Questioning neutrality to move beyond the myth of the true and fair view in accounting: A necessity to make the accounting profession accountable

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to study the extent to which the concept of neutrality in accounting contributes to the dissemination of the "true and fair view" myth and to understand how this myth can be challenged by a segment of the accounting profession concerned with societal issues. It is based on a qualitative study of 28 semi-structured interviews conducted with certified public accountants (CPAs) of various profiles. These interviews, analyzed using the Gioia methodology, reveal the issues associated with the concept of neutrality as perceived by the CPAs. By understanding the concept of neutrality mainly from the point of view of their practices, our results show that most CPAs subscribe to a technical vision of accounting that masks its political dimension. In so doing, they mediate a monological view of accounting that reflects the dominant ideology which, under the guise of neutrality, contributes to establishing the myth of the true and fair view. However, our results reveal that some CPAs, aware of the inability of such a vision of accounting to respond to societal issues, question the concept of neutrality and propose avenues of reflection to move beyond this myth, even if dialogue with the rest of the accounting profession is proving difficult.

Keywords: neutrality, ideology, myth, certified public accountants, monologic accounting

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1. Introduction

While the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report,[1] published in March 2023, continues to sound the alarm about increases in greenhouse gas emissions, the rise in global temperatures, and the growing vulnerability of ecosystems and populations, the current environmental situation is causing us to redefine the key issues, question our ways of thinking, and rethink our ways of acting. Accounting is far from neutral: It is an "essential component" of capitalism (Richard, 2010, p. 53)[2] with a well-established link to current climate and non-climate risks. A number of authors have discussed the relationship between accounting(s) and capitalism(s) and investigated the theory that accounting has always followed the development of economic models, and of successive forms of capitalism in particular (e.g., Colasse, 2012; Lemarchand & Nikitin, 2009; Richard, 2010). As Richard (2010) and Colasse (2012) in particular note, it can be seen in the transition from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism and, more recently, to financial capitalism, that accounting models have evolved and that various alternatives have coexisted in every era (e.g., the Anglo-Saxon model vs. the continental European model during the expansion of financial capitalism). The very purpose of accounting has evolved from a control and information tool for merchants in the age of merchant capitalism to a decision-making tool for investors in the age of financial capitalism (Colasse,

1. https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/
2. **Translator's note**: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.

2012). Now, increasing environmental awareness and the societal crises we are currently experiencing may result in a further transformation of the economic system, causing some authors (e.g., Kazmi *et al.*, 2016) to question the capacity of contemporary capitalism to absorb environmental criticism and reinvent itself. Standard-setters, scientists, intellectuals, and accounting professionals are also wondering how to respond to the new societal challenges, particularly how they can be translated into accounting terms. Up to now, it is clear that accounting has only tentatively considered social and environmental factors, thereby raising questions about its relevance and its ability to provide a true and fair view of the economic picture of a company's activities. The Notat–Sénard report (2018, pp. 9–10), which dealt with companies as objects of collective interest and made recommendations that contributed to the French act known as PACTE (Plan d'action pour la croissance et la transformation des entreprises; Action Plan for the Growth and Transformation of Companies), states that "any understanding of a company comes from its accounts. Yet social and environmental issues that should be taken into consideration are not included. [...] Purely financial accounting does not give a true and fair view of corporate practice." In light of the variety of interests and issues, and the potential conflicts between them, there are "as many accounting models as there are ways of depicting the world, in other words, what it seems appropriate for a company to value" (Jourdain, 2019, p. 11). Accounting is therefore forced to take sides, as it does when it prioritizes the protection of financial capital and the interests of those who hold it (e.g., Richard & Rambaud, 2020). This perspective suggests that accounting breaks with the idea of neutrality associated with it in its role as a tool for depicting the economic reality of companies in figures (Subtil-Geeraerts, 2016). As a consequence, some of the literature challenges "the hegemonic conception of accounting as a neutral, scorekeeping technology" (Sikka & Willmott, 1997, p. 162). Although the true and fair view is not just about neutrality, this issue is nevertheless a key component and one that the accounting profession is constantly debating. However, unlike other concepts that also play a part in depicting a true and fair view of a company (the concept of prudence in French accounting, for example) (e.g., Bensadon & Blum-Ebrard, 2022), few studies have focused on the concept of neutrality. That is why we have chosen to focus on the concept in this article. In France, the Autorité des normes comptables (ANC) (Accounting Standards Authority) does not currently have a definition of the concept of neutrality in its accounting standards regulations (the Plan comptable général, or PCG) and makes no explicit mention of it either. Yet, as Jérôme Haas,[3] the former chair of the ANC, pointed out, the question of neutrality has become an "obsessional topic" for accountants (p. 2). The ANC has recently taken up the issue, opening up a shared reflection on the concept of neutrality, in order potentially to modernize French standards (de Cambourg, 2019). For its part, the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) makes reference to the concept of neutrality when it states that financial statements are neutral if they do not deliberately influence users' decision-making or judgment in order to achieve a predetermined result or outcome. Gilbert Gélard, a former IASB board member, also stated in 2008 that "accounting is neither a political nor an arbitration tool,"[4] thereby becoming involved in the debate on the neutrality of accounting. In this article, we aim to contribute to these reflections by examining accounting professionals' perceptions of the concept of neutrality. To this end, we have a dual understanding of the neutrality of accounting: first, standard-setting, and second, the production of accounting information, in line with Chiapello's (2008, p. 26) definition of accounting as comprising "both accounting regulations that help set accounting standards for companies to adopt in a given territory and at a given time, and the results of the work of accounting departments and accountants themselves." In terms of information production, neutrality refers to the behavior of accountants and managers when preparing accounts and presenting information. This is called into question, for example, by earnings management (e.g., Elage & Mard, 2018; Libby *et al.*, 2015), a practice that more often than not introduces bias into the accounting information disseminated, even though in some cases it may reflect economic reality. In terms of standard-setting, neutrality refers to the political aspect of standards, as discussed by a number of authors who consider accounting to be a social construction of reality, irrespective of the frame of reference in which it appears (e.g., Chauvey *et al.*, 2015; Hines, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Tinker, 1991), or as an ideological tool (e.g., Arnold & Hammond, 1994; Berland & Pezet, 2009; Chiapello, 2005; Farjaudon & Morales, 2013). Against this backdrop, the idea of neutrality in accounting is no longer appropriate and only serves "to conceal an ideology behind pretense" (Capron, 2006, p. 155), leading several authors to consider

3. https://thejournalofregulation.com/en/article/i-24-the-principle-of-the-neutrality-of-standards-/#:~:text=The%20question%20of%20neutrality%20is,ideas%20and%20reminiscences%20to%20mind.
4. http://www.focusifrs.com/content/view/full/3428

the goal of a true and fair view as a "myth" (Morgan, 1988, p. 477) that we propose to discuss.

This study draws on previous accounting literature and on Plato's allegory of the cave to examine the extent to which the concept of neutrality in accounting contributes to disseminating the "myth of the true and fair view" and to understand how this myth may be challenged by a section of the accounting profession concerned with societal issues. In order to achieve this, we chose a qualitative methodology based on 28 semi-structured interviews with certified public accountants (CPAs) of various profiles ("traditional" CPAs and other accountants who specialize in social and/or environmental accounting). The interviews underwent content analysis using NVivo 10 software, following the principles of the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). Our results show that the concept of neutrality is one of the vehicles that help establish the myth of the true and fair view in the accounting profession. In fact, the concept of neutrality helps rally accounting professionals around a global baseline that partly forms the foundation for the accounting profession's principles and legitimacy. If the concept of neutrality is understood primarily from the perspective of CPAs' practices, our results show that most subscribe to a technical view of accounting that conceals its political dimension. As a result, since simply complying with the standard enables CPAs to believe that their practices are neutral, the concept of neutrality acts as an illusion that, by objectifying accounting practices, reassures CPAs and allows them to continue to believe in the myth of the true and fair view. By implementing standards without thinking about them, CPAs become the mediators of a monological view of accounting that translates the dominant ideology that, under the cloak of neutrality, helps establish the myth of the true and fair view. Against this backdrop, any consideration of possible alternatives regarded as "utopian" proves tricky. Our results do, however, reveal that some CPAs are questioning the myth of the true and fair view and the concept of neutrality that it helps to convey. These CPAs are aware of the current accounting system's failings in responding to societal challenges and so propose avenues for discussion in order to understand and move beyond the myth of the true and fair view, but dialogue with the rest of the profession is proving difficult. The issue at stake is the acceptance of alternative discourses, since some accounting professionals have told us that these create resistance. Our contribution is therefore an attempt to propose consideration of a set of levers that can be used to enable CPAs to break free from the myth of the true and fair view, thereby encouraging the accounting profession to concern itself with current societal issues.

Our intention in this study is to contribute to both academic and professional discussions on the myth of the true and fair view in accounting and, more generally, on the political dimension of accounting. Such discussions are vital in a context where the financialization of accounting information (Morales & Pezet, 2010) and of the economy is increasingly being challenged throughout society. On the academic level, our study forms part of the critical literature that examines the socially constructed, biased, and partisan nature of accounting (Tinker *et al.*, 1982; Tinker, 1991). It seeks to question the existence of the concept of neutrality in accounting, and more specifically in accounting standards (the IFRS and PCG models), by highlighting the risk associated with a technical or mechanical understanding of accounting based on the practice of professionals, since this would exclude all debate on the political dimension of accounting and prevent the accounting profession from addressing current societal issues.

In that respect, we make an original link between the political dimension of accounting that has been highlighted in the literature for a number of decades and more recent developments in social and environmental accounting and social reporting. From a theoretical point of view, deploying Plato's allegory of the cave, which has rarely been used in management science (with the exception, for example, of Del Bucchia *et al.*, 2020; Henderson *et al.*, 2009), enables us to contrast a key current issue for the accounting profession with an old philosophical story that provides a number of important lessons. The allegory of the cave provides a valuable interpretive model for understanding current organizational issues (Henderson *et al.*, 2009) and particularly, in our case, for understanding how the myth of the true and fair view can be challenged by a section of the accounting profession concerned about societal issues. Our findings may also be used to discuss standard-setters' decisions about whether or not to include the concept of neutrality in the conceptual frameworks for standards and how the concept should be understood. The standard-setters will undoubtedly be required to take a position in the near future on the outlook for accounting in a world on the cusp of major societal transformation.

The article is organized as follows. The second section summarizes the previous literature on the neutrality of accounting and sets out the theoretical framework for the study, with the myth as its focus. The third section describes the methodology employed. The fourth section presents the results. The fifth and final section contains a discussion of the results and the conclusion.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In this section, we begin by describing the extent to which the concept of neutrality contributes to the persistence of a monological view of accounting (2.1), within which the true and fair view is a myth that we propose to interpret in the light of Plato's allegory of the cave (2.2).

2.1. Neutrality in the service of a monological view of accounting

In the light of Chiapello's (2008) definition of accounting, the neutrality of accounting is concerned with two issues: the production of accounting information by accounting professionals, and accounting standard-setting. First, neutrality in the production of accounting information is linked to the behavior of accountants and managers when preparing accounts and presenting information and is concerned with a technical view of accounting supported by the standard-setters (2.1.1). Second, the neutrality of standard-setting raises questions about the political dimension of accounting standards and the underlying ideology (2.1.2) that relegates social and environmental issues to the background (2.1.3).

2.1.1. NEUTRALITY AND THE BEHAVIOR OF ACCOUNTANTS: A TECHNICAL VIEW OF ACCOUNTING

Accounting is, by definition, a language whose purpose is to provide users of financial statements with a "true and fair view" of a company's economic and financial situation. In the IASB's conceptual framework, revised in 2018, the concept of neutrality is one of the characteristics that accounting information must have in order to be considered a faithful representation.

Hence, paragraph 2.15 states:

> A neutral depiction is without bias in the selection or presentation of financial information. A neutral depiction is not slanted, weighted, emphasised, de-emphasised or otherwise manipulated to increase the probability that financial information will be received favourably or unfavourably by users. Neutral information does not mean information with no purpose or no influence on behaviour. On the contrary, relevant financial information is, by definition, capable of making a difference in users' decisions.

This definition is shared by the American Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB), which regards information as reliable if it is verifiable, neutral, and faithful. According to this standard, information is considered neutral if it is free from error and/or bias that might compromise the information's usefulness in decision-making. In the same vein as the two standards mentioned above, the Canadian standard-setter, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA), states that neutrality implies that accounting information provides the most faithful image possible of economic activities, thereby excluding accounting behavior that seeks a predetermined result. Hence, for example, accounting information that is influenced by earnings management practices designed to serve the purposes of the company's managers is considered nonneutral. There has been significant work on practices of this nature in accounting research (e.g., Elage & Mard, 2018; Libby *et al.*, 2015). The Canadian standard-setter further adds that financial statements that do not contain all the information required to provide a true and fair view of the transactions and realities affecting an entity's operations are not neutral. In France, the regulations governing accounting standards (the PCG) do not explicitly mention the concept of neutrality. Instead, they place greater emphasis on the principles of a true and fair view, compliance, and honesty. However, Colasse and Michaïlesco (2021) note that the notion of honesty in the French standard is similar to the concept of neutrality. The principle of honesty implies that the person responsible for producing the information is confronted with a number of decisions when applying the standard but opts for the one that best reflects the economic situation. Hence, as Colasse and Michaïlesco (2021, p. 10) state, "accountants (and, behind them, managers as the people responsible for the accounts they produce) must be as neutral as possible with regard to the information they process and present."

By focusing on the production and dissemination of accounting information, standard-setters and accounting frameworks only understand the concept of neutrality in terms of the behavior of accountants and managers when preparing accounts and presenting information, thereby reinforcing the technical view of accounting. Yet Morgan (1988, p. 477) argues that accountants "are not just technicians practising a technical craft. They are part of a much broader process of reality construction, producing partial and rather one-sided views of reality." Similarly, Berland and Pezet (2009, p. 12) note that "accounting is one of those tools that are too frequently regarded as neutral because they are technical." Several authors consider accounting to be a social construction of reality (e.g., Chauvey *et al.*, 2015; Hines, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Tinker, 1991). Amernic and Craig (2005) believe that the perceived technical role of accounting helps conceal other nontechnical roles, particularly political ones, that are revealed by examination of accounting standards. Indeed, as Jourdain (2019, pp. 11–12) points out, accounting is "a black box designed by specialists who lay claim to a scientific neutrality that conceals highly political choices. Any attempt to bring about change toward a greener, more democratic, and fairer society is doomed to failure if it does not address accounting standards." Consequently, questioning the neutrality of the accounting standards that form the basis for preparing accounting information is a vital step that we address in the next section.

2.1.2. NEUTRALITY AND THE DECISIONS MADE BY STANDARD-SETTERS: A POLITICAL VIEW OF ACCOUNTING

The issue of the political dimension of accounting standards, whether that be the Financial Accounting Standards (FAS) or the International Accounting Standards/International Financial Reporting Standards (IAS/IFRS), has been considered by a number of authors (e.g., Burlaud & Colasse, 2010; Himick & Brivot, 2018; Young, 2003; Young, 2014). Young (2003) highlights the rhetorical strategies employed in the FAS to persuade users of the validity of the standards and to silence possible alternatives or criticisms. By highlighting an imperative of "regulatory objectivity," regulators are able to adopt specific points of view that are seemingly detached from biased perspectives and hence to "purify" the debate from the polluting effect of politics (Young, 2014, p. 717). Mouck (2004, p. 529) states that some accounting representations can be described as "objective" because they are in accordance with established rules, whereas there is no indication that these rules are based on foundations that are themselves objective. The IASB's conceptual framework, which was revised in March 2018, states that the objective of financial reporting is to provide "information [...] that is useful to existing and potential investors, lenders and other creditors in making decisions relating to providing resources to the entity." This decision to prioritize investors as the primary target of accounting information reveals a Friedmanian view of the company on the part of the standard-setter, leaving the company with apparently no responsibility toward society (Colasse, 2016). This raises questions about the lack of neutrality of a standard that promotes a financialized view of the economy. In effect, with this decision, there is a particular "view of the company and its mode of governance that the standard-setter has chosen to convey" (Muller-Lagarde, 2015, p. 7). However, the standard-setter justifies its decision by invoking the difficulty of responding to different and inherently conflicting needs. Faced with the different interests involved and the potential conflicts between them, accounting is forced to take sides, something it does when it adopts a monological perspective, i.e., when it values "the information needs of the holders of financial capital, while promoting the idea that the transmitted information is objective and supposedly beneficial to all" (Godowski *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Hence, by passing on the dominant ideology, monologic accounting is falsely portrayed as "a neutral framework within which different stakeholders can pursue their interests" (Brown, 2009, p. 316). This therefore raises the question of the political orientation of the accounting system that is formed via its standard-setting process. By focusing accounting on a single type of actor, the conceptual framework of the IAS/IFRS standards provides an example of how a decision that is initially made for political reasons can simplify reality, thereby masking the underlying ideological issues. Although supporters of the adoption and development of international accounting standards claim that due process[5] means there is a democratic process for formulating and producing standards, Chantiri-Chaudemanche (2000) and Chantiri-Chaudemanche and Kahloul (2012) highlight the political nature of this process. In reality, the collegiality of due process is purely superficial, leading Burlaud and Colasse (2010, p. 159) to talk about "a rhetoric of neutrality and objectivity" whose sole aim is to legitimate the accounting standard-setting process. The position in France with regard to the standards that apply to corporate accounts (the PCG) is that the state, banks, or families that have traditionally been the main providers of funds are considered major users of accounting information (Chantiri-Chaudemanche, 2022). These standards come from a continental European accounting model that is more stakeholder-focused, whereas the Anglo-Saxon model is primarily investor-oriented (Colasse, 2012). However, this assertion needs to be put into perspective, since "several of the PCG's provisions have moved toward convergence with international standards" (Chantiri-Chaudemanche, 2022, p. 774). In addition, even though France is moving away from the Friedmanian view of the company, notably via the PACTE act, one of whose objectives is to encourage companies to take social and environmental issues into account in their strategies, the fact remains that these issues are still barely included in accounting standards. Hence, regardless of the accounting model (Anglo-Saxon or continental European), if the standard-setters decide, for example, to recognize employees solely as expenses, they are choosing to convey a particular political view of the world that minimizes the importance of the human element in a company (Colasse & Déjean, 2022).

If global financialization has led to the development of accounting standards that reinforce this view of reality, the question arises as to what extent

5. This is a procedure for approving standards that includes a number of steps involving discussion, analysis, and consultation, culminating in a decision on publication.

the current environmental and social crisis, which imposes greater responsibilities on companies, can help reopen the debate on the accounting model (Colasse & Déjean, 2022). We believe that the neutrality of accounting, or more accurately its lack of neutrality, and the implications for the true and fair view is an interesting question to raise in the broader context of reflections on the evolution of the accounting model in the face of current societal issues.

2.1.3. MONOLOGIC ACCOUNTING DETACHED FROM SOCIETAL ISSUES

By focusing solely on financial stakeholders (investors in the Anglo-Saxon model and providers of funds in the continental European model), traditional accounting models help the actors involved to retain a view of the world where societal issues are relegated to the background. Such a perspective is part and parcel of the development of a capitalist economy whose role in the social emergency (inequalities) and the environmental crisis (global warming, loss of biodiversity, and so on) facing humanity is well established (Richard & Rambaud, 2020). In the current accounting system, "a company that produces while polluting, depleting natural resources, or destroying ecosystems (in the textile or energy sectors, for example) is considered to be performing well if the financial value of its capital is increasing" (Charriot & Vidal, 2020, p. 10), demonstrating the dominance of financial interests. Apart from a few exceptions mentioned by Déjean (2021), there is still only tentative consideration of social and environmental issues in accounting. In fact, there are a few specific calculations that allow environment-related quantitative information to be recorded in the balance sheet or income statement. These include asset depreciation, provisions for contingencies and losses, environmental taxes, and investments committed to reducing environmental impact. There are also specific standards for greenhouse gas quotas and energy saving certificates.

In light of current societal challenges, the question arises of the wider inclusion of social and environmental aspects in accounting, but the answers provided are varied. These responses are the subject of debate among standard-setters and accounting professionals and in the academic literature. On the one hand, there are the proponents of a complete overhaul of the accounting model who criticize its underlying neoliberal ideology (e.g., Rambaud & Richard, 2015; Richard & Rambaud, 2020); on the other, there are those who advocate extending social and environmental reporting obligations and creating a kind of complementary framework containing extrafinancial elements in order to develop "green capitalism." The standard-setters have recently come out in favor of this latter proposal, extending their scope of operations to include sustainability standards. This decision can be more broadly seen as a desire on the part of financial capitalism to forestall some of the "reformist"[6] environmental criticism while ensuring the system remains fundamentally unchanged. At the European Union level, the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG) has been tasked by the European Commission with proposing, as part of the new Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), a set of European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) in order to create a common language for dealing with sustainability issues in the European Union. The IASB has also focused on the issue of extrafinancial reporting, announcing in November 2021 the creation of the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB), tasked with developing a global baseline for sustainability disclosures to meet the expectations of the financial markets, once again relegating the social and environmental disclosure requirements of other stakeholders to the background (Colasse & Déjean, 2022). Developments of this kind do not challenge the principles underlying the production of accounting information and the ideological decisions that ensure accounting is rooted in a monological perspective (Richard & Rambaud, 2020). Consequently, the idea of accounting conveying a true and fair view can be equated with a myth that must be left behind in order to devise a new accounting model that might help respond to current societal challenges by enabling us to learn to "account differently" (Déjean, 2021, p. 70).

6. Environmental criticism is expressed in two different ways: as radical criticism that advocates "the organization models of traditional societies that use fewer resources and are more respectful of nature with their modestly sized self-governing communities" and modernist or reformist criticism that believes that "only technical progress can help us to save the planet through renewable energies, advances in genetic engineering and agronomy, and information technologies" (Chiapello, 2013, p. 74).

2.2. Neutrality and the myth of the true and fair view: Plato's allegory of the cave as an interpretive framework

2.2.1. TECHNICALIZATION AS A PRETEXT FOR NEUTRALITY IN THE DISSEMINATION OF THE MYTH OF THE TRUE AND FAIR VIEW

The concept of the myth has frequently been used in management science studies (e.g., Chauvey *et al.*, 2015; Ferns *et al.*, 2019; Filby & Willmott, 1988; Gibassier *et al.*, 2018), and although there are a number of interpretations of the concept, most make reference to the work of Barthes (e.g., Ferns *et al.*, 2019; Palo *et al.*, 2020). Barthes (1972 [1957]) saw myths as fulfilling a dual function, both as a mechanism that produces shared meaning and as a means to legitimate power structures. In the words of Brown (1994, p. 863), "myths are narratives or extended metaphors" that not only create and legitimate past, current, and future actions, but also shape and conceal political interests. Myths are used in this way by actors to construct the appearance of rationality for exercising power within organizations (Brown, 1994). According to Pesqueux (2018), the criterion for the validity of a myth is not truth but efficacy. It must have sufficient instrumental value to enable it to mobilize its supporters and demonize its opponents so that it can provide a seamless and plausible explanation of past, present, and future events. It must therefore combine a number of attributes, including the ability to create a community of belonging through a shared language, facilitate a rhetoric of persuasion, legitimate an organization, and divert attention in order to reconcile contradictions or ambiguities and enable commitment to action (Pesqueux, 2018). The myth is a unique key to movements in society, giving it the ability to convince public opinion and generate support. To be credible, a myth must remain consistent with the representations conveyed by communities and with dominant social norms, and must limit discord. Hence, for La Torre *et al.* (2020), the power of myth lies in the meaning and interpretation that the public attributes to the message it conveys, based on their own beliefs. In the words of Barthes (1972 [1957], p. 107), "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way it utters this message," as the constructor of an image that becomes reality, in our case the idea of the performativity of accounting. Neutrality is one of the vehicles that enable accounting standard-setting bodies to project a form of economic representation that is intended to be faithful, where beliefs are structured around an image of economic reality that caters solely for a financialized economy.

The technicalization of accounting plays a major role in this process. Although the IASB chose to follow the FASB in adopting the idea of principles rather than rules, the increase in the number of standards reflects a drift toward a technical view of accounting (Véron *et al.*, 2006). In this way, the standard-setter makes the task of preparing accounting information a more assured one, but undoubtedly causes misrepresentation and/or distortion of meaning. Colasse and Michaïlesco (2021) point out that, by defining the quality of accounting information, the Anglo-Saxon standard-setter consolidated its reputation for both expertise and neutrality by using quasiscientific criteria to support a project that is more ideological than technical. Hence, neutrality acts as a "pretext for misrepresentation" (Pesqueux, 2018, p. 158) that falsely constructs accounting information as a reflection of the true and fair view of a company's economic situation. This measurement-based technicalization is built "on the belief that objectivity consists in translating reality into mathematical terms. Calculation gives an illusion of mastery over the world," a reassuring illusion that is preferred to "a frightening reality full of uncertainties" (de Gaulejac, 2005, p. 101). Technicalization based on a "calculative rationality" is a legitimating voice for the profession where accounting practices have been standardized and reproduced in support of an unwavering belief in the objectivity of accounting (Frémeaux *et al.*, 2020, p. 4). It strengthens the logic of making accounting an evidence tool and opens the way to consideration of accounting tools as neutral. As Demeestère (2005) points out, science can be utilized to provide factual information or help clarify reasoning, but it can also be used to legitimate decisions in an authoritarian way that excludes debate. In Capron's view (2006, p. 116), "just because accounting law encourages the producers of accounts to provide a 'true and fair view' of the company's situation and results, that does not mean we should naively believe that there exists an accounting truth provided by the figures and detached from social contingencies and any strategic ulterior motive on the part of business leaders." Reducing accounting to a set of ostensibly neutral techniques (Frémeaux *et al.*, 2020) gives the impression that we are dealing with depoliticized speech, which, according to Barthes (1972 [1957]), is an essential attribute of myth. It reinforces "the image of an objective science" and dispels the idea that accounting is "a subjective discipline [...] shaped by an entity with power" (Richard, 2010, p. 53).

In this regard, Himick and Brivot (2018) show how a small group of actors committed to financialization strongly influenced the accounting standard-setting process by presenting the discount rate as a neutral, scientific, and apolitical computation technique. The standard-setter sought to retain a semblance of economic reality by appealing to science, giving accounting professionals the illusion of control over poorly structured accounting statements. The technical standard that sets out the detail of valuation procedures standardizes the production of accounts, but it also obscures the subjective nature of the accounting process (Chauvey *et al.*, 2015). Hence, since the accounting process appears to be neutral, it legitimates the "antidialogical action[s]" that enable a dominant group to destroy the ability of a dominated group to understand the world critically (Solomon & Darby, 2005, p. 31). It takes on the form of the bars of a "psychic prison" that confines the actors and encourages them to act (Filby & Willmott, 1988, p. 336), thereby hindering the emergence of alternatives.

2.2.2. MOVING BEYOND THE MYTH OF THE TRUE AND FAIR VIEW IN ACCOUNTING: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Reflection on the myth of the true and fair view relates back to Plato's writings on the allegory of the cave, writings that we feel are particularly useful for understanding how this myth can be challenged by a section of the accounting profession that is concerned with societal issues. Plato (1995, p. 514) sets out a symbolic narrative to "represent human nature according to its degree of education" [translator's note: translated from the French version]. It takes the form of a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, in which Socrates describes the world as divided into two quite separate spaces. The first, inner space is portrayed as a cave or world of illusions. This is a dark world (with no natural light) where human beings, described as prisoners, have been confined since childhood, their legs and necks chained to prevent them from turning round their heads. They are condemned to look at a wall in front of them. Their only source of light is a fire that burns far behind them, far enough away for it not to burn them and at just the right distance to illuminate the cave in such a way that the prisoners see in this artificial light the natural light of the sun. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is a road with a low wall built along it, above which puppeteers, or "magicians," carry objects whose reflections are projected onto the walls of the cave. The prisoners only see the shadows of these objects and so have a false perception of reality. In other words, they are kept in a position of ignorance and impressions.

The second space described by Plato is the external or intelligible world, which he equates with reality or truth. This world benefits from natural sunlight, which he equates with knowledge and ideas. The challenge therefore is to lead the prisoners out of the world of darkness into the world of light, i.e., from the world of ignorance into the world of knowledge. However, leaving this place would create physical pain for the unchained prisoners, who would be compelled to stand up, walk, and look into the blinding sunlight. It would also be a source of psychological pain for the prisoners, since they would be leaving behind the sense of comfort that the cave provides. In this respect, the fire plays a major role, warming, illuminating, and reassuring the prisoners who regard the fire as the sun and so have no incentive to leave the cave. They are nourished by fantasies that the world of illusions enables them to satisfy and, in this sense, are happy with their condition. Any freed prisoner who became aware of the illusions the cave provided would feel obliged to question everything he believed to be true, inducing in him resistance and fear and causing him to return to his reassuring condition as a prisoner. Plato therefore states that the exit from the cave requires a guide or "philosopher," represented by Socrates, who must help the prisoner gradually to free himself from his illusions in order to apprehend the truth through the dialectical method, or "intellectual method of logical dialogue" (Plato, 1995, p. 533) [translator's note: as above].

Once he has discovered the truth, the freed prisoner, who has now become a philosopher, must return to the cave to convince and educate the other prisoners. Plato calls this stage "the return to the cave." The difficulty is that, once the prisoner has left the cave, he does not necessarily want to return, knowing that failure to convince the others could cost him his life, as happened to Socrates, who was sentenced to death for "corrupting the youth."

Using this frame of reference enables us to understand what is happening inside the world of the cave and to identify the conditions under which the prisoners are able to leave it. The myth of the cave provides an interpretation of the myth of the true and fair view in accounting, a myth within which the fire "lit" by the actors of the dominant ideology enables a monological view of accounting to be disseminated that is supported by a number of factors, including the concept of neutrality that is our focus in this article. The aim of this article is to use our examination of accounting professionals' perceptions of this concept to analyze the extent to which the concept of neutrality in accounting helps disseminate the "myth of the true and fair view" and to comprehend how some CPAs might move beyond this myth.

3. Methodology

In this section, we present our methods for collecting (3.1) and analyzing (3.2) the data.

3.1. Collecting the data

For this research, we have taken a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. Qualitative analysis is defined by Paillé and Mucchielli (2016) as a discursive process of reformulating, elucidating, and theorizing about testimonies, experiences, and phenomena in order to discover and construct meaning. We have opted for this approach because it enables us to gain a detailed, in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied. Moreover, according to Gendron (2009, p. 123), "qualitative research constitutes a relevant research method in the development of better understandings of complex accounting realities and processes." We chose semi-structured individual interviews as the data collection method because they enable us to obtain information about realities and representations by encouraging the interviewees to let their thoughts go wherever they take them (Kaufmann, 2001). Blanchet and Gotman (2007, p. 25) consider the interview to be "the preferred tool for exploring realities, and the spoken word is the main vehicle for this process. These realities involve representation systems (constructed thoughts) and social practices (realities experienced)."

The study is based on 28 semi-structured interviews with CPAs of various profiles practicing in France (see Table 1) who are representative of the range of professionals working in the world of accounting: "traditional" CPAs (17 interviews) and those in specialist social and/or environmental roles (11 interviews). The latter group includes CPAs working for firms renowned for their expertise in legal and contractual work for works councils (WCs[7]) (such as Secafi, Syndex, and so on) and those working for CSR consulting/audit firms or supporting social economy actors. In order to ensure our data is representative, the CPAs came from firms of different sizes, including Big Four and non-Big Four firms. The reason for interviewing CPAs with a range of profiles is to provide a cross section of perspectives on the issue of the neutrality of accounting and accounting standards.

We conducted the semi-structured interviews using an interview guide (see Appendix 1). We initially ran a test stage where we conducted interviews with three "traditional" CPAs, before making some minor adjustments to the design of the interview guide and then extending the interviews to the whole

7. French legislation passed on May 16, 1946, gives WCs the option of using a CPA to make the information provided by the company to employees and their representatives "intelligible" and to assist WCs' members in assessing the company's situation in its environment (Godowski *et al.*, 2020).

of the study population.[8] The interviews, which were conducted during the period from September 2019 through December 2020, averaged 29 minutes in length for the "traditional" CPAs and 40 minutes for the "specialist" CPAs (see Table 1). The interviews were initially conducted face-to-face, or by telephone in the event of geographical constraints, and then were carried out solely by telephone because of the COVID-19 health crisis. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed in full. Like Frémeaux and Noël (2015), we believe that word choice is not neutral and that it reveals the way in which interviewees perceive the phenomenon being studied, hence the importance of the recordings. Once the interviews had been transcribed, each author read the material separately a number of times in order to absorb the main points of the respondents' remarks. The content of the interviews was then analyzed in NVivo 10 using the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

Table 1. List of interviews with CPAs

Date	Interview type	Length	Interviewee identifier
"Traditional" CPAs			
09/30/2019	Face-to-face	16 mins	CPA 1
10/15/2019	Face-to-face	32 mins	CPA 2
10/21/2019	Face-to-face	13 mins	CPA 3
10/21/2019	Face-to-face	34 mins	CPA 4
10/30/2019	Telephone	32 mins	CPA 5
11/11/2019	Face-to-face	31 mins	CPA 6
12/05/2019	Face-to-face	38 mins	CPA 7
12/11/2019	Telephone	15 mins	CPA 8
12/16/2019	Face-to-face	24 mins	CPA 9
03/26/2020	Telephone	32 mins	CPA 10
03/30/2020	Telephone	22 mins	CPA 11
03/30/2020	Telephone	31 mins	CPA 12
03/31/2020	Telephone	16 mins	CPA 13
04/02/2020	Telephone	43 mins	CPA 14
04/07/2020	Telephone	47 mins	CPA 15
04/09/2020	Telephone	42 mins	CPA 16
04/15/2020	Telephone	29 mins	CPA 17
Specialist CPAs			
11/27/2019	Face-to-face	47 mins	CSR CPA 1
03/25/2020	Telephone	22 mins	WC CPA 1

8. Since the only adjustments made were to the design of the interview guide, the three interviews from the test stage were included in the study population.

Date	Interview type	Length	Interviewee identifier
03/26/2020	Telephone	32 mins	WC CPA 2
03/26/2020	Telephone	37 mins	WC CPA 3
03/27/2020	Telephone	40 mins	CSR CPA 2
03/30/2020	Telephone	38 mins	WC CPA 4
03/31/2020	Telephone	40 mins	CSR CPA 3
04/03/2020	Telephone	50 mins	CSR CPA 4
04/10/2020	Telephone	48 mins	CSR CPA 5
04/16/2020	Telephone	44 mins	CSR CPA 6
12/04/2020	Telephone	38 mins	CSR CPA 7

3.2. Analyzing the data

We carried out the data analysis in three stages, following the method recommended by Corley and Gioia (2004) and Gioia *et al.* (2012). The first stage involved open coding of the data with the aim of examining and comparing the data in an unbiased manner in order to highlight the most frequently recurring themes (known as first-order concepts). We then grouped interview extracts on similar themes into categories, taking care to ensure the wording remained as close as possible to the interviewees' original remarks. This stage helped us to identify the vocabulary the interviewees generally associated with the topic's main terminology, i.e., neutrality and standards. It also revealed some ambivalence on the part of our respondents, since they seemed to be committed to neutrality as a concept while at the same time admitting they departed from it when necessary in order to protect their clients' interests. This stage also revealed the factors that helped raise some CPAs' awareness of the shortcomings of the traditional accounting model.

The second stage of the method was based on an abductive approach, i.e., we were primarily interested in empiricism, but still paid heed to theory since "analysis proceeds by the continuous interplay between concepts and data" (Van Maanen *et al.*, 2007, p. 1149). More specifically, the interplay was between the raw data assembled into first-order concepts and the theoretical concepts used. This step enabled us to group the previously defined first-order concepts into broader conceptual categories (known as second-order concepts). Returning to the literature enabled us to highlight second-order concepts linked to theoretical advances around neutrality, understood either in a technical or political approach to accounting (the production of accounting information and standardization respectively). In other cases, comparing our empirical data with existing research showed that some aspects were either insufficiently explored or absent in the literature and therefore represented the article's main contributions. These contributions include in particular the reassuring illusion of neutrality versus the utopian ideal of including all stakeholders, and the issue of dialogue versus the CPAs' feeling of resignation with respect to the rest of the profession. In the third and final stage, we aggregated the second-order concepts into two dimensions: (i) neutrality, which, understood in a technical view of accounting, provides CPAs' practice with a certain legitimacy, while also causing them to promote a monological view of accounting that helps establish the myth of the true and fair view, and (ii) challenges to this myth by a group of CPAs who are attempting to escape from it by proposing a debate that seeks to reposition accounting in line with current societal shifts. Appendix 2 presents the data structure produced using the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

4. Results

In this section, we begin by presenting the extent to which the concept of neutrality contributes to disseminating the myth of the true and fair view in accounting (4.1), before going on to explain why it is difficult to challenge this myth within the profession (4.2).

4.1. Neutrality: Between the legitimacy of the profession, the depoliticization of standards, and maintenance of the status quo

4.1.1. NEUTRALITY: A COMPONENT OF THE GLOBAL BASELINE AND A GUARANTEE OF LEGITIMACY FOR THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION

The interviews revealed the CPAs' commitment to the concept of neutrality. It seems to be an important component of a global baseline shared by members of the profession, but not the only one. Although the CPAs had different profiles, the definitions of neutrality were shared and evoked in parallel with the features of accounting information quality. Some CPAs regarded neutral information as information that has not been skewed in order to obtain specific results. For example, CPA 2 stated that "neutrality means presenting information so that it does not introduce interpretation bias for the user." Similarly, CPA 5 said that neutrality means "not being influenced by the agendas of third parties." The interviewees also frequently mentioned the notion of "impartiality," stating that neutrality means complying with regulations; for example, CPA 3 said that neutrality "means producing financial statements impartially, i.e., applying standards in a strictly technical manner." For CSR CPA 7, neutrality means putting passions aside and presenting things as they are, without judgment. Several of the CPAs interviewed also associated "neutrality" with the concepts of "honesty," "the true and fair view," and "completeness." According to CSR CPA 2, neutrality is "the true, fair, and honest view of the accounts in relation both to an economic reality and to concepts defined for regulatory purposes." In the opinion of CPA 15, "if the information is honest and complete, you can get a kind of neutrality." Other CPAs equated the concept of neutrality with that of comparability, including CPA 16, who stated that neutrality means "defining standards that enable information to be presented in a way that lends itself to comparison."

The discussions with the accounting professionals also demonstrated the importance they attached to the current and continued existence of the concept of neutrality in accounting. For example, in answer to the question "Should neutrality be defined?," almost all the CPAs interviewed answered "of course." In their words, the concept of neutrality guarantees "transparency" and "objectivity": "Valuations have to be identical, and any valuation of a transaction has to be as objective as possible so that it's possible to understand the significance of the transaction and how it was recorded" (CPA 11). CSR CPA 7 stated: "I think it's important to emphasize accounting's potential role as a neutral arbiter." In the accounting professionals' opinion, the concept of neutrality acts as a safeguard against "a no-man's-land, a purely commercial relationship in the production of financial information" (CPA 1). This also helps legitimate the profession: "If I can be influenced or can influence others, there's a subtext of manipulation that's bound to damage my reputation; whereas if I'm neutral, I can add value to whoever I'm working for" (CPA 8). In the view of CPA 9, "you have to have a degree of neutrality because you have to respond to an economic reality, but I tend to think that most accountants already do that, because that's how we're trained. Traditionally, that's been the very essence of our profession."

Therefore, along with other accounting concepts and principles, the concept of neutrality plays a part in establishing a global baseline for the accounting profession that helps give it legitimacy in the eyes of the outside world.

4.1.2. NEUTRALITY: A VEHICLE FOR A TECHNICAL APPROACH TO ACCOUNTING

In the opinion of the CPAs we interviewed, standards are the ground rules for presenting financial statements. CPA 7 stated that it is important for "the rules to be neutral and independent of any personal point of view or professional judgment." Several CPAs mentioned the "democratic process" (CPA 14) or the "consensus about an accounting treatment" (CPA 2) that has enabled the development of accounting standards. CPA 14 believes that standard-setting is the outcome of "combining" the "concrete positions of users and regulators." The issue was to "take a neutral position in order to translate the economic situation in the best way possible." Hence, the CPAs equated standards to a kind of manual for preparing accounting information, which meant that they did not have to think about the political dimension of accounting standards. Hence, a number of the CPAs shared the view of accounting standards as neutral, particularly the so-called "traditional" accountants like CPA 2, who stated that "I don't see anything that's not neutral in the standards. I think that, when I'm not neutral, it's because I don't apply the standard when I should do." In the view of CPA 13, "when a standard is issued, when it's created [...], it can really only attempt to be fairly generic and broadly neutral." Hence, the CPAs understood the issues linked to neutrality from a purely technical point of view that involves an honest and compliant application of the rules provided by the standard-setters, who use the rules to find the best way to represent reality as they want it.

The imperative of neutrality described by almost all the CPAs we interviewed conveys a somewhat imaginary and fantastical view of the role of accounting that contrasts with the on-the-ground reality mentioned by the same CPAs. Despite the importance of the concept of neutrality, a good number of the interviewees indicated that it was difficult to apply the concept in practice: "In theory, it is perfectly possible to accept the principle of neutrality. In practice, it's clear that we don't always apply it and sometimes even have difficulty with it" (CPA 3). This difficulty in applying the principle can mainly be explained by the CPAs' desire to protect their clients' interests. CSR CPA 6 stated: "Typically in our profession [...], when we prepare the annual accounts, we have to be neutral. At least that's the principle, but, in my experience and from what I've seen, it's not always easy to be neutral when you're protecting your clients' interests." CPA 8 expanded on this insight: "Yes, we're neutral in the sense that we comply with the rules. Sometimes there are several rules to choose from, and we choose the rule that is most beneficial to the client. That's what consulting is." Accounting's close ties with the tax system can also mean that CPAs make accounting decisions that benefit their clients' tax situation. In the opinion of CPA 5, "French accounting standards are not all that neutral, because we make accounting decisions based on tax considerations." Similarly, CPA 4 stated that "tax impacts are currently the ones that cause us to be the least neutral in accounting."

Some CPAs went further, mentioning the legal techniques used to influence the information disclosed: "We are well aware that financial disclosure and the way some information is highlighted so as to hide other information is now a real discipline in its own right" (CPA 16). Several of the CPAs we interviewed mentioned the close link between neutrality and accounting decisions. The use of provisions for earnings management purposes was mentioned, for example, by CPA 6, who stated: "You can minimize earnings if you want to, to prove that the company is unprofitable, to do what you want, to lower employee profit sharing, to lower the share price." However, CPA 6 qualified their remarks by stating that the use of provisions is more common in large companies than in SMEs. Interestingly, some of the CPAs interviewed justified these earnings management practices by pointing out that they do not conflict with the standard: "It's true that we can, how can I put it, dress things up without cheating, but still dress things up to suit the investor" (CPA 17).

According to some of the interviewees, the practical difficulties of neutrality also relate to the fact that accounting standards are incomplete and leave scope for discretion and interpretation, thereby revealing a problem with application of the standards: "If we want the standard to be neutral, we need to lay down more precise rules to avoid personal interpretation, but it's the interpretation that's not neutral, not the standard itself" (WC CPA 3). CPA 8 put it this way: "Sometimes, the standard is not specific enough. It can be interpreted or understood differently by the people applying it." CPA 6 stated: "That's why we have accounting standards, but, in my opinion, there aren't enough of them."

Hence, many of the CPAs we interviewed considered accounting standards to be neutral and only noticed potential breaches of neutrality when it came to the production of accounting information. They understood the question of neutrality via a technical view of accounting that ignores the issues surrounding the political dimension of standards.

4.1.3. A REASSURING ILLUSION OF NEUTRALITY FACED WITH AN IDEAL DESCRIBED AS UTOPIAN

Although, initially, a large proportion of the CPAs interviewed (particularly the so-called "traditional" ones) seemed to accept the neutrality of the standard-setter, the international standard-setter's decision to prioritize investors as the recipients of information caused some to qualify their comments while at the same time treating any alternatives as utopian. In the view of CPA 1, "It strikes me that prioritizing investors is not particularly neutral." He went on to add: "Hoping for financial information that meets the expectations of all stakeholders seems like an illusion." Likewise, CPA 3 stated: "This mainly investor-oriented view is not likely to encourage neutrality, because it favors one stakeholder, so it's not neutral." He continued: "In an ideal world, all stakeholders would be catered for, i.e., the information needs of partners who want to contribute to the management of their company, investors who only want to know about the financial side, employees, and third parties would all be satisfied (but I don't know if that's feasible)." In the opinion of CSR CPA 3, "Providing information that meets the expectations of such a varied range of stakeholders just isn't possible. You'd have to have a completely insane amount of information." Hence, questions about how standards should be positioned are soon negated by the "fatalism" of some CPAs who, rather than changing the situation, prefer to buy into the myth of the true and fair view and an imaginary and fantastical but reassuring neutrality of accounting.

Many of the CPAs nevertheless stressed the need to consider all of a company's stakeholders: "It [neutrality] is designed to enable all stakeholders to make decisions once they've read the financial statements" (CPA 17). CPA 8 stated, along similar lines: "These stakeholders, whether they're bankers, suppliers, tax authorities, or social security organizations, might not have the same notion of neutrality. And so the concept needs to be clarified for everyone." This awareness is not enough to pose a challenge either to the concept of neutrality or to the myth of the true and fair view, however. Any alternative to the dominant ideology would entail major changes that the profession does not seem ready to accept, with the result that it remains on the sidelines on current social and environmental issues. CSR CPA 1 stated: "Having a critical mindset would be almost like sawing off the branch you're sitting on [...]. So you won't get any fundamental challenges from the profession."

Some CPAs also indicated that they had internalized the ideology of the standard: "I think that, at the international level, directly defining the conceptual framework of accounting using an approach that is economic, or 'capitalist' in quotation marks, [is] not too troubling" (CPA 7). In this way, they help disseminate the dominant ideology, encouraging maintenance of the status quo and making it difficult to propose alternatives within the myth. In response to the question about which actors consider the concept of neutrality to be important, CSR CPA 4 replied: "Investors, or bankers for that matter. Basically the person who puts in the money." Similarly, CPA 15 replied: "Who considers it important? Who is it we have to work for on this? The shareholders, clearly." CSR CPA 3 took a firmly monological stance, adding: "When it comes to accounting standards, I don't really see what could be of interest to the workforce. I may never have asked myself the question, but they can't even read a pay slip."

Discussing the concept of neutrality with the CPAs helped us to understand the extent to which the concept acts as one of the vehicles helping to establish the myth of the true and fair view within the accounting profession. Because most CPAs understand the concept of neutrality from the perspective of their professional practices, they adopt a technical view of accounting that conceals its political dimension. As a result, since simply complying with the standard enables the CPAs to believe that their practices are neutral, the concept of neutrality acts like an illusion that, by objectifying accounting practices, reassures them and allows them to continue to believe in the myth of the true and fair view. Because they apply the standards automatically, the CPAs are the mediators of a monological view of accounting that reflects the dominant ideology and, under the guise of neutrality, reinforces the myth of the true and fair view. Against this backdrop, any consideration of possible alternatives proves problematic and is equated with "utopian" thinking. This example demonstrates the dual function fulfilled by myth, as proposed by Barthes (1972 [1957]), who believed that myth provides a mechanism for producing shared meaning and helps legitimate power structures.

4.2. Societal issues at the forefront of a painful challenge to the neutrality of accounting and the myth of the true and fair view

4.2.1. THE ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY AS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND AWARENESS OF THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF ACCOUNTING

Some CPAs, particularly those working with WCs or specializing in CSR issues, mentioned awareness of the ideological dimension of accounting as a reason for wanting to move beyond the myth of the true and fair view. In the opinion of CSR CPA 7, "accounting standards reflect an agreed policy. Capitalism is what is wanted, and standards are designed to uphold capitalism." Hence, accounting is "the tool that promotes a worldview," in the words of WC CPA 4. This realization was painful, since it caused some CPAs to want to dismantle the traditional accounting model they have always known and to think more critically about their knowledge and practices in order to adapt to the current "paradigm shift." CSR CPA 1 put it this way: "In my daily life as a certified public accountant for some thirty years, I believed that, outwardly, accounting was a perfectly neutral form of classification, and I used it as such without asking myself a single question as long as it represented a rule, a classification rule (period)." Having become aware of the ideological nature of the standard, he concluded that "accounting is not neutral. It operates within a framework where nothing exists if it isn't financial." Some CPAs condemned the excessive financialization of the international accounting standard: "A standard has been introduced that only meets the needs of one of the stakeholders. I think it's clear the objective is wrong and a balanced outcome can't be achieved. If you write it with only one of the stakeholders in mind, in essence you're no longer being neutral" (WC CPA 3). In a similar vein, WC CPA 2 stated: "I've noticed that the quality of accounting has deteriorated since I joined the profession. In other words, anything goes. No one respects the fundamentals anymore. When you start to get into the detail of the accounts, I assure you it's frightening. Instead of worrying about, let's say, 'standards,' or presentations to investors, we'd do better to reinvest in the fundamentals of accounting." CPA 4 expressed his "disgust as a financial analyst with all the nonsense being spoken." He added that accounting was invented "for stakeholders who hold capital" and therefore causes companies to make damaging management mistakes: "If you have financiers running a company, they'll have financiers' instincts, so, if they need to lay off staff, and sometimes that's necessary, they'll keep the people who seem to be the most skilled rather than the people who believe most in the company, the most driven and most motivated staff, etc." He concluded by saying: "It was at that point that I said to myself, yes, sure enough, finance and accounting are a huge machine that doesn't think about anything at all."

For most CPAs, this awareness of the monological view of accounting was accelerated by the climate emergency, which has made some features that were hidden by accounting more visible: "At the firm, [...] we never talked about the environment. Those were subjects that weren't discussed. I really didn't feel comfortable with that. I really felt my work was losing any meaning" (CSR CPA 6). Likewise, WC CPA 4 said: "It seems to me that accounting is organized in such a way as to optimize extractivism, i.e., economic activity designed as a means of allowing humanity to use the planet for its own ends, which is a fundamental strategic mistake." Interestingly, CSR CPA 6 pointed out that taking social and environmental issues into account in accounting might create greater neutrality because it would mean including the concerns of a greater number of stakeholders. He said: "If we change the standards and take the environment into account in the standards, for example, I think that a company's image in the current climate can quickly turn negative if other criteria are taken into account." To illustrate this idea, he took the example of a business whose earnings were lower than another company's because it decided to pursue societal goals. An approach of this kind might make it difficult to obtain a loan from a bank, whereas the "traditional" company would have no such difficulty. It's "a shame [...] because, in the long term, the most valuable company will be the one that does everything it can to safeguard its resources, but that's not our approach." CSR CPA 5 concluded: "We're currently going through a paradigm shift. In other words, a change in society, and it's clear now that accounting is part of the old paradigm and is trying to find a way to survive." In the opinion of WC CPA 4, "Accounting as it is currently organized is a huge charade and a sham that doesn't prevent decisions from being taken that are contrary to the interests of humanity."

Against this backdrop, the concept of neutrality was strongly challenged by a small number of the CPAs we interviewed: "Language can't be neutral, numbers aren't neutral, science isn't neutral, accounting isn't neutral. Accounting is a way of understanding the world. It's a set of agreements that are absolutely not neutral" (WC CPA 4). Similarly, CSR CPA 1 said that "classifying training as an expense is not neutral. Classifying personnel costs as a whole is not neutral. It's not a neutral decision; it's taken from the stakeholder's perspective." He added: "I think what's needed is a strong reaction. In fact, wanting to keep hold of this word 'neutrality' that's so reassuring in this world infantilizes accountants' thinking."

4.2.2. REDEFINING ACCOUNTING BY EXPLORING WORLDS OUTSIDE THE PROFESSION

The CPAs that no longer endorsed the myth of the true and fair view were aware of the illusion of neutrality in which they had been immersed since their training and were setting out to explore a new world and new practices outside the usual parameters laid down by accounting institutions. CSR CPA 6 said: "Five years ago, I left the accounting profession because I wanted to do something different. I needed to look further into social responsibility, do my bit for the environment, so I explored other networks in the environmental and social transition, in CSR. I started to discover other perspectives, researchers, scientists, CSR consultants, environmentalists, another way of looking at things really." In a similar vein, CSR CPA 5 said: "After a while, I felt that we weren't actually contributing enough to the companies I was working with, that we were too focused on a preset model and that there was something else behind it that we weren't getting across at all. So I sold my client list with the aim of starting a new business that was more about supporting organizations."

On this journey into the unknown, newly acquired knowledge is a key resource that provides guidance and prevents a relapse into the old ways of the past myth. Like Plato's philosopher guiding the freed prisoners, encounters can be a driving force in CPAs' explorations, as CSR CPA 7 stated: "What steered me toward the sustainable development issues I dealt with subsequently was meeting a professor [...] who was unusual in being a certified public accountant researching environmental and social accounting." Discussions with another community helped CSR CPA 7 to discover another world with which he was completely unfamiliar: "I had some very insightful discussions with him. When we first started talking, I was anti and didn't understand what he was getting at. We gradually came to an understanding. Now I'm passionate about his subject." Many of the CPAs had undertaken training outside accounting to satisfy their emerging knowledge needs: "I followed a program in the functional and cooperative economy. To me it seems like an economic model for sustainable development" (CSR CPA 5). In a similar vein, CSR CPA 6 said that "there were people on these programs who had strong backgrounds in science. I was the only one from finance, so talking about accounting from another perspective, such as the triple bottom line, really made me appreciate the profession in a new way." This newly acquired knowledge meant that those CPAs who no longer wanted to endorse the original myth were able to move beyond the "accounting machine": "As it happens, I've kept the accountancy firm, but I'm trying to reorient it more toward sustainable development. I also followed a program about carbon footprints and then set up another company alongside it, but I wanted it to be outside the Ordre des experts-comptables [French Institute of Certified Public Accountants], because in my view the Ordre is no longer relevant to today's world" (CSR CPA 2). This stage of emerging from the world of illusion, which was difficult because it was new, led the CPAs to adopt a cautious trial and error approach when reflecting on best practice so as not to lapse into new illusions. CSR CPA 2 said: "When the model urgently needs changing, should we be neutral, or should we be committed?" He added: "At the start, we took the approach of involving the largest possible number of stakeholders, institutions, academics from a range of disciplines, economic actors, and citizens in the choice of indicators."

The newly acquired knowledge pushed the CPAs to redefine the very purpose of accounting. CSR CPA 2 put it this way: "I can't imagine accounting being neutral because, by definition, it's either a portrayal of the world, or it's a tool for societal action. I believe that accounting has a duty to serve the common good." In the opinion of WC CPA 4, accounting "can maybe open up a little and show that it has stopped being shortsighted and guilty and that perhaps it's getting ready to be useful for the future, when the world has changed direction, if it does, and requires new accounting standards that deal with regeneration instead of extinction and exploitation." The intention would be to "rebuild" "an accounting system in accordance with this new totem that would involve safeguarding the conditions for life on earth for the whole of humanity" (WC CPA 4).

4.2.3. AN IDEOLOGICAL COUNTER-DISCOURSE THAT IS DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN WITHIN THE PROFESSION

As the CPAs explored a different accounting model, a gap seemed to be opening up with the other members of the profession. CSR CPA 6 said: "I'm a member of the sustainable development team, but I'm bored. I'm bored because we discuss CSR in a very reductive way. In my opinion, we don't go far enough because we don't even talk about the environmental transition [...]. It seems to me that even the term CSR has become obsolete. There's also greenwashing with CSR." CSR CPA 5 was of the same opinion: "The feeling around it is that it's difficult. In fact, people find it hard to understand what you're trying to tell them. You get the feeling that 'traditional' accounting (in quotation marks) is quite dominant and that no other kind can exist." Some CPAs found themselves up against a barrier that was difficult to overcome. That was the case for CSR CPA 1: "Initially, we did some research into how to incorporate sustainable development into accounting. It very quickly became clear to us that, because the IFRS conceptual framework says that anything nonfinancial does not exist, there's no more discussion to be had." WC CPA 4 gave a similar account, demonstrating the difficulty of discussions with other actors in the profession and the business world: "I can't get anywhere at all. Not with anybody whatsoever in the profession. Nobody whatsoever on the boards of directors. Or the unions. No one. It's only in certain, let's say, 'philosophical' or 'associative' circles that I'm able to talk about it." Similarly, on the subject of environmental issues, CSR CPA 7 stated: "Ten years ago, when I mentioned it, people stared at me, thinking I was an activist."

In addition to the difficulties with discussing issues, the CPAs who continued to endorse the myth of the true and fair view set up defense mechanisms in order to maintain their view of the profession: "It's like, when a society is challenged, there comes a moment when it violently rejects anyone who challenges it" (CSR CPA 1). WC CPA 4 showed a degree of resignation in the face of such behavior: "A lot of things need to be changed completely. The accountants I know are not the people you're going to be able to move forward with." Hence, as CSR CPA 5 said, the challenge to avoid getting cut off from the rest of the profession and to be able to make an impact on it is to successfully identify the "arguments," the "language," the "key," "to ask companies, if you like, to move in this direction voluntarily. Yes, at some point compulsion might help us make quicker progress, but I say to myself, when it's obvious to everyone, everyone will do it." The "freed" CPAs may also have to deal with the active co-option of their ideas by the actors inside the cave, who see consideration of CSR as a means of winning new market share: "Traditional accounting is in the process of losing market share. There's a sense that the tide is turning, so firms are beginning to look for other areas to specialize in, and currently CSR seems to be attracting a great deal of interest and enthusiasm, because there are new opportunities in topical areas like environmental, social, and societal issues" (CSR CPA 7). Faced with the risk of co-option of social and environmental issues, the CPAs who advocate the idea of challenging the myth of the true and fair view run the risk of being further marginalized by a profession that has no real desire to change its fundamentals.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Following the examples of Dermarkar and Gendron (2019) and Dillard and Vinnari (2017), we have chosen to use the phronetic approach[9] (Flyvbjerg, 2001) to structure the discussion of our results. This approach aims to "transpose the results of a given study so that the researcher can enter into a form of dialogue with society" (Dermarkar & Gendron, 2019, p. 75). The aim is to focus the discussions on the social and political implications of the findings and to devise an action program linked to the issue under investigation (Dillard & Vinnari, 2017). Generally speaking, the questions asked are: "Where are we going?" (5.1), "Is this desirable for society?" (5.2), and "What can we do about it?" (5.3).

9. A range of research activities that mainly use an inductive and qualitative approach aimed at social action.

5.1. Where are we going?

By investigating the perceptions of accounting professionals, we have produced results that shed light on the issues associated with the concept of neutrality in accounting. We agree with Morales and Sponem (2017) that neutrality is an ideological concept that helps shape the world of illusion where the great majority of CPAs are to be found, allowing themselves, consciously or otherwise, to be carried along by a concept that offers them legitimacy and security. To claim that the concept of neutrality is ideological is to say that it is linked to the legitimation of particular interests in a power struggle (Arnold & Hammond, 1994). Hence, a majority of CPAs claim that neutrality in accounting is necessary and indispensable because, in the words of Solomons (1991, p. 287), "without it the credibility of accounting is endangered." However, our results also uncover contradictions between the CPAs' comments and practices, revealing a difference between desirably objective and politically distorted accounting (McKernan, 2007). Indeed, although the concept of neutrality is a guarantee of legitimacy for the profession, in practice it is easily "forgotten" by CPAs when they need to safeguard their clients' interests in order to continue their business relationship. It is much easier to forget when to do so helps sustain the dominant neoliberal logic in which profit maximization and tax optimization are the core principles for organizing economic life. These findings are in line with the research undertaken by Malsch and Gendron (2013) and Picard *et al.* (2014), who document the coexistence of two logics in the accounting profession: a commercial logic, which is gradually gaining a foothold; and a professional logic, which depicts CPAs as guardians of the public interest, a role they are able to take on because of the values of integrity and rigor that prevail within the profession.

Furthermore, the ability of accounting standards, particularly international ones, to convey a neoliberal ideology (Capron, 2005; Chiapello, 2005) that enables a monological view of accounting to persist was barely questioned by the CPAs we interviewed. As a consequence, the political neutrality of accounting standards was rarely discussed with the CPAs, especially the "traditional" ones, even when the decision to make investors the main target audience for accounting and financial information was raised in the interviews. This internalization of the ideology was particularly noticeable in the interviews with the "traditional" CPAs, who sometimes failed to notice specific themes in some of our questions. Our results show that they did not consider the decision to be totally unjustified, since they offered very little criticism of the standards, which they often perceived as the result of a technical process undertaken by experts. The fact that the standards are perceived in this way helps move accounting into the realm of logical reasoning, with objective, empirically proven explanations. This quest for accuracy of representation, which is criticized by Tinker (1991), propels accounting into the domain of science and results in a drift toward technicalization (Colasse, 2011), as evidenced by the proliferation of standards and the translation of economic operations into writing in a way that favors the hypothetical side of accounting operations. The idea of shifting the debate from the political to the technical is not new and is often used as a weapon by dominant actors to avoid challenges of any kind. In practice, this drift toward technicalization is an attempt by the myth of the true and fair view of accounting to reverse Plato's allegory of the cave. In effect, this myth objectivizes accounting and creates the illusion that the world of Science and Reason lies inside the cave, on the side of the standard-setter and the imprisoned CPAs, whereas, in Plato's story, the world of Science lies outside the cave. In fact, the discourse of the CPAs who question the neutrality of accounting and, beyond that, the myth of the true and fair view by appealing to Science and the available scientific data on the current climate situation is discredited and discounted as illusory and utopian by a process of subjectivization of objective knowledge. In this way, the technical view of accounting confines CPAs in a reassuring world where their analytical skills are put to work on behalf of the neoliberal ideology supported by the standard-setters. Believing in this illusion is particularly reassuring in view of the fact that the profession of CPA offers sufficient material and social rewards (remuneration and the high profile of the profession in society) for accounting professionals to be satisfied with this illusion. Consequently, CPAs are currently the mediators of a particularly flawed, antidialogical ideology.

5.2. Is this desirable?

It is risky to confine accounting to a monological view under the guise of the myth of the true and fair view partly supported by the concept of neutrality. It results in the exclusion of a large number of stakeholders and the suppression of all possible alternatives (Godowski *et al.*, 2020; Vinnari & Dillard, 2016). While this situation has so far benefited the accounting profession and the ideology it conveys in society, its responses in the face of current societal challenges, which are considered inadequate, represent a danger for both society and the profession itself, which might see its legitimacy challenged. For example, some of the CPAs we interviewed who specialized in social and/or environmental work seemed critical of the political trajectory taken by accounting standard-setting, adopting "a critical scepticism of accounting measures and processes" (Amernic & Craig, 2005, p. 78). As a result, the myth of the true and fair view no longer seems to be such a driving force for a number of accountants, and so the question arises as to how to deconstruct this myth. As a number of CPAs pointed out, deconstructing the myth is particularly necessary in view of the current climate challenges, to help send the economic model in a new direction. For a number of years, various researchers have been warning about the issue of the accountability of the current accounting system in the environmental crisis (Gray & Bebbington, 2001; Maunders & Burritt, 1991; Richard & Rambaud, 2020). The focus on financial stakeholders has made it increasingly difficult for the accounting profession to claim to be the "protector" of the public interest, a situation that may cause more and more actors, including some within the profession, to challenge the myth, as some of our interview extracts show. While these increasingly trenchant criticisms do not fall on completely deaf ears in the profession, the solutions it proposes are borrowed from a neoliberal conception that is likely to recreate the illusion. Responding to reformist environmental criticism with solutions based on emergent "green capitalism" has the effect of limiting proposals for more radical changes (Chiapello, 2013; Lehman, 1999; Spence, 2007) that seek to bring the accounting model into line with societal changes. Hence, recent proposals by the European and international standard-setters to broaden and improve regulation of the dissemination of societal information, along with the creation of the ISSB, which is tasked with putting forward a set of sustainability standards that meet the needs of investors, may induce a degree of skepticism in actors hoping for a real paradigm shift. In effect, focusing solely on investors' needs for social and environmental information maintains accounting's monological approach, under the guise of taking societal issues into consideration. In the same way, all the institutional mechanisms (e.g., the Ordre des experts-comptables's sustainable development club) and new practices within companies (e.g., integrated reporting, social and environmental reporting) are struggling to convince CPAs seeking a new emancipatory and radical accounting model. They are, however, a powerful weapon for reassuring accounting professionals who are beginning to question the foundations of monologic accounting, thereby helping to keep them in a comforting routine. Questioning the concept of neutrality therefore also means laying the foundations for thinking about an overhaul of the accounting system that will allow accounting rules and standards to be adapted to new challenges (Déjean, 2021). Such questioning signals a return to a recurring debate about the purpose and/or functions assigned to accounting and the ideology that inspires it. The history of accounting shows that its purpose has constantly evolved to enable it to coexist with different forms of capitalism. If the intention is to move to "green capitalism," accounting will need to change its purpose to become a communication and dialogue tool to support both the environmental transition and the social challenges of the digital age.

5.3. What can we do about it?

The aim in this section is to envision the levers that society might use to enable as many people as possible to escape from this illusion of neutrality and the myth of the true and fair view that it helps disseminate and move toward recognition of the societal dimension of accounting. The purpose of our findings is to encourage reflection about the need for a paradigm shift in the aims of accounting, without which it will continue on the path to losing its legitimacy for good. The idea that accounting can be reorganized and redesigned within the public sphere is not a new one (Gray, 2002; Lehman, 1999). Lehman (1999), for example, proposes considering a communitarian conception of accounting to counter the liberal conception of developments in social and environmental accounting. Similarly, the current and developing strand of research around dialogic accounting (e.g., Brown, 2009; Brown & Dillard, 2015; Château Terrisse & Arnaud, 2022; Dillard & Vinnari, 2019; Godowski *et al.*, 2020) represents an interesting avenue for reorienting the accounting framework. Reorienting accounting in this way would mean abandoning the concept of neutrality, which appears to contradict one of the key principles of dialogic accounting, namely the acknowledgment of the subjectivity and contestable nature of the accounting information produced (Brown, 2009). Indeed, in principle, the supposed neutrality of accounting information makes it impossible to discuss the range of other possibilities, though this discussion could be enabled by an accounting that is open and demystified of its neutrality. This is the starting point for an accounting system based on the notions of pluralism, adversarial exchanges, and dissonance between actors with competing ideological positions. The aim of accounting would then no longer be to "provide technical answers to pre-given goals" focused on the needs of financial capital, but to facilitate discussion, debate, and dialogue between all stakeholders, including those with competing interests (Brown, 2009, p. 329).

To encourage a radical paradigm shift such as this requires reflection, in the light of Plato's allegory of the cave, on the levers that could be pulled to help free CPAs and help them engage in dialogue with other actors in the profession. Our results show that most of the CPAs who spoke out against the illusion of neutrality preferred to turn to the outside world rather than attempt to transform the accounting profession into a place where dominant economic interests can be challenged and contested. This is a recurring debate in the critical accounting literature, as noted by Brown and Dillard (2013). Some authors argue that engaging in a "partnership" approach with established companies and institutions, particularly via participation in stakeholder consultation processes, brings with it a serious risk of being co-opted and beguiled by the dominant ideology (Archel *et al.*, 2011; Spence, 2007). Setting up external social movements that are independent of dominant companies and institutions would therefore represent a means of countering the dominant discourse (e.g., Vinnari & Laine, 2017). Others believe that creating internal social movements within companies or institutions may have the subversive potential of a "Trojan horse" (Gray, 1992, p. 400) and lead to the adoption and implementation of radical changes, particularly on a societal level (Clune & O'Dwyer, 2020). Particular care must be taken, however, to ensure that discussions do not become stuck in technical debates that shut down dialogue by imposing an overarching framework of thought that serves a monological view of accounting. On this subject, Chenhall *et al.* (2013) show how debates over the accounting mechanics of evaluation practices can be unproductive and lead to "stuckness" in discussions between different actors, whereas debate focused on the principles underlying these practices can help new proposals to emerge. Château Terrisse and Arnaud (2022) document the role of participatory governance processes in the introduction of new forms of accounting. The authors believe that change can be achieved in accounting by reviewing the articles of association of accounting firms since, rather than adopting the codes of Anglo-Saxon shareholder governance, they could adopt a cooperative approach and promote democratic governance. This requirement, which recognizes and values the diverse interests of the stakeholders involved, would ensure that accounting technology would be in a position to help challenge the dominant hegemonies.

In addition to the question of how to organize dissonance within the accounting profession, we need to ask who should play the central role of the philosopher helping the prisoners to break free from their chains in Plato's cave, leading them toward the light and enabling them to gain access to knowledge. Although university lecturers and professors are likely to be able to fulfill this role, as some of our results suggest, the way accounting is currently taught seems to be contributing to placing future CPAs in the world of illusion at a young age. For example, Boyce (2004) believes that accounting teaching continues to be constrained within narrowly defined but misconceived disciplinary boundaries, focusing on the techniques and "skills" of accounting practice. Hence, accounting has been transformed into a purely technical discipline and gradually emptied of its ethical substance (Williams, 2002), even though most accounting problems are in fact moral problems. As Sikka *et al.* (2007, p. 3) note, "beyond a technical and instrumental view of accounting, there is little discussion of theories, principles, ethics, public interest, globalization, scandals or social responsibility" in accounting textbooks. There are several ways to improve accounting education. According to Chabrak and Craig (2013), the introduction of ethics classes, which are rarely found in current programs, might help restore the ethical dimension of accounting. In the same way, it is essential to stop presenting accounting as a neutral technique and to highlight its social and political role (Chabrak & Craig, 2013). Craig and Amernic (2002) believe that it is our responsibility as educators to resist the dominant market ideology and nurture students intellectually in order to assist in the development of their critical thinking by directing them toward another way of doing and thinking about accounting and equipping them with useful skills to enable them to question mainstream thinking (Chabrak & Craig, 2013). Only an approach of this kind can help train future accounting professionals capable of contributing to the construction of an accounting framework that grants visibility to human suffering and environmental degradation (Saravanamuthu, 2015).

Hence, like Dermarkar and Gendron (2019), we believe that researchers must not "neglect the great opportunity they have to influence minds (...)—when they have a chance to teach, at any level of higher education" (p. 78). It now seems vital, as proposed by Dumay and Guthrie (2019, p. 2299), for researchers to leave their "ivory tower" and play a part in the necessary transformation of society. Conducting interventionist research, sitting on boards, systematically sharing their research, creating collectives of critical researchers—these are all solutions that might help "free" more and more CPAs and facilitate the necessary revitalization of the accounting profession. Although we are placing university professors at the heart of the process to enable a genuine paradigm shift to take place within the profession, we must not forget that the public authorities also have a role to play. We did not explore this angle in this research because we did not interview any standard-setters, but this opens up a future research angle that will build on our research. The decision to leave the accounting standard-setting process to a private body seems to have created a particular standard-setting regime. However, would it not be better if standard-setting were the sole responsibility of a public body, so that accounting remains part of the common good? That is a question that would be interesting to answer in the future as an extension to this research.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Certified public accountant individual interview guide

The first part of the interview was designed to establish a relationship of trust with the interviewee that would help the discussion. We therefore decided to begin the interview with general questions about the interviewees in order to gradually lead them toward the heart of the subject. We also guaranteed to protect the interviewees' anonymity and any information provided so that they would feel free to express themselves. The second part of the interview involved a discussion of the main concepts used in this research: neutrality and standards. In the third and final part, we presented the research project and gathered respondents' views on the various issues raised by the project, particularly the following questions: "Are accounting standards neutral?" and "Should the concept of neutrality in accounting be defined?"

Date:

Start time:

Length:

Interviewee name:

Interviewer name:

Preliminaries

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We would like this interview to take the form of a semi-structured interview to enable you to freely express your views on the topics we raise during the interview. The questions will therefore be open-ended.

In order to ensure that the interviews are processed in a scientific manner (content analysis), we would like your permission to record the interview. Irrespective of whether or not you give us your permission, we guarantee to keep the interview anonymous in all of our communications and will naturally ensure that any names mentioned during the course of the interview will not be disclosed when we report our results.

If you are interested, as a thank-you for taking part in this academic study, we would like to send you the results once the research has been completed. Would you be interested in receiving the results?

Introduction

We have contacted you as part of a research project we are currently carrying out on the subject of neutrality in accounting.

Before we get to the substance of the subject, could you please briefly tell us about yourself (the size of the firm you work for or worked for, the number of years' experience you have, your day-to-day work, your experience applying IFRS standards, etc.)?

Questions

In your opinion, is it worthwhile questioning the concept of neutrality in accounting?

What do you understand by the term "standards"? What about "accounting standards"?

How would you define the concept of neutrality?

Do you think accounting standards are neutral?

Do you think this concept is important and needs to be defined? Yes/no. Why/why not?

Who is this neutrality for? Who provides it? How?

What is the link with financial reporting?

The IASB places investors at the heart of its conceptual framework. Do you think this has an impact on the neutrality of the standards?

Appendix 2. Building a data structure in accordance with the Gioia methodology

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>First-order concepts</th><th>Second-order concepts</th><th>Aggregate dimensions</th></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality = Unbiased, impartial information</td><td rowspan="3">Polysemic definition of the concept of neutrality</td><td rowspan="6">Neutrality: a global baseline and guarantee of legitimacy for the accounting profession</td><td rowspan="19"><u>Neutrality, which underpins a technical view of accounting, disseminates a true, fair, and uncontested view of the world</u></td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality = Complies with the regulations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality in conjunction with accounting principles: “true and fair view,” “completeness,” “comparability”</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality guarantees that reporting is transparent, comprehensible, and intelligible</td><td rowspan="3">Attachment to the concept of neutrality</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality to enable decision-making</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality contributing to legitimation of the profession</td></tr>
<tr><td>“Rules,” “framework,” “ground rules”</td><td rowspan="3">Standards as manuals for preparing accounting information</td><td rowspan="9">Neutrality: a technical problem of applying standards, not of developing them</td></tr>
<tr><td>Standard = consensus about accounting treatment</td></tr>
<tr><td>Neutrality of the standard-setters</td></tr>
<tr><td>Possibility of interpretations</td><td rowspan="3">Insufficiently “consistent” standards</td></tr>
<tr><td>Possible options</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sometimes complex language</td></tr>
<tr><td>Desire to prioritize clients’ interests</td><td rowspan="3">Desire to protect clients’ interests</td></tr>
<tr><td>Consideration of tax interests</td></tr>
<tr><td>Use of earnings management</td></tr>
<tr><td>Lack of neutrality on the part of the standard-setter in the decision to focus on investors</td><td rowspan="2">Accounting professionals’ internalization of the standard-setters’ financial ideology</td><td rowspan="4">Neutrality as a vehicle for the dominant ideology</td></tr>
<tr><td>... but a financial logic that is adopted and rationalized</td></tr>
<tr><td>A broader consideration of stakeholders mentioned</td><td rowspan="2">Accounting professionals’ fatalism when faced with the opportunity to make changes</td></tr>
<tr><td>... but dismissed as utopian</td></tr>
</table>

	First-order concepts	Second-order concepts	Aggregate dimensions
Growing awareness of the link between accounting and capitalism	Factors triggering the growing awareness	Criticism and questioning of the **political view** of the accounting system	Questioning the myth of the true and fair view in accounting
Criticism of the excessive financialization of accounting			
Climate emergency			
Accounting system ill-suited to respond to current societal challenges	Deconstructing the traditional accounting model		
Accounting model out of touch with reality			
Questioning of the concept of neutrality			
Exploration of other perspectives/networks	Continued learning outside the world of accounting	The emergence of a new form of accounting to respond to **societal challenges**	
Acquisition of new knowledge			
Important role of some academics			
Neutrality defined in relation to the goal of maintaining living conditions	Toward a redefinition of the outlines of accounting		
Accounting compatible with preserving the common good			
Accounting bodies behind the curve on current societal challenges	Imperviousness of current accounting actors to a radical transformation of the accounting system	CPAs: between resignation and dialogue	
Difficulties challenging actors in accounting leading to feelings of resignation			
Risk of active co-option of societal issues by the profession	Cautious dialogue with economic actors		
Dialogue with companies			