„Analiza i Egzystencja" 76 (2026), 47–66
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2026.76-03

ARTICLES

MANUEL KNOLL
ORCID: 0000-0002-0651-1915
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU)
Email: manuel.knoll@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

Political Epistemology and Deep Disagreement

Keywords: practical knowledge, moral facts, moral knowledge, ethical realism, cognitivism, relativism, skepticism, meta-ethics

Słowa kluczowe: wiedza praktyczna, fakty moralne, wiedza moralna, realizm etyczny, kognitywizm, relatywizm, sceptycyzm, metaetyka

Abstract

Political epistemology asks whether there is knowledge about values, the good, the just, and the morally right that could be applied to political issues. Debates on such questions go back to the ancient Greeks. While Protagoras claims that no moral facts and no moral knowledge exist, Plato strives to overcome Protagoras's skeptical claims. This article argues in the tradition of Protagoras that there is no ultimate moral knowledge to orientate political decisions ethically. The main argument against the existence of a mind-independent and objective moral reality about which moral knowledge could be acquired is based on the existence of myriad deep disagreements on values, justice, morality, and ethics, which are resistant to rational resolution. The arguments presented against ethical realism and cognitivism in section II are mainly based on Max Weber's and Isaiah Berlin's views that deep disagreements on values, morality, and ethics exist. The arguments set out against these positions in section III rest on deep philosophical disagreements on social and political justice, which are a characteristic feature of the history of political thought. Drawing on Aristotle's and Machiavelli's ideas about practical knowledge, the conclusion argues that this type of knowledge remains relevant for contemporary politics.

I. The significance of deep disagreement for political epistemology: Historical beginnings

Political epistemology is the theory of knowledge applied to political issues. Its questions focus on the area where the disciplines of epistemology and political philosophy intersect.[1] Central questions in political epistemology are: What is the relation between politics and truth? This question touches on issues such as post-truth, fake news, and the appeal of conspiracy theories. What is the political role of experts, for example, in relation to problems such as the coronavirus or climate change? What is the relationship between democracy and knowledge or ignorance? Political epistemology also asks about forms of knowledge that could be applied in politics.[2] The central question posed by political epistemology is whether there is knowledge that can orientate political decisions ethically.[3] Political decisions are usually based on some kind of knowledge. When a government deals with another state, it attempts to acquire knowledge about, for example, its interests, its power to enforce them, and the people who govern. When legislators draft a new law, they seek to acquire knowledge about all areas affected and the social and political consequences. However, this kind of knowledge does not allow governments or legislators to answer the question of whether a policy is morally right or whether a law is just. The most fundamental question political epistemology asks is whether there is knowledge about values, the good, the just, and the morally right.

Debates on such questions go back to the ancient Greeks and especially to Protagoras and Plato. Informed about the variation in customs and moral codes from one culture to another by the historian Herodotus, Protagoras defended the view that in moral and legal matters there are no universal truths. According to Protagoras's argument, if moral truths and an objective or universally valid morality existed, we could expect considerable agreement on moral beliefs. However, we can observe a lot of diversity in moral views

---

1 Political epistemology is not limited to research on the intersection of epistemology and political philosophy. The discipline also comprises research on the intersection of epistemology and political theory or political science and is open to collaboration with scholars from related fields (cf. Edenberg & Hannon, 2021; Hannon & de Ridder, 2021).

2 For the last three questions, see Knoll (in press).

3 For the philosophy of orientation, see Stegmaier (2019).

and substantial disagreement on what is right and wrong. Therefore, no moral truths and no objective or universally valid morality exist. In the contemporary debate, this argument against the existence of moral truths and an objective or universally valid morality is called the *argument from moral disagreement* or the *argument from relativity* (cf. Gowans, 2000, pp. 3–4, 15–18; Ladd, 1985, pp. 1–3; Mackie, 1977, p. 37; Tersman, 2006, pp. xii–xiii). Despite Protagoras's rejection of any universal truths in moral and legal matters, he argues that some moral beliefs or views about what is good and just are more beneficial or useful than others (Plato, *Theaetetus*,[4] 166d–167d, 172a–b, 177d–e). In the principal clause of his philosophy, Protagoras claims that "man is the measure (*metron*) of all things (*chrêmata*): of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not" (*Tht.* 152a, trans. Levett, rev. Burnyeat). Because of this clause, Protagoras is usually "considered the first official voice of relativism" (Baghramian & Coliva, 2020, p. 27).[5] According to Plato's interpretation of the clause, all truths are relative to perceiving individuals (*Tht.* 152a). There is no single truth but rather as many truths as there are perceiving individuals. Individual human beings are the measure of what is true. Applied to the fields of morality, law, and politics, Protagoras's epistemological relativism means that no such thing as "the just and unjust" has "by nature (*physei*) any being (*ousia*) of its own" (*Tht.* 172b, trans. Levett, rev. Burnyeat). In this statement from Plato's *Theaetetus*, Protagoras denies the existence of mind-independent moral facts and an objective moral reality. In the language of contemporary meta-ethics, he was an "anti-realist".[6] Protagoras holds that "whatever any community (*polis*) decides to be just and unjust, and establishes as such, actually is

[4] Hereafter referred to as *Tht*.

[5] Baghramian and Coliva (2020) explain, "It is difficult to know what variety of relativism, if any, Protagoras was defending, but Plato seems to be attributing alethic relativism – to the effect that claims to truth should be relativized to a framework or perspective – to Protagoras" (p. 27; cf. pp. 1–2). Giorgini (2019) attributes "epistemological relativism" to Protagoras (p. 112). Zilioli (2007) conceptualizes Protagoras's relativism as "perceptual relativism" and "ethical relativism" (pp. 15–16).

[6] In contemporary meta-ethics, "moral realism" or "ethical realism" is the position that claims that moral facts, an objective moral reality, or objective moral values exist independently of the mind (Miller, 2013, p. 5; Rüther, 2015, pp. 93–123). Tersman (2006) equates the "realist" view of ethics with the "objectivist" view. Both views claim "that moral issues are issues over matters of fact, issues that allow for objectively and uniquely true answers" (pp. xi–xii).

what is just and right for that community and for as long as it remains so established" (*Tht.* 177d, trans. Levett, rev. Burnyeat).

Like his teacher Socrates, Plato aimed to overcome Protagoras's skeptical claims that no moral facts and no moral knowledge applicable to political issues exist.[7] For Plato, Protagoras's view has a major shortcoming: because of the lack of objective and universal standards, he cannot provide sufficient ethical orientation for political decisions and can only partially overcome moral and legal disagreements, which are disagreements about which actions and laws are right or wrong. Plato argues that there is philosophically accessible moral knowledge that can orientate personal and political decisions ethically. This claim is equivalent to an affirmative answer to the most fundamental question of political epistemology. In the language of contemporary meta-ethics, Plato was an "ethical realist" and "cognitivist" who held the good to be a moral fact or an objective moral reality about which moral knowledge can be acquired.

Protagoras and Plato vigorously disagree on the basic problem of political epistemology: whether there is any knowledge that can orientate political decisions ethically. In contemporary philosophical language, the disagreement between Plato and Protagoras is a dispute between an ethical realist and an anti-realist. It is also a dispute between a philosopher who believes in the possibility of moral knowledge (about the good and justice) and one who does not. Such disagreements are at the center of contemporary meta-ethical arguments. As the ongoing debate suggests, the discussants are far from resolving their disagreement and from reaching a consensus. This prompts the conclusion that such disagreements are *deep disagreements*. Deep disagreements are good-faith disagreements that cannot be resolved through the use of reasons and arguments (Fogelin, 2005, pp. 8, 11).[8]

In the next two sections, this article argues, in the tradition of Protagoras, that there is no ultimate moral knowledge that can orientate political decisions ethically. The main argument is based on the existence of myriad deep disagreements on values, justice, morality, and ethics, which are resistant to

---

[7] For good reasons, Protagoras has been understood as "Plato's Subtlest Enemy" (Zilioli, 2007). In line with Zilioli, Giorgini (2019) claims, "Plato struggled all his life with Protagoras's thought" (p. 115).

[8] Fogelin's definition of deep disagreements could be complemented by the condition that such disagreements are only deep if they do not depend on disagreements over descriptive facts.

rational resolution. The reality of these disagreements is a strong argument against the existence of a mind-independent and objective moral reality about which moral knowledge could be acquired.[9] The arguments presented against ethical realism and cognitivism in section II are mainly based on Max Weber's and Isaiah Berlin's views that deep disagreements on values, morality, and ethics exist. The arguments set out against these positions in section III rest on deep philosophical disagreements on social and political justice, which are a characteristic feature of the history of political thought.

II. The argument against ethical realism from deep disagreements on values, morality, and ethics: Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin

The world of today is not only a world characterized by moral disagreements and value conflicts, but also a world that is well aware of such disagreements and conflicts. People disagree on essentials such as religion, values, politics, and the good life, and on specific moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, affirmative action, taxation, and human cloning. Influenced by Nietzsche's thought on the struggle between opposing values,[10] Max Weber developed his own theory of value conflict. Weber claims that modernity is characterized by an irresolvable pluralism and struggle of values and ideals (Weber, 1949, pp. 17–18). The political struggle between politicians and parties is part of this broader and more fundamental fight. One main aim of politics is to fight this battle of antinomic values and ideals. Weber's understanding of politics follows the realist tradition that rejects "ideal theory," considers only pure factuality, and holds power to be the central category in politics. Politics means "striving for a share of power or for influence on the distribution of power, whether it be between states or between the groups of people contained within a single state" (Weber, 1994a, p. 310).

---

[9] This article mainly focuses on the ontological questions of whether moral facts and an objective moral reality exist. The important epistemological question of which doxastic attitude one should adopt concerning disagreements over which policy is the best or right to implement will be addressed in a future article. This question revolves around the problem of whether, in the face of such political disputes, one should retain or revise one's belief or whether one should suspend judgment.

[10] For the influence of Nietzsche's views regarding value conflict on Weber, see Knoll (2019, pp. 117–123).

Weber states that "all politics is essentially struggle" (Weber, 1994b, p. 219). In this struggle, every citizen and politician has to choose which value or ideal he holds to be "God" and which one he holds to be the "Devil" (Weber, 1949, pp. 17–18).

Weber's answer to the central question of political epistemology is unequivocally negative: no moral knowledge exists that is able to orientate a politician's decisions and actions ethically in the struggle of values and ideals. In this context, Weber emphasizes "the 'limits' of ethics" (Weber, 1949, p. 15). Both the social sciences and ethics face limits regarding the rational or scientific grounding of values and conceptions of justice. Both are unable to scientifically answer the questions of how to act and how to live. Scientific reason is unable to determine which of two or more conflicting goals or values is more desirable or worth choosing. Weber addresses these limits in a crucial statement that also refers to his "decisionism":

> Even such simple questions as the extent to which an end should sanction unavoidable means, or the extent to which undesired repercussions [*Nebenerfolge*] should be taken into consideration, or how conflicts between several concretely conflicting ends are to be arbitrated [*schlichten*], are entirely matters of choice or compromise. There is no (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever which can provide us with a decision here (Weber, 1949, pp. 18–19).

Weber's central claim is that there "is no (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever" that could arbitrate between values or resolve moral disagreements and value conflicts. His point about the argumentative limits of ethics and the social sciences is not that the different parties in moral disagreements and value conflicts are unable to defend their views with reasons and arguments. Rather, Weber claims that such disagreements and conflicts cannot be definitively and conclusively resolved through argument.[11] For Weber, an *ultimate* rational grounding of values, norms, or ideals is impossible.

Like Weber, Isaiah Berlin reflects on value pluralism. Despite his view that values are objective, Berlin believes that they often clash. Values are human ends that differ in "some profound, irreconcilable way" and are

[11] Weber repeatedly refers to the "Unaustragbarkeit" of such conflicts (Weber, 1949, pp. 11, 16; cf. Knoll, 2019).

"not combinable in any final synthesis" (Berlin, 1997, p. 8). According to Berlin, "values can clash" or "be incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me". Values "may easily clash within the breast of a single individual" (Berlin, 1997, p. 10). Berlin illustrates value conflicts with the example of someone who believes in always telling the truth and someone who believes that this "can sometimes be too painful and too destructive" (Berlin, 1997, p. 10). Berlin's example illustrates a more profound and general conflict between two main approaches to morality and ethics, i.e. between a deontological and a consequentialist approach. Deontological ethics claims that certain actions are always right or wrong in certain situations, no matter what the consequences are. Consequentialist ethics, on the contrary, holds that the judgment about the moral rightness or wrongness of an action depends exclusively on the quality of its foreseeable consequences. These two approaches to ethics are irreconcilably opposed to each other. They do not allow for consensus or compromise. Rather, they require a choice about whether actions or consequences are the appropriate domain of ethical assessment. Weber conceptualizes the deep disagreement between these two approaches to ethics as a conflict between an "ethics of responsibility" (*Verantwortungsethik*) and an "ethics of conviction" (*Gesinnungsethik*) (Weber, 1994a, pp. 357–369; cf. Knoll, 2019).

Berlin further illustrates value conflicts with the collision of liberty and equality, two major human values and goals. When different individuals exercise their liberty, it usually leads to inequality among them. The achievement of equality, by contrast, frequently demands the restriction of liberty; e.g., liberty needs "to be curtailed in order to make room for social welfare" (Berlin, 1997, pp. 10–11). The clash between equality and liberty is one of the key conflicts pertaining to the political sphere. In contemporary political philosophy, this conflict is represented by the deep disagreement between the theories of Rawls and Nozick, which is addressed in section III.

According to Berlin, value conflicts are an essential feature of the human condition. In such conflicts, "we are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss" (Berlin, 1997, p. 11). The "normal human situation" is that "ends equally ultimate, equally sacred" and "entire systems of value" do "come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration" (Berlin, 2013, p. 94; cf. pp. 94–99). On the basis of his views on value pluralism and collisions of values, Berlin rejects the utopian political

notion of a perfect state as an unrealistic ideal and dangerous political goal: "the search for perfection does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed" (Berlin, 1997, pp. 12–13, 15).

Although Weber and Berlin did not use the term "deep disagreements," both scholars claimed decades before Fogelin that there is no possibility of rationally arbitrating between ideals or rationally resolving value conflicts. While Weber and Berlin focus on deep disagreements on values and ideals, Fogelin examines deep disagreements on moral issues such as abortion and affirmative action (2005, pp. 8–10). Despite Berlin's view that values are objective, he denies the existence of moral knowledge that could help to choose between conflicting values, e.g., between liberty and equality. Weber denies the existence of any given or predefined "hierarchical ordering of values" (Weber, 1949, p. 19). Deep and irresolvable disagreements on values, morality, and approaches to ethics are a strong argument against the existence of an objective moral reality that could orientate political decisions ethically. If a mind-independent order of values existed, it would be likely that, after thousands of years of philosophical research, some moral knowledge about them would have been discovered. However, as the contemporary debate shows, we are far from any agreement on this kind of knowledge that would allow us to resolve value conflicts and moral disagreements.

III. The argument against ethical realism from deep disagreements on justice

Since ancient Greek thought, many philosophers have argued that justice is our central moral, social, and political virtue. Plato argues that true philosophers are able to acquire knowledge about justice; Protagoras denies this. In the contemporary debate, Rawls developed a theory of "justice as fairness" that is able to orientate political decisions ethically.[12] Rawls explains

[12] In 1971, Rawls explained that his conception of justice as fairness "constitutes the most appropriate moral basis for a democratic society" (Rawls, 1999, Preface, p. xix). In his later works, Rawls insists on the distinction "between moral and political philosophy" and emphasizes that he defends a "strictly political conception of justice." Such a conception is "limited to the domain of the political" and "expresses political values" (Rawls, 2005, pp. xv, 450; cf. p. 439). Nevertheless, Rawls still understands political

his ideal theory approach to political justice: "We are in the way of describing an ideal arrangement, comparison with which defines a standard for judging actual institutions, and indicates what must be maintained to justify departures from it" (Rawls, 1999, § 36, p. 199). Despite Rawls's conviction that his ideal theory is able to orientate political decisions ethically, he does not claim that his conception of justice as fairness is true: "I do not claim for the principles of justice proposed that they are necessary truths or derivable from such truths" (Rawls, 1999, § 4, p. 19). In 1985, Rawls again declared that he "should like to avoid" making "claims to universal truth" for his conception of justice as fairness (p. 223). In his *Theory of Justice* he makes the more modest claim that in a fair "initial situation" a rational agreement on his conception of justice can be achieved (Rawls, 1999, § 2, p. 11).[13] This agreement should enable a society to cope with disagreements over the good by establishing a just political framework that allows opposing conceptions of a good life to coexist. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls claims that, in a pluralist society with opposing comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines, an "overlapping consensus" on a political conception of justice can be reached (Rawls, 2005, Part IV, §§ 1–8, pp. 133–172; cf. Mason, 1993, pp. 9–12). A rational agreement or an "overlapping consensus" on social or political justice is, however, not a realistic goal.

As early as 1917, Max Weber argued in a compelling passage that there are not only irreconcilable conceptions of the good but also of the just. He illustrates "the 'limits' of ethics" by referring to deep disagreements on social and political justice:

> The implications of the postulate of 'justice' cannot be decided unambiguously by any ethic. Whether one, for example – as would correspond most closely with the views expressed by Schmoller – owes much to those who achieve much or whether one should demand much from those who accomplish much; whether one should, e. g., in the name of justice […] accord great opportunities to those with eminent talents or whether on the contrary (like Babeuf) one should attempt to equalize the injustice of the unequal distribution of mental capacities through the rigorous provision that talented

philosophy as applied moral philosophy and claims about justice as moral or ethical claims. He explains, "Political conceptions of justice are themselves intrinsically moral ideas" and describes them as a "kind of normative values" (Rawls, 2005, p. 484).

[13] In the "Preface for the Revised Edition," Rawls hopes that "justice as fairness will seem reasonable and useful" (Rawls, 1999, p. xi).

> persons, whose talent gives them prestige, must not utilize their better opportunities for their own benefit – these questions cannot be definitely answered [*dürfte aus "ethischen Prämissen" unaustragbar sein*]. The ethical problem in most social-political issues is, however, of this type (Weber, 1949, pp. 15–16).

In the literature, this passage has been referred to as "Weber's 'Babeuf' antinomy" (Turner and Factor, 1984, p. 35). However, in the dense and complex passage, Weber shows that it is a general feature of modernity that there are irreconcilable conceptions of social and political justice. Weber refers not only to Babeuf's view of distributive justice but also to several irreconcilable interpretations of "the postulate of 'justice'," e.g., the conflict between the "performance principle" and what Rawls calls the "principle of redress" (Rawls, 1999, § 17, p. 86).[14] Weber's main point is that the disagreement between these irreconcilable conceptions of justice "cannot be conclusively argued out based on 'ethical premises'" (*dürfte aus "ethischen Prämissen" unaustragbar sein*). In the last phrase of the passage, Weber makes clear that such "'limits' of ethics" apply to most "social-political issues".

Deep disagreements on justice are not a uniquely modern phenomenon but were quite common in the ancient world. Plato's and Aristotle's writings contain central insights regarding conflicts about political justice. These conflicts are based on irreconcilable views of a just distribution of political offices and power. Concerning a just distribution of political power, Plato distinguishes between egalitarian and proportional justice. Egalitarian political justice is identical with democratic justice. It asks for "arithmetic" or "numeric" equality, claiming that in the distribution of political power, all male citizens should receive equal shares. In contrast, proportional justice asks for "geometric" or "proportional" equality, claiming that it is just to allot equal shares only to equals, not to every citizen. The inequalities that matter politically to Plato and in proportion to which he wants to distribute political power are "education" (*paideia*) and "virtue" (*aretê*) (*Laws* VI 757b–e). Aristotle unequivocally shares this meritocratic view (*Politics* III 13, 1283a25).

According to the political theory of merit that Aristotle presents in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, proportional political justice is applied in four different conceptions of distributive justice. All of these conceptions are

[14] For Babeuf's view of distributive justice, see Fleischacker (2004, pp. 55, 76, 160–61).

defended by different groups of citizens who have distinct political convictions. The democrats favor "freedom" as the appropriate criterion of merit, the supporters of oligarchy "wealth," the aristocrats "virtue" (*aretê*), and an unnamed fourth group "noble birth" (*Eth. Nic.* V 6, 1131a24–29). Therefore, Aristotle distinguishes between four different conceptions of distributive or political justice: the democratic, the oligarchic, the aristocratic, and an undesignated fourth conception. Each of these conceptions is linked to its corresponding political system and justifies its specific distribution of political power. To argue that every free-born male citizen should get an equal share in political power is equivalent to defending democracy. To advocate the distribution of political offices in proportion to wealth is the same as supporting oligarchy. To argue that political power should be given only to virtuous citizens is equivalent to defending aristocracy.

In the *Politics*, in contrast to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, like Plato, opposes "numeric" or "arithmetic" (*arithmô*) equality to equality "according to merit" (*kat' axian*) (*Politics* V 1, 1301b29f.; VI 2, 1317b4; cf. Plato, *Laws* VI 751d). This opposition corresponds to the fundamental antagonism and deep disagreement between arithmetic and proportional equality and justice. Proportional justice and egalitarian justice are not only opposites but also, in general, logically irreconcilable. They are mutually exclusive and represent two competing and contradictory understandings of justice that are connected to different sets of rules. This means that they cannot both be applied to solve the same distribution problem without nullifying each other (cf. Herwig, 1984, pp. 97–99). Either justice means equality *only for equals* or, in an exclusive sense, *for all* (equals and unequals). The formal principle of proportional justice stipulates that *only equals* should get equal shares, while unequals should be allotted unequal shares. This formal principle is reconcilable in only one case with the formal principle of egalitarian justice that determines that *all* should get equal shares: when everyone is equal. If there are unequal citizens involved in a distribution of political power, such as the rich and the poor, an oligarchic conception of proportional justice requires that unequal shares be allocated to them in proportion to their unequal wealth. For oligarchic justice, to distribute equal shares in such a case would be unjust. If there were virtuous and non-virtuous citizens who had claims in the same distribution, to distribute equal shares would also be unjust from the perspective of an aristocratic conception of justice. Aristocratic justice requires allotting unequal shares to citizens in proportion to their unequal virtue.

However, if the most virtuous citizens were poor, such a distribution would be unjust from the perspective of oligarchic justice. From the perspective of democratic justice, however, a distribution of unequal shares is unjust. Democratic justice, which is egalitarian justice, requires allotting equal shares to every citizen, which can be achieved through universal and equal suffrage. Census suffrage, which is based on oligarchic justice, is unjust from the prevailing modern perspective of egalitarian justice.

In the 19th century, while conflicts about political justice persisted, deep disagreements on social justice entered the stage. Karl Marx argues that the distribution of social wealth should be based exclusively on individual needs and thus be independent of unequal labor contributions to society (Marx, 2009; cf. Knoll, 2018a, pp. 33–39). Several contemporary political philosophers, such as Michael Walzer and David Miller, recognize the importance of the "needs principle" for just distributions of social benefits (Walzer, 1983, pp. 25–26, 64–94; Miller, 2003, pp. 203–229; cf. Rawls, 1999, § 47, p. 268). However, from the perspective of the performance or merit principle, it is extremely unjust if persons who contribute more to society receive significantly less than those who contribute less. Nevertheless, with regard to social distribution, Marx does not acknowledge or approve the "bourgeois" performance principle at all. His own distributive principle is not only irreconcilable with the performance principle but also nullifies it and even allows it to be reversed.

A similar conflict and deep disagreement over social justice is at the center of contemporary political philosophy. Although the performance principle and meritocracy are still advocated by political philosophers today (Miller, 2003, pp. 177–202), most contemporary political theorists endorse egalitarian justice. Only three years after John Rawls published his egalitarian conception of social justice in 1971, the libertarian Robert Nozick forcefully objected to it. Rawls's basic moral conviction is that inequalities of birth and natural endowments are undeserved and hence call for social redress or compensation (Rawls, 1999, § 17, pp. 86–93). Against this conviction, Nozick (1974) argues that even if people might not deserve their natural endowments, they still rightfully own them, have a justified claim to them, and are free to use them for their own benefit (p. 225). Therefore, Nozick deeply disagrees with the extent of taxation and income redistribution required by Rawls's conception of social justice. In a polemical statement, Nozick attempts to

expose the injustice of Rawls's conception, which treats persons' natural endowments and abilities as means for other people's welfare:

> Taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor. Some persons find this claim obviously true: taking the earnings of *n* hours labor is like taking *n* hours from the person; it is like forcing the person to work *n* hours for another's purpose (Nozick, 1974, p. 169; cf. pp. 168–69, 228).

The deep disagreements between Rawls's and Nozick's views on social justice could be interpreted as a resumption of the deep disagreement between advocates of the performance or merit principle and advocates of Marx's view of social justice.

The preceding arguments that show that deep disagreements on social and political justice are a characteristic feature of the history of political thought are significant for both meta-ethics and political epistemology. The reason is that such disagreements, resistant to rational resolution, provide a strong case against ethical realism and cognitivism. More than two thousand years of systematic philosophical research on justice have neither uncovered objective truths about the matter nor led to any agreement among scholars. Looking at it the other way round, deep disagreements among notions of social and political justice exist because there is no objective moral reality and there are no moral facts. There is nothing in the world to back up any *one* of the conflicting philosophical views on justice. Nor is there a procedure using moral facts to resolve moral disagreements and to show that one view is wrong and another is right (cf. Waldron, 1999, pp. 177–78). If the ethical realist, who, like Plato, claims that moral facts or objective moral values exist, were able both to cogently demonstrate that such an objective moral reality exists and to successfully communicate his knowledge about it, he could refute the anti-realist and moral skeptic. In this case, such a philosopher could resolve moral disagreements and value conflicts by pointing to *the* moral truths and using them as standards to assess antagonistic views and values. However, to date, no undeniable moral truths have been identified. The ethical realist has the burden of proof. She should be able to show the anti-realist and moral skeptic how such facts and values can be detected and accessed. If we were to accept the belief that objective values are somehow part of the structure of the world, we should be able to identify or comprehend their nature and their place in this world. Likewise,

someone who makes an empirical claim—say, that centaurs exist—should be able to prove it to the skeptic who denies it. If the moral skeptic is expected to equate an objective moral reality with an inaccessible divine or metaphysical reality, such as the one Plato claims for the form of the good, she has good reasons to doubt its existence.

The *argument against ethical realism from deep disagreements on justice* rests on historical and contemporary disagreements among philosophers, researchers, and scholars, who represent the alleged vigor of human reasoning. Their disagreements are based on elaborate but opposing philosophical theories, each of which is defended with carefully constructed arguments. According to an old-fashioned view, philosophy is committed to finding out the truth. However, after more than two thousand years of continuous philosophical disagreements on social and political justice, it is very likely that there exists no objective truth about justice. Considering the enormous amount of past philosophical effort, there is no good reason to be optimistic that a consensus on justice could be reached in the future (Ribeiro, 2011, pp. 3–25).

IV. Conclusion

The mere fact of continuous deep disagreements on justice, values, and morals does not, of course, conclusively rule out the possibility that an objective moral reality or moral knowledge exists. It is conceivable that some philosopher in the past discovered truths about such matters or will do so in the future. Nevertheless, the debate until now and the persistence of widespread deep disagreements on justice, values, and morals offer little hope that political epistemologists will reach consensus or discover ultimate moral knowledge that could orientate political decisions ethically. Instead of searching for moral knowledge, political philosophers should focus on how to deal practically and ethically with such disagreements.

Deep disagreements on justice, values, and moral issues occur especially in the political arena. Theoretical disagreements among citizens often turn into practical conflicts and lead to fights and violence. In such conflicts, opponents frequently denigrate each other as unreasonable, ignorant, backward, prejudiced, vicious, and the like, which is often an oversimplification of the matter. The value conflict between the life of a fetus and

a woman's liberty can easily turn into a conflict between persons and may, in extreme cases, lead to violent actions by anti-abortion radicals. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, citizens in many countries disagreed with the restrictions on freedom and lockdowns imposed by their governments. Protests against these measures led to violence and arrests. In the worst cases, theoretical disagreements and practical conflicts can lead to civil unrest and civil wars. The central question, then, is how to reduce practical conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence among those who disagree but must live together.[15] Rather than seeking moral facts and moral knowledge, political epistemologists should seek knowledge that promotes the attainment of these goals.

There is knowledge that allows citizens to reduce practical conflicts and to promote peaceful coexistence. This kind of knowledge is practical rather than theoretical. An early model for it is what Aristotle calls "practical knowledge" (*epistêmê praktikê*), which is based on experience and the intellectual virtue "prudence" (*phronêsis*) (*Eth. Nic.* VI). In Book V of his *Politics*, Aristotle suggests an empirical, inductive, and comparative method for gaining knowledge about "upheaval," "sedition," or "revolution" (*stasis*). In Book V, Aristotle demonstrates how the empirical study of history and of the different causes of factional conflict, which includes research on human nature, allows for a better understanding of such phenomena. If we know the various causes of past uprisings and revolutions, we can use this knowledge to prevent future ones. Aristotle's search for knowledge about civil disagreements and civil unrest is guided by the normative political goal of stabilizing political systems. The insights of his political studies are still relevant for the world of today and its civil wars. Aristotle's establishment of an empirical political science is connected to his political ethics, which aims at the good and happy life of the members of the political community. Drawing on this tradition, political epistemologists and contemporary political ethics should develop strategies for dealing practically and ethically with deep disagreements on justice, values, and morals.

It was the ill-famed political thinker Niccolò Machiavelli who not only shared Aristotle's normative political goal of stabilizing political systems (*mantenere lo stato*), but also used his empirical, inductive, and comparative method to gain practical knowledge (Knoll, 2010). By comparing historical

[15] For preliminary answers to this question, see Knoll (2020).

and contemporary political events, Machiavelli aims to derive "general rules" (*regole generali*) to guide political action (cf. Knoll, 2010, pp. 110, 114–115). Despite believing that the world is contingent and unpredictable, Machiavelli recognizes a constant factor in history through which practical knowledge could be gained. This factor is human nature, consisting of unchangeable desires and passions such as "ambition" (*ambizione*), "greed" (*avarizia*) and the striving for power (Knoll, 2018b). By comparing human nature with the sky, the sun and the other natural elements, Machiavelli concludes that these phenomena have remained unchanged since ancient times (*Discourses*, Preface). Machiavelli further explains:

> Prudent men are accustomed to say, and not by chance or without good reasons, that whoever wishes to foresee the future should reflect on the past, for everything that happens in the world at any time has its proper counterpart [*riscontro*] in ancient times. This is due to the fact that these events are the work of men who have, and always have had, the same passions [*sempre le medesime passioni*] which must of necessity result in the same effects (*Discourses* III 43, my translation; cf. *Discourses* I 39).

Machiavelli's idea that historical necessity is based on the constancy of human nature can already be found in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* (I 22, III 82), which, like Book V of Aristotle's *Politics*, was known to the Florentine. This constancy allows political theorists and politicians who study history to learn from it.

The empirical, inductive, and comparative method used by Aristotle and Machiavelli to gain practical knowledge is not outdated and could still be employed by contemporary political theorists. While Aristotle primarily used this method to prevent future uprisings and revolutions, Machiavelli applied it more comprehensively. For example, Machiavelli compares Lucius Junius Brutus's killing of his own sons after the liberation of Rome from the tyranny of the Tarquinian kings with the scrupulous behavior of Piero Soderini after the expulsion of the Medici from Florence. From this comparison, he deduces the general rule that a leading politician must eliminate the enemies of a new republican order established after a period of monarchical rule (*Discourses* I 16 and III 3). Machiavelli considers this to be the price to pay for lasting political stability.

The empirical, inductive, and comparative method could be used to analyze why so many wars initiated by U.S. administrations ended in failure

and disaster, causing significant loss of life and incurring high financial costs. The *Pentagon Papers* revealed the unfounded optimism surrounding the initiation and continuation of the Vietnam War, which ended with the humiliating withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1975. The U.S.-led coalition's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 resulted in the Taliban's successful return in 2021. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to regional instability and the rise of Sunni insurgency groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and, subsequently, the Islamic State (ISIS), which seized large parts of Iraq and Syria. At present, the war against Iran, launched by Israel and the United States on 28 February 2026, appears to provide further evidence that U.S. administrations are unable to learn from history or simply ignore the practical lessons that could be gained by applying the empirical, inductive, and comparative method.

References

Baghramian, M., & Coliva, A. (2020). *Relativism*. Routledge.

Berlin, I. (1997). The Pursuit of the Ideal. In H. Hardy & R. Hausheer (Eds.), *The proper study of mankind: An anthology of essays* (pp. 1–16). Chatto & Windus. (Original work published 1988).

Berlin, I. (2013). The Originality of Machiavelli. In H. Hardy (Ed.), *Against the current: Essays in the history of ideas* (2nd ed., pp. 33–100). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1972).

Edenberg, E., & Hannon, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Political Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

Fleischacker, S. (2004). *A Short History of Distributive Justice*. Harvard University Press.

Fogelin, R.J. (2005). The Logic of Deep Disagreements. *Informal Logic*, *25*(1), 3–11. (Original work published 1985).

Giorgini, G. (2019). Does Democracy Necessarily Rest on Relativism? The Origins of the Debate in Ancient Greece. In C. Riedweg (Ed.), *Philosophie für die Polis: Akten des 5. Kongresses der Gesellschaft für antike Philosophie 2016* (pp. 93–120).

Gowans, C. W. (2000). Introduction. Debates about moral disagreements. In C. W. Gowans (Ed.), *Moral disagreements: Classic and contemporary readings* (pp. 1–43). Routledge.

Hannon, M., & de Ridder, J. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*. Routledge.

Herwig, D. (1984). *Gleichbehandlung und Egalisierung als konkurrierende Modelle von Gerechtigkeit. Eine systematische Analyse*. Fink.

Knoll, M. (2010). Wissenschaft und Methode bei Machiavelli. Die Neubegründung der empirischen Politikwissenschaft nach Aristoteles. In M. Knoll & S. Saracino (Eds.), *Niccolò Machiavelli—Die Geburt des Staates* (pp. 91–119). Steiner.

Knoll, M. (2018a). Deep Disagreements on Social and Political Justice: Their Meta-Ethical Relevance and the Need for a New Research Perspective. In M. Knoll, S. Snyder, & N. Şimşek (Eds.), *New perspectives on distributive justice: Deep disagreements, pluralism, and the problem of consensus* (pp. 23–52). De Gruyter.

Knoll, M. (2018b). The Role of Emotions, Desires, and Passions in Politics. Machiavelli's Political Psychology of Motivation. *Lo Sguardo. Rivista di Filosofia*, (27), 49–59.

Knoll, M. (2019). Max Weber on Politics, Reason, and the Clash of Values and Approaches to Ethics. *Dîvân. Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *24*(47), 111–140.

Knoll, M. (2020). Deep Disagreements on Values, Justice, and Moral Issues: Towards an Ethics of Disagreement. *Trames*, *24*(3), 315–338.

Knoll, M. (in press). Democracy or Epistocracy? On the Role of Knowledge in Politics. In D. Zucca (Ed.), *Ancient critiques of democracy and their contemporary relevance.* Tab Edizioni.

Ladd, J. (Ed.). (1985). *Ethical Relativism*. University Press of America. (Original work published 1973).

Lynch, M.P. (2010). Epistemic Circularity and Epistemic Incommensurability. In A. Haddock, A. Millar, & D. Pritchard (Eds.), *Social epistemology* (pp. 262–277). Oxford University Press.

Machuca, D.E. (2013). Editor's Introduction. In D.E. Machuca (Ed.), *Disagreement and skepticism* (pp. 1–23). Routledge.

Machuca, D.E., & Reed, B. (Eds.). (2018). *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin.

Marx, K. (2009). *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Dodo Press.

Mason, A. (1993). *Explaining Political Disagreement*. Cambridge University Press.

Miller, A. (2013). *Contemporary Metaethics. An Introduction* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Miller, D. (2003). *Principles of Social Justice*. Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1999).

Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Basic Books.

Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *14*(3), 223–251.

Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (Rev. ed.). Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1971).

Rawls, J. (2005). *Political Liberalism* (Expanded ed.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1993).

Ribeiro, B. (2011). Philosophy and Disagreement. *Crítica. Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía*, *43*(127), 3–25.

Rüther, M. (2015). *Metaethik zur Einführung*. Junius.

Siegel, H. (2013). Argumentation and the epistemology of disagreement. *OSSA Conference Archive*, Paper 157, 1–22.

Stegmaier, W. (2019). *What is Orientation? A Philosophical Investigation* (R. G. Müller, Trans.). De Gruyter.

Tersman, F. (2006). *Moral Disagreement*. Cambridge University Press.

Turner, S.P., & Factor, R.A. (1984). *Max Weber and the Dispute over Reason and Value: A Study in Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics*. Routledge.

Waldron, J. (1999). *Law and Disagreement*. Oxford University Press.

Walzer, M. (1983). *Spheres of Justice. A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. Basic Books.

Weber, M. (1949). The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics. In E.A. Shils & H.A. Finch (Trans. & Eds.), *The methodology of the social sciences* (pp. 1–47). Free Press. (Original work published 1917).

Weber, M. (1994a). The Profession and Vocation of Politics. In P. Lassman & R. Speirs (Eds.), *Weber: Political writings* (pp. 309–369). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1919).

Weber, M. (1994b). Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order. In P. Lassman & R. Speirs (Eds.), *Weber: Political writings* (pp. 130–271). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1918).

Zilioli, U. (2007). *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism. Plato's Subtlest Enemy*. Ashgate.

Author Note

Manuel Knoll, Prof. Dr. phil. habil., earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy, Political Science, and Modern and Contemporary History at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU). Having held three full professorships in Istanbul from 2011 to 2024, he returned to LMU as a Privatdozent in Political Theory and Philosophy. He is a Fellow at the Émile Durkheim Research Unit: Crisis Analysis at the University of Bonn (since 2025) and a Visiting Lecturer at Bucerius Law School, Hamburg (since 2026). He is also an Associate Editor of *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* (since 2021) and a member of the Instituto "Lucio Anneo Séneca" at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (since 2013). His main areas of research are political philosophy and ethics (particularly theories of justice), deep disagreements about values, morals, and justice, social philosophy and critical theory, hedonism, Greek philosophy of classical antiquity, as well as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Rawls, Walzer, and Nussbaum.

Citation

Knoll, M. (2026). Political Epistemology and Deep Disagreement. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *76* (4), 47–66. DOI: 10.18276/aie2026.76-03.