corruption. While not producing a radical change in my value of transparency, this extension of the domain of relevance of corruption might contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of the meaning of this value. For instance, I might realize that corruption practices can be more manipulative and devious than I thought. Therefore, caring about transparency still requires acting in an open and legal way, but now it demands subtler observation of the nuances of my own behavior and that of others.

In this case, the values–concepts circuit works as a process of articulation. Charles Taylor defined articulations as 'attempts to formulate what is initially inchoate, or confused, or badly formulated. But this kind of formation or reformulation does not leave its object unchanged. To give a certain articulation is to shape our sense of what

we desire or what we hold important in a certain way' (Taylor 1985, 36). In this situation, values inspiring conceptual engineering are initially at least partially inchoate and indeterminate.[7] The application of revised value-laden concepts to unexpected domains may provide the opportunity to articulate the meaning of these values. Through articulation, the meaning of the starting value undergoes a further and more fine-grained definition. This process of further articulation may occur in a more or less spontaneous way. In applying a value-laden concept to new situations, I might find myself articulating the meaning of this value beyond the explicit concept that I had in mind, leading me to spontaneously adopt this new meaning. In some other contexts – e.g. in the example of anti-corruption mentioned in the previous section – this overstepping process might ignite some doubts: should I stick to my previous value of transparency? Did I go too far in articulating its meaning? Or should I henceforth adopt this new emerging meaning?

Sally Haslanger's recent analysis of the principles of social inquiry and social critique provides a convincing representation of the interplay between partial indetermination and articulation. This emerges clearly from her discussion of Jack M. Balkin's understanding of values. According to Balkin, human beings are characterized by an 'inexhaustible drive to evaluate' (Balkin 1998, 27). In doing so, they often start with inchoate and indetermined values. These values are articulated and refined by both imagination and unexpected cultural and material changes. Values are embodied and articulated through our practices. As these practices and the social frames in which they occur change, values can be in turn created, revised and redefined. These dynamics are well exemplified by the value of justice. Our 'indeterminate value of justice' is concretized through different human institutions and practices. Moreover, justice can be redefined and re-articulated according to the new examples of injustice and oppression that human beings have to face (Balkin 1998, 30–31).

Haslanger applies Balkin's ideas about values and partial indetermination to the relation between social critique and the value of justice. When we engage in social critique, we do not need to rely on fully determined normative principles, which provide the viewpoint

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[7] The topic of articulation has been gaining a growing importance in pragmatist scholarship. See Jung (2009), Frega (2009), Viola (2022), Serrano Zamora (2017), Serrano Zamora and Santarelli (2021). I am deeply sympathetic with Matthew Congdon's brilliant and creative use of Taylor's concept of articulation (Congdon 2022).

through which to evaluate existing concepts and imagine new ones. Quite on the contrary:

> Social critique can, at the very least, rely on an inchoate and indeterminate sense of justice [...] We rely on such indeterminate ideas about what is valuable when we collect our considered judgments and intuitive principles to begin moral theorizing. (Haslanger 2021a, 149)

These partially indeterminate meanings and ideas of justice will then further be specified and articulated thanks to the relevant facts and to the practices which emerge from the viewpoint provided by this partially inchoate value. As Ronald Dworkin made clear, partial indetermination is an important feature of the way we deal with political and moral values: 'We agree – mainly – that these are values, but we do not agree about the precise character of these values' (Dworkin 2011, 160). Serrano Zamora's analysis of democratic movements proceeds along similar lines. These movements do not simply apply fixed and totally determined democratic values and principles to their practices. Rather, the practices of such movements sometimes enrich their understanding of democratic values, and consequently also their concept of what is democracy and what is democratic (Serrano Zamora 2021).

Therefore, in the context of social critique, partial indetermination is not in itself an epistemic defect of values which inspire projects of conceptual engineering and conceptual revision. On the contrary, vagueness [8] can involve respectively epistemic and political advantages. Values that are 'suggestive without being precise' can help us to track the evolution of meaning in changing social contexts, frames, and practices. While precise and fully determined normative principles may be effective in guiding our actions, they risk being continually overthrown by social changes. 'Vague articulations of our sense of justice' can inspire and direct our strategies of conceptual amelioration, and at the same time, they can be reformulated in the interaction with an evolving social reality (Haslanger 2021b, 151).[9] To

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[8] The term vagueness has been used in many ways in debates, in philosophy and in the social sciences. In the context of the present article, I use the term 'vagueness' as a synonym of partial indetermination. For recent discussions of the pragmatist understanding of vagueness, see Maddalena (2015); Viola (2019); Tiercelin (2019). It also seems to me that Haslanger in her work (see Haslanger 2021a) employs the two terms interchangeably. In doing so, I think she is not using the term 'indetermination' in the technical sense adopted in the debate on Quine's translation and reference indeterminacy (Hylton and Kemp 2020).

[9] Haslanger reports a comment by David Plunkett, according to which there are important similarities between these passages and Ronald Dworkin's interpretivism (Dworkin 2011). Conversely, Haslanger maintains that there are important differences between her view and Dworkin's (Haslanger 2020, 246). I think that the two approaches share the significant idea

sum up this point with Haslanger's own words: 'We do not need to know what justice is or have a complete moral theory to engage in social critique (thank goodness!)' (Haslanger 2021b, 147). As Haslanger (2021a) recently pointed out in discussing Iris Marion Young's (1990) social theory, a partially indeterminate idea of justice helps people to orient themselves in social reality without neglecting forms and experiences of injustice that apparently do not fit their concept of injustice. Social reality involves the ongoing emergence of new challenges and new situations of injustice which may escape our attention if we stick to a rigidly determined idea of justice.

Before going further into our discussion, a clarification needs to be made. The value-concepts circuit does not consist necessarily in a process of further determination of concepts. The iterative relation between values and concepts may yield a more refined definition of a concept, and this refinement may result in the articulation of an originally partially indetermined value – see the previous case of anti-corruption values. At the same time, value-laden concerns might prompt us to make a concept less determined than it currently is. This happened in the case of feminist value-laden studies on divorce analyzed by Elizabeth Anderson (2004). As Anderson makes clear, these studies challenged the conceptualization of divorce as nothing but rupture, trauma and loss adopted by researchers endorsing traditionalist family values. In doing so, they intentionally adopted a vaguer and more nuanced concept of divorce, understood as 'an extended process of adjustment to a new set of life circumstances that could go better or worse over time' (Stewart et al. 1997, 19). This vaguer and value-laden concept of divorce accounts for both negative and positive consequences of this re-organization of social relations'. Therefore, the iterative values-concept process does not necessarily have the Hegelian flavor of greater and greater determination.[10]

4. Amelioration and isolation: a problem for conceptual engineering?

The model of the circuit provides a theoretical tool for understanding how values and concepts interact in ameliorative projects. At the same time, in doing so it also sheds light on a problematic aspect of projects of conceptual amelioration and a further complication of what has been called the implementation challenge in conceptual engineering

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that values are often partially indeterminate. [10]I took this cutting expression from an extremely useful critical remark by Reviewer 1.

(Jorem 2021; Koch 2020; Queloz and Bieber 2021). If our revised concepts are enmeshed in circuit-like relations with overarching values, then what happens when people endorse different values? At first sight, it seems that outcomes of conceptual revision would involve only those who endorse the value in question – or even worse, a specific understanding of this specific value. If it were the case, then a situation emerges in which value-concepts circuits are enclosed in themselves and isolated one from each other. This would confirm the worst nightmares of those who are concerned by the fragmentation effects of ameliorative projects in philosophical and public discourse: a scenario of continuous culture wars between incompatible and isolated conceptual and value bubbles.

A closer examination of the subject, however, suggests that this fragmentation effect does not necessarily take place. In this sense, it is helpful to refer to Haslanger's discussion of the concept of family. According to Haslanger, generally speaking, the possession of a concept has to do with the function of responding and coordinating with others in a social environment (Haslanger 2020, 251). In the specific case of family, having this concept means having a cluster of mechanisms for processing information about the coordination of domestic life (Haslanger 2020, 250). From a semantic standpoint, this function can be instantiated in different ways, by means of different partitions of logical space. Sometimes, it happens that a specific semantic instantiation becomes so widespread and dominant that it appears as the only possible and conceivable way to fulfill the function of this concept. In the case of the concept of family, the bionormative model played a hegemonic role in many social contexts. This specific version of the concept has often been naturalized, thereby becoming the definition of family. Haslanger's point is that we can disagree about the fact that it is the only and the best semantic instantiation of family, while at the same time preserving an underlying agreement about the basic function of this concept.

As an example of this kind of disagreement, Haslanger discusses the fictional example of Albert. Albert believes that families should be limited to heterosexual bionormative nuclear families (HBNFs). He does so for moral reasons because he believes that the definition of domestic unions which do not fit with the HBNF model as families brings moral confusion and instability into our societies. Since traditions and social and moral stability are dear values to him, then he morally disagrees with the extension of the conventional concept of family to these new forms of domestic organization. In discussing this with him, Mario – a fictional character that I introduce into

Haslanger's plot – uses a functional counterargument. Mario tries to show Albert that extending the concept of families to same-sex couples does not threaten in any way our capacity to cooperate with others in organizing domestic life. If including these new forms of family preserves the functional core of the concept, why should we keep on excluding them – especially considering the suffering provoked by their exclusion? Albert can partially agree with this argument, while at the same time maintaining his position that only HBNFs are families. According to Haslanger, two different normative axes are at play in this kind of disagreement (Haslanger 2020, 253): (A) a functional axis, according to which we evaluate a concept on the basis of its adequacy in processing information for the purpose of coordination; (B) a moral/political axis, in which we can disagree for reasons that go beyond functional aspects – e.g. the way a specific concept is defined violates an important value for us.

Agreement on the functional axis and disagreement on the moral/political axis can coexist, and they often do so. Albert admits that certain kinds of domestic organization function exactly like families. Still, he sees a sense in which these forms of organization cannot be fully conceived of as families. Haslanger shows how family is a good case of dual character concepts (Knobe, Prasada, and Newman 2013). Dual character concepts allow for two different kinds of evaluation of their exemplars. The first kind of evaluation is based on a set of concrete features, while the second one is grounded on a set of abstract values realized by these features. The outcomes of these evaluations do not always go in the same direction. For instance, in my leisure time, I like watching videos of guitar players on the internet. It is often the case that in my eyes some guitar players are good guitar players. Their technique is impeccable, they have practiced extensively on their instrument and can perform a vast repertoire. At the same time, I think that they are not true guitar players because they fail to embody some values that are relevant for my judgment – they do not have any personality, they imitate other guitar players, and their videos are ostentatiously catchy.

In the case of Albert, family can be framed as a dual character concept in this sense. It is possible that Albert will never be convinced about the fact that these social arrangements will be true families in the full normative sense of the term he adopted. Still, Mario can convince Albert that same-sex families count as families because they functionally do the work we expect of a family, and that they might

even be quite effective at it.[10] Moreover, he can also show Albert that countries that legally recognize same-sex families haven't experienced the consequences Albert is worried about – i.e. the moral collapse of society.

Albert's example can be formalized in more general terms.

G_1 is an individual or a social group. G_1 revises the concept C, which fulfills function F_1. This revision is influenced and organized by value V_1. In doing so, G_1 shows that instances c_5, while being excluded from the dominant version of C: (1) can be included in C, because they fulfill F_1; (2) should be included in C, because their exclusion violates V_1. (1) and (2) inspire a semantic amelioration of C, that we call C_1.

G_2 disagrees with the new concept of C_1. The inclusion of c_5 violates V_2, which according to G_2 is a fundamental abstract value embodied and realized by C. Yet, G_2 agrees with move 1 by G_1: it is true that c_5 somehow fulfills F_1. In this sense, G_2 admits that c_5 somehow belongs to C, even if they are not true instances of C.

G_1's conceptual revision provides relevant information also for G_2, even if their value disagreement persists. And even more, G_1's valueladen reconceptualization influences G_2, which adopts the idea that C includes c_5, albeit in a limited sense. But if this influence is real, then it is false that G_1's ameliorative project isolates G_1 from G_2, like if they were living in completely separated cultural bubbles.

This reconstruction of Haslanger's 'Albert example' suggests a way to avoid the problems presented at the beginning of this section. It is true that values are a source of persisting disagreement about concepts. Social critique involves contesting something that we want to change, and this contestation normally prompts resistance, disagreement and reactions from specific individuals and social groups. Yet, it is apparently false that value-laden conceptual revisions inevitably lead to total epistemic and normative isolation between groups upholding different values. In the case discussed above, Albert partially changes his mind after the confrontation with the new value-laden revision of the concept of family. This limited change would have been impossible if the only outcome of value-laden projects of conceptual amelioration was a persisting cultural war between isolated value bubbles.

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[10] One might argue that dual character concepts sneak in through the back door of the facts-values dichotomy that the pragmatists threw out the front door. I do not think this is the case. Overcoming the fact-value dichotomy is compatible with the fact that in some cases and for specific purposes, we can focus more directly either on the concrete and descriptive features of a concept or on the abstract values that we expect the exemplars of this concept to embody.

The latter discussion does not aim at introducing a method of resolution of value conflicts in society.[11] The point here is to show that value-laden concept revisions might influence conceptualizations by individuals and groups upholding radically different values. This influence is not merely external or causal – e.g. in the sense of backlash reactions, in which groups adopt a more dogmatic version of a given concept as a response to claims and demands that they perceive as a threat to their values. In the case here discussed, Mario influences Albert's conceptualization on the basis of shared empirical knowledge about the fact that some social arrangements function better as families and with less 'negative' consequences than Albert originally thought.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to show how a pragmatist theory of values can contribute to a more detailed understanding of ameliorative projects. Specifically, I have adopted the Deweyan idea of circuit to show how values and revised concepts mutually interact and influence each other. The novelty of my approach lies in suggesting that the interplay runs in both directions. A value like social justice can inspire and organize our practices of assessment and revision of concepts. Revised concepts frame new and unexpected situations as relevant for this value, thereby prompting a new understanding, or a revision of our idea of social justice. These changes take place in a more or less reflective manner. The situations and the relevant facts that we see through our new concepts can prompt us directly to rethink the way in which we understand social justice. However, it could also ensure that we surprise ourselves, as we are already using a value in an unexpected way – e.g. by applying the concept of injustice also to the private sphere, as in the case of articulation.

The idea of the circuit can contribute to a more realistic understanding of ameliorative projects, as it involves an interweaving between concepts and practices working in two directions. First, conceptual revision projects inspired by moral and political values must refer to some extent to existing social practices. Without such a nexus, ameliorative projects risk falling back into abstract idealism.[12]

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[11] I would like to thank Reviewer 2 for prompting me to focus on this point.

[12] On how this is true not only for moral and political values but for conceptual practices at large including science and our efforts to 'get things right' see, e.g., Huetter on 'practice immanent realism' in Rorty (Huetter-Almerigi 2020; Huetter-Almerigi 2022).

Their implementation thus becomes a mysterious process that has to bridge two very heterogeneous domains, namely our revised concepts and social practices. Second, conceptual revisions are social practice themselves. To a certain extent, they are part of that same social change and evolution that at the normative level they represent as desirable.

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