Analiza ¿Egzystencja

czasopismo filozoficzne

AiE

76

2026

Political Imagination

Guest editors: Urszula Lisowska & Karol Morawski

Uniwersytet Szczeciński

Rada Naukowa – Arianna Betti (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands), Piotr Bołtuć (University of Illinois, Springfield, USA), Arkadiusz Chrudzimski (Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Kraków), Józef Dębowski (Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski, Olsztyn), Adam Drozdek (Duquesne University, USA), Piotr Gutowski (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Lublin), Stanisław Judycki (Uniwersytet Gdański), Andrzej Klawiter (Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań), Dariusz Łukasiewicz (Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz), Josef Moural (Usti nad Labem, Czech Republic), Zbysław Muszyński (Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin), Robert Piłat (Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa), Roger Pouivet (Université de Lorraine, France), Alexander Pruss (Baylor University, USA), Andrzej Przyłębski (Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań), Wlodek Rabinowicz (Lund University, Sweden), John Skorupski (University of St Andrews, UK), Marek Szulakiewicz (Uniwersytet im. Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń), Monika Walczak (Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Lublin), Urszula Żegleń (Uniwersytet im. Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń)

Lista recenzentów dostępna jest na stronie: wnus.usz.edu.pl/aie

Redaktor naczelna – Renata Ziemińska (Uniwersytet Szczeciński)

Komitet redakcyjny – Mirosław Rutkowski (Uniwersytet Szczeciński), Adriana Schetz (Uniwersytet Szczeciński), Tadeusz Szubka (Uniwersytet Szczeciński), Katarzyna Ciarcińska (Uniwersytet Szczeciński), Katarzyna Szymańska (Zachodniopomorski Uniwersytet Technologiczny).

Sekretarz redakcji – Judyta Babis

Adres Redakcji – Instytut Filozofii i Kognitywistyki Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego
71-017 Szczecin, ul. Krakowska 71, e-mail: egzystencja@usz.edu.pl

Wersja papierowa jest wersją podstawową

Elektroniczna wersja czasopisma jest dostępna na stronie: wnus.usz.edu.pl/aie

Czasopismo jest indeksowane w bazach: SCOPUS, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), ERIH PLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities), CEJSH (The Central European Journalof Social Sciences and Humanities), CEEOL (The Central and Eastern European Online Library) oraz BazHum

Redakcja językowa i korekta – Zuzanna Zawadka

Skład komputerowy – Iga Bańkowska

Projekt okładki – Michał Starczewski

© Copyright by Uniwersytet Szczeciński, Szczecin 2026

ISSN (print) 1734-9923 | ISSN (online) 2300-7621

WYDAWNICTWO NAUKOWE UNIWERSYTETU SZCZECIŃSKIEGO

Wydanie I. Ark. wyd. 7,0. Ark. druk. 7,3. Format A5. Nakład 35 egz.

Contents

Urszula Lisowska, *Wonder to Imagine Better – Thinking Politics in the Anthropocene* 5

Geoff Bowe, *Image and Power in the Socratic Problem* 25

Manuel Knoll, *Political Epistemology and Deep Disagreement* 47

Mehmet Fatih Elmas, *Against* Entia Imaginationis*, with* Imagination*: Toward a New Conception of Religion in Spinoza* 67

Mariusz Turowski, *Realism, Imagination and Ontology: Human Development and the Post-Liberal Turn in Contemporary Political Philosophy* 89

„Analiza i Egzystencja" 76 (2026), 5–24
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2026.76-01

ARTICLES

URSZULA LISOWSKA
ORCID: 0000-0003-2177-6732
The University of Wrocław
Email: urszula.lisowska2@uwr.edu.pl

Wonder to Imagine Better – Thinking Politics in the Anthropocene

Keywords: the Anthropocene; politics; wonder; imagination; reflective judgment
Słowa kluczowe: antropocen; polityka; zadziwienie; wyobraźnia; sąd refleksyjny

Abstract

The paper considers the relevance of wonder and imagination to thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. In the first step, the Anthropocene is presented as a foundational political challenge. After that, the faculties of imagination and wonder are discussed, each in relation to the challenge(s) posed by the Anthropocene. In the final step, wonder is connected to imagination through an account of reflective judgment. The paper concludes by looping back to the Anthropocene and pointing to further questions to be considered. The argument draws on the work of Hannah Arendt, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, among others.

Introduction

The term "the Anthropocene" expresses the realization that we humans and our products now act as a force that destabilizes the Earth system at all levels, including the geological one (Steffen et al., 2007).[1] To claim this period calls for a new name is to suggest the scale of our impact on the planet is unprecedented, and therefore, its exact nature and consequences are difficult to imagine. One of the areas that need reimagining, I will argue, is the character and foundations of politics. In the first section, I specify in three points what I take to be the foundational political challenge of the Anthropocene. Next, I turn to Hannah Arendt to develop a twofold account of political imagination and use it to rearticulate the political crisis of the Anthropocene. In the succeeding section, I introduce the concept of wonder as a political faculty. I offer a threefold account of wonder and follow up by linking it to the three aspects of the political challenge of the Anthropocene. In the next step of the argument, I connect wonder to imagination through the concept of judgment. I conclude by looping back to the Anthropocene, as well as pointing to some additional questions that require consideration.

The political challenge of the Anthropocene

As a political problem, the Anthropocene demands attention at two levels, which roughly correspond to what Chantal Mouffe calls the dimensions of politics and the political, respectively. Politics, Mouffe says, comprises "the manifold practices of conventional politics" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 8), i.e., institutions, instruments, standards, etc. through which the functioning of a society is organized. To treat the Anthropocene as a political matter in this sense is to employ the measures offered by a given political system – from the media, through civic activism to the programs of political parties and, finally,

[1] In March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) rejected the motion to recognize the Anthropocene as a current geological epoch (succeeding the Holocene). However, what the IUGS found controversial was not the claim that humans have a pervasive impact on the planet but rather some of the details of the Anthropocene proposal as it was submitted (e.g., its starting point). Moreover, the IUGS acknowledged that the term "the Anthropocene" will continue to be used in various disciplines and public discourse (IUGS, 2024).

law-making – to address environmental concerns. However, the aptitude (or the primary responsibility) of politics for addressing the Anthropocene is far from uncontroversial, with science, technology, or the market often being given priority over politics (cf. Latour, 2015). And if the very province of politics – the question of what belongs to its scope and therefore of what politics actually is – is at stake, then we enter the dimension of what Mouffe calls the political, zooming in on "the very way in which society is instituted" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9; this general definition is independent of Mouffe's specific agonistic account of the political, as Mouffe herself emphasizes). In other words, the Anthropocene not only generates a set of problems that should be addressed by political measures but also, and more basically, calls for reflecting on the very foundations of politics.

In treating the Anthropocene in this way, I follow such authors as John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering (2019), as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021), who point out that the Anthropocene brings about a crisis in (Western) ideas of politics, and call for a revision of these ideas. Using the categories I have discussed so far, the problem can be expressed in terms of the disconnection between the levels of politics and the political. For even if we do agree that the anthropogenic planetary crisis should be addressed by means offered by politics, the question that emerges is this: can the political realm be instituted at all? More specifically, I propose to break this challenge down into three overlapping points: the problem of agency, the difference between human and other-than-human beings, and the crisis of understanding.

First, let us assume the following working understanding of agency: agency is the spontaneous, responsible, and accountable activity over which the actor has some degree of control. In the Anthropocene, agency becomes problematic as we are confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, to say that human beings are bringing about a dramatic change in the functioning of the planet – a change that would not have happened without our activities and in this sense can be said to have been caused by us spontaneously, rather than following from the existing processes on Earth – is to suggest that we, humans, can act as potent agents. On the other hand, it is quite clear that an average human being does not have much of a sense of agency when confronted with the structural factors perpetuating ecologically unsound habits (cf., e.g., carbon lock-in). Moreover, albeit – one way or another – human-engendered, the crisis brings about violent natural processes

and rapid events (e.g. weather events), over which we have little (if any) control and which, therefore, make us feel powerless.[2]

One way to articulate this paradox is to use Chakrabarty's concepts of the global and the planetary. To think in terms of the global, Chakrabarty says, is to approach the environment from the angle of *global*ization. Here, the entire Earth is treated as the object of human agency, out there to be used for the benefit of humanity (or part of it). However, as Chakrabarty succinctly puts it, "the global reveals the planetary" (Chakrabarty, 2021, pp. 205–217): when we act extensively on our material surroundings, we activate universal (cosmic) processes that we neither created nor control. In other words, by causing the Anthropocene, we subvert our own agency. Perhaps, as such, the Anthropocene dramatizes what Hannah Arendt sees as the inherent ambivalence of action. When we act, Arendt argues, we initiate a completely new course of events and therefore exercise autonomy from what is given. But the unprecedented character of action means it continues into the future in ways we can neither predict nor fully control (Arendt, 1998, pp. 181–192). Interestingly enough, Arendt observes that this ambivalence of action achieves a new, dangerous quality when we begin to act into the more-than-human world and therefore "infect" it with instability (cf., e.g., Arendt, 1998, pp. 1–6; Arendt, 2006, pp. 57–63). Although Arendt formulates this conclusion in her comments on nuclear energy and space conquest, it can be easily applied to the condition of the Anthropocene (cf. Hyvönen, 2020). The question that emerges is this: are we still capable of taking responsibility for "instituting society" (Mouffe)? Or should we rather surrender to the forces we may have provoked but do not control?

This is related to the second of the points mentioned above, i.e., the status of the difference between human and other-than-human beings. On the one hand, the Anthropocene works against human hubris, prompting the recognition that we, humans, are just part of the broader realm of materiality.

[2] Another legitimate concern is the question of who is actually causing the crisis. Is it really all of humanity or only some parts of it? Yet more fundamentally, can the sources of the problem even be expressed in terms of agency, or are the systemic factors decisive? These questions animate the debates around the various alternatives to the concept of the Anthropocene. I leave them aside because, no matter how the problem of responsibility is settled, a robust idea of agency is needed if any positive change is to be made.

Can our ability to "institute a society" form part of – rather than be in opposition to – our materiality? Can such concepts as agency, freedom, responsibility, or accountability be reconciled with our materiality? On the other hand, the boundaries of political community are being challenged. If materiality becomes increasingly relevant to politics, then it is not only our materiality that matters, so to speak, but that of other beings as well. How can other-than-human entities participate in politics? How can a collectivity of human and other-than-human beings be built?

Finally, both of the difficulties discussed point to the crisis of understanding. On the one hand, our notions of agency (and with it, the concepts of freedom, responsibility, and accountability) and political community are unsettled. So too are the more basic metaphysical concepts that provide the background for political concepts. For example, we are confronted with a time scale – the so-called deep or geological time – that challenges the (Western) ways of experiencing temporality. Simultaneously, the expectation of relatively stable cause-and-effect relationships gives way to the experience of rapid events following the transgression of tipping points (Rockström, 2025). The concept of nature – if it is understood as a realm independent of human creations – is also being challenged as our activities mark (or better, perhaps, mar) each subsystem of the Earth. On the other hand, the crisis can be perceived as so pressing as to leave no room for reflection, urging quick action instead. In other words, when our thinking habits fail us, it often seems emergency rhetoric is the only solution.[3] How do we make sense of the Anthropocene and exercise our sense-making faculties in this time of crisis, then? How do we decide how to institute the political realm, given that many of our political and metaphysical concepts are being rendered obsolete?

Introducing political imagination

All of the above questions mean that, as I suggested at the beginning, the foundations of politics need reimagining. So far, I have appealed to an intuitive, common-sense idea of imagination. I now want to offer a more

[3] This kind of rhetoric is often criticized in decolonial and Indigenous philosophies (cf., e.g., Ferdinand, 2022; Whyte, 2021).

technical reading of the concept, thinking about imagination as *a faculty*. What I mean by a faculty – and this also applies to wonder and reflective judgment, which I discuss below – is the ability to respond to things in a certain way. Faculties thus include both an active and a passive element, and they contribute to how we experience that which appears to us. In this general sense, then, my understanding of faculties is phenomenological: faculties are responses to and, at the same time, ways of looking at, that which comes our way. Thus, by discussing imagination, wonder, and reflective judgment in the context of the political challenge of the Anthropocene, I want to show how these faculties can shape our experience of the planetary crisis. Remaining at this fundamental level, I do not take up here the more practical questions of how the three faculties can be cultivated and encoded in specific political institutions.

To start with, when thinking about imagination, I am inspired by the author introduced at the end of the previous section, that is, Hannah Arendt. Whereas Arendt did not develop a systematic account of imagination, she did discuss it in a number of places – often in connection with other concepts important to her inquiries, such as understanding and judgment – and, what is particularly important to me, she emphasized its political relevance. Here, I propose to single out two points from her remarks on imagination and then translate them into two features of politics. As I move on, I will show how these features can operate in thinking about politics in the Anthropocene, starting by rearticulating the challenges of the Anthropocene at the end of this section.

First, let us think through Arendt's definition, inspired by Immanuel Kant, of imagination as "the faculty of making present what is absent, the faculty of re-presentation" (Arendt, 1992, p. 79). Imagination goes beyond what is (or has been) given to one but is not completely unhinged from it. This is how I understand the concept of "*re*-presentation": imagination does not start from scratch but contains a reference to something that has been experienced (cf. also Arendt, 1972, pp. 5–8). I link this feature of imagination to the constructivist moment of politics – but I mean here a constructivism of a specific type. Namely, politics involves the ability to go beyond the immediate, to construe something "that is not there," without denying what we are experiencing (have experienced). Politics, then, is neither fully determined by facticity (what is given) nor completely disconnected from it. This is one of the vectors that can provide

a framework for thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. In this reading, politics involves the push and pull between conditioning factors and creativity, going beyond the simple opposition of determination and complete spontaneity.

Second, Arendt argues that imagination "enables us (…) to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance (…), to be generous enough to bridge the abysses of remoteness (…) [of] everything that is too far away from us" (Arendt, 1994, p. 323). "Making present" or "re-presenting" thus involves "the distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others" (Arendt, 1994, p. 323), that is, renegotiating distance and proximity, and therefore it includes a relational element. I propose to link this feature of imagination to the type of relating in which that which seems familiar becomes defamiliarized (it loses the appearance of obviousness) and that which feels strange is pulled towards oneself. This is the second vector that can form the framework for thinking about politics in the Anthropocene. Here, politics involves the effort of taking a step back from that which is immediate – such as our habits of thought but also what seems most pressing (e.g., the interest of some section of humanity) – and of reaching out to that which is different (e.g. other-than-human beings).

With the twofold account of imagination and the related political framework in mind, we can now reformulate the three points that make up the political challenge of the Anthropocene. First, regarding the paradox of agency, how can we experience agency beyond the dualism of determination and spontaneity? Second, regarding the human-other-than-human divide, how can we decenter our human perspective and "bridge the abysses" to other-than-human beings? Third, regarding the crisis of understanding, how can we make sense of the Anthropocene without either being under pressure from that which is given (the established ways of thinking, the urgency of the crisis) or getting completely lost in the process?

Introducing wonder

I do not propose to give a complete answer to the above questions in this paper. But I want to point to a possible direction for addressing them by introducing an account of wonder. The concept of wonder (*thaumadzein*, *admiratio*) and the activity of wonder*ing* have a long history in the Western

philosophical tradition, and have been the object of renewed attention in the past decades. Here, I draw selectively on these diverse resources to offer an account of *the faculty of wonder as a type of reflectiveness that enables non-appropriative relationships*. The concept of non-appropriation is central to my interpretation of wonder, and it filters my reading of other studies, thereby shaping my own conception of this faculty.[4]

Three overlapping features make up this account. First, wonder unsettles our habits of thought, rather than being determined by them. When Aristotle, in the classic passages from the first book of *Metaphysics*, observes that philosophy begins in wonder, which, in turn, stems from the sense of one's ignorance, he presents wonder as the power to transform a lack of knowledge into a search for it (Aristotle, n.d.). On the eve of modernity, Descartes follows the same thread, arguing that wonder incites "the desire to know more" about its object (Descartes, 2017, §71). But, in addition to that, he links wonder, "the first of passions," to the sense of novelty and surprise (Descartes, 2017, §53). Wonder thus acquires a *comparative* character: not only does it push us to fill in the gaps in our understanding, but it also makes us realize that our habits of thought do not work in a given situation, and that the case under consideration cannot be simply appropriated to what we already know. Similar assumptions play out in recent interpretations of wonder, which additionally emphasize its *active* character. Here, Martha Nussbaum's account of wonder as an emotion is quite representative. In what she calls her neo-Stoic approach, emotions are value judgments in which we state that something or somebody is important to our well-being (eudaimonia). Yet wonder, writes Nussbaum, is "non-eudaimonistic" in that it is not motivated by a prior idea of a flourishing life. Through wonder, rather than appropriating an object to what we already value, we respond to its pull and revise our goals accordingly (Nussbaum, 2008, pp. 54–55). Jeremy Bendik-Keymer creatively engages with Nussbaum's approach to offer his own concept of wonder as "the positive anxiety of considering things." For him, wonder is "the cast of mind," a form of reflectiveness, in which we engage when we are confused about how to make sense of something (Bendik-Keymer, 2023, pp. 12, 19). Wonder, then, kicks in when we realize that our patterns of understanding do not apply in a given situation and need revising.

---

[4] I discuss wonder and non-appropriation elsewhere (Lisowska, 2024a, 2024b, 2025).

But to respond to something new, we need to be able to *perceive it as new*. Therefore, the second aspect of wonder I want to emphasize is the ability to see the apparently ordinary – as unordinary; as Anders Schinkel puts it, wonder "*defamiliarizes* the world" (Schinkel, 2021, p. 53; italics in the original, quotation modified). Indeed, we might intuitively associate wonder with children's propensity to ask questions about things that seem perfectly commonplace to adults. Yet if there is something childlike about wonder, there is nothing childish about it. Arendt traces the defamiliarizing potential of wonder back to Plato, who, she argues, wanted to conceptualize Socrates' tendency to fall into sudden states of speechlessness and motionlessness. For Plato, says Arendt, "*thaumadzein* [is] the wonder at that which is as it is" (Arendt, 1990, p. 97). Whereas for the Greeks wonder had an affirmative character and expressed admiration for everything "that is as it is" (Arendt, 1978b, pp. 150–151), in Arendt's own interpretation, wonder is no longer unequivocally celebratory. Quite importantly, this shift is linked to her intention to apply wonder to thinking about politics. When Arendt observes that "an authentic political philosophy (…) can spring only from an original act of *thaumadzein*" and must "directly grasp the realm of human affairs and human deeds," she emphasizes that to wonder politically is to be ready to feel disturbed (Arendt, 1994, pp. 445–446). Indeed, Kyle Barker (2019) and Magnus Ferguson (2022) argue in their respective works that Arendt makes room for wonder-as-horror (or terror). This is perhaps best manifested in Arendt's treatment of the 20th-century totalitarianisms. In refusing to see them as mere incarnations of "some well-known evil of the past, such as aggression, tyranny, conspiracy" (Arendt, 1994, p. 309), Arendt chose to wonder, with terror, that they were as they were. She thus rejected attempts to conceptually appropriate the atrocities of the century by means of familiar terms and decided to endure their extraordinariness (of the worst possible type).

The two features of wonder already discussed reveal that, thirdly, wonder is a response to difference as difference. Because it is not determined by preexisting habits of thought, wonder is sensitive to the singularity of its object, whether it is perceived as terrifying, attractive, or simply puzzling. As such, wonder translates non-appropriation into a manner of relating. Luce Irigaray points to this conclusion in her creative rereading of Descartes. Whereas she focuses on sexual difference,

her remarks can be generalized to the idea of wonder as enabling relationships based on responding to the specificity of another being:

> This first passion [i.e. wonder – Anon] is indispensable not only to life but also and still to the creation of an ethics. (…) Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us completely. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An *excess* resists (…). (Irigaray, 1993, p. 74; italics in the original).[5]

Wonder thus responds to the excess of another being's difference, an excess that cannot be appropriated as part of what feels like oneself, so to speak. Another way to put this would be to say, as Nussbaum (2008) and Bendik-Keymer (2023) do in their respective accounts, that wonder counteracts narcissism. Wonder overcomes the desire to subject others to my control – and in this way to make them part of myself – and helps me relate to them as different from myself.

Wonder in the Anthropocene

Let me now link my account of wonder to the three challenges of the Anthropocene. First, the unsettling character of wonder suggests that it can form part of the solution to the crisis of understanding brought about by the planetary crisis. When we wonder, we honestly respond to the novelty of the phenomenon in question. To wonder at the events of the Anthropocene, then, is to refuse to see them in the business-as-usual way, i.e., as instances of familiar processes that do not call for a revision of our thinking and acting. The defamiliarizing work of wonder also means that it can slow things down and create a space for reflection. When we wonder that something "is as it is," as Arendt would put it, we stop approaching this phenomenon in a commonsense way and try to make sense of what it can mean for it to be as it is. Wonder can thus work not only against the business-as-usual-style approach to the Anthropocene but also against the emergency rhetoric that all too easily substitutes for thinking. In wonder, disorientation causes neither the defensive reinforcement of familiar but obsolete ways of thinking nor panic but instead leads to the search for new senses. Finally, the Arendtian variety

[5] Cf. also La Caze (2013) for a discussion of Irigaray's concept of wonder.

of wonder-horror suggests that wonder does not always include a positive evaluation of that which evokes it. As such, wonder can arguably respond to that which is disquieting – even dreadful – about the Anthropocene. All in all, wonder provides an aid in "staying with the trouble"[6] of the Anthropocene,[7] and in honestly confronting that which is new and perplexing about this crisis.

Second, wonder's sensitivity to difference can be extended beyond the human realm and connected to the challenge of relating to other-than-human beings. It is remarkable that, apart from her theory of emotions, another context in which Nussbaum discusses wonder is justice for other-than-human animals. In *Frontiers of Justice* (2007) and the more recent *Justice for Animals* (2023), she argues, in the Aristotelian vein, that different animals strive for their own good in different ways, and the activity they display in the process is worthy of wonder. Bendik-Keymer goes even further when he talks about the biocentrism of wonder, meaning that wonder is specifically – though not exclusively – focused on life. For if wondering involves reflecting on how to make sense of something, then wonder is particularly elicited by the diverse ways in which different living beings – animal and non-animal – strive for a life that makes sense to them: not necessarily because they consciously appreciate it as such but because it is optimal for them (Bendik-Keymer, 2022). As a result, wonder helps establish non-appropriative relationships with other-than-human beings, in which they are appreciated in their plurality for their own sake rather than exploited for the benefit of (some) human beings. Wonder thus supports moving beyond the mentality of what Chakrabarty calls the global.

But is wonder relevant to the task of rethinking agency beyond the opposition of determination and full spontaneity? To begin addressing this question, I want to point to an interesting equivocation in Arendt's comments on wonder. The philosopher observes that, in Greek philosophy, the experience of *thaumadzein* was already known to the Presocratics, who marveled at *physis,* i.e., "nature (…), the totality of things that were not man-made and not created by a divine maker but came into being by themselves"

---

[6] I have borrowed this expression from Donna Haraway (2016).

[7] Haraway believes that the concept of the Anthropocene does not "stay with the trouble" we are dealing with and proposes another name for our epoch, "Chthulucene," to emphasize the need to focus on relationships between species (Haraway, 2016). My approach is thus largely consistent with hers, even if I am using the category of the Anthropocene.

and were hidden behind the appearing phenomena (Arendt, 1978b, p. 143). Thus, it could be argued that the object of the Presocratic wonder was everything that exists, where "everything" is conceived in an immanent rather than a transcendent (suprasensual) way.

Interestingly, Arendt mentions the concept of *physis* in quite a different context as well. Since, in this other passage, she pairs it with the expression "that which is as it is," we can assume that here *physis* is also the object of wonder (although Arendt mentions gratitude). Defending her treatment of Adolf Eichmann's trial in a letter to Gershom Scholem, she writes:

> I found it puzzling that you should write "I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way." The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman – that is to say, kind of insane. (…) I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything *that is as it is* [italics added]; for what has been *given* and what was not, could not, be *made* [italics in the original]; for things that are *physei*, not *nomoi* (Arendt, 1978a, p. 246).

Whereas for the Presocratics *physis* meant the total order of becoming, here Arendt uses the category to talk about what is most intimate. Importantly, although the main focus of her exchange with Scholem is her Jewishness, another example of "that which is as it is" is her sex/gender, i.e., her body type. This connects to the non-transcendent sense of the Presocratic *physis*. Wonder at *physis* thus moves between two levels – "that which is as it is" as everything that exists and "that which is as it is" as what is most intimate to oneself, including one's body.

Wonder and imagination – points of convergence

This last point in fact combines two aspects I now want to start connecting to my working understanding of imagination. All in all, I see imagination as continuing but also presupposing wonder.

First, then, when I wonder at the "that which is as it is" of my position, I can start imagining what it could mean for me to become the agent I can be.

Here, my *physei* may appear as brute – i.e., as having a certain non-negotiability about them – but not as brutal – i.e., as oppressive and fully determining; I am imagining what I can do with what I have been given. But to perceive my circumstances in this way, I need to be able to "stay with their trouble," as wonder can help me do. In other words, I should see my *physei* in their particularity, *as given to me and not anybody else*. Only then will I be able to respond to the "that which is as it is" of my position creatively, rather than treating it as predetermined by some general idea (e.g., of what it means to be a woman, a Pole, or an academic…). Together, then, wonder and imagination allow me to move between spontaneity and determination.

Second, to wonder at the given is to wonder at that which has been given to me as the particular being I am and at that which has been given to me from outside of myself, as the two senses of *physis* may suggest. Thus, if I am ready to imagine what it could mean for me to become the agent I can be, I am also open to imagining what it means to be someone or something else. But to try to "bridge the abyss" to somebody else without trying to reduce what is specific to them to what is familiar to me, I need to be able to wonder at their difference as a difference. Here, then, wonder and imagination help create relationships I am calling non-appropriative. Through wonder and imagination, I reach out to others and gain enough distance from myself to acknowledge that their differences cannot be explained away so that those others appear much the same as me. I thus appreciate them as given to me in their particularity.

Wonder and imagination – reflective judgment

The political import of the "cooperation" of wonder and imagination becomes apparent in their intertwinement in the faculty of political judgment. Here, I want to draw on Arendt's philosophy again. I mentioned at the beginning that one of the contexts in which Arendt discusses imagination is that of judgment. With wonder, the situation seems a bit more problematic, as Arendt points to a tension between wonder's tendency to go beyond the comfort of fixed beliefs and judgment, which should culminate in the formulation of an opinion (Arendt, 1990, p. 99). Yet, in my reading, the connection between wonder and imagination means that the former is active in reflective judgment as well.

For her part, Arendt did not manage to systematize her remarks on judgment, as was the case with imagination. But when she did discuss this faculty, she drew a lot from Kant. Here, Arendt makes an original claim that Kant's conception of the judgment of taste – i.e., the judgment about the beautiful – in fact provides a blueprint for theorizing judgment as a political faculty. Two features of this account are important to me.

First, Arendt accepts Kant's classification of judgments of taste as reflective, rather than determinative. Reflectiveness means that a judgment does not subsume the phenomenon being considered under a prior, fully defined concept, but, instead, "ascend[s] from the particular (…) to the universal" (Kant, 1987, p. 19). In other words, in reflective judgment, we respond to the specificity of the case in question, rather than appropriating it to what we already know. Kant explained this peculiarity of reflective judgments by arguing that they are based on "a free play" of understanding – the power of thinking in terms of concepts – and imagination – the power of synthetizing sensory data into a phenomenon (Kant, 1987, §9, p. 62).

Arendt continues by linking imagination to the ability to see a phenomenon one is reflecting on as an example, "the particular that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule" (Arendt, 1992, p. 84). Examples thus help us imagine new senses of a concept, or perhaps even new concepts. But to take in what is given, rather than determine its sense based on our habits of thought, we need to be able to perceive it in its specificity. Here, again, the defamiliarizing work of wonder is needed. Wonder opens up reflection (as Kant and Arendt understand it) to us and helps us attend to what we are dealing with instead of falling back on routine interpretations. The involvement of wonder and imagination thus means that when we make reflective judgments, we focus on the specific case at hand, while also proposing to see it as pointing beyond itself to something more general. In this way, our reflective judgments operate in the space between spontaneity and determination. In terms of what I am proposing, then, reflective judgments are political because they are constructivist in the sense laid out above.

Yet the question that emerges is how, given that they do not fall back on established ways of thinking, reflective judgments can be shared with others. The second feature of Arendtian judgment I want to mention addresses this difficulty. Kant argued that the communicability of reflective judgments is based on enlarged (or broadened) thinking (*eine erweiterte*

Denkungsart) (Kant, 1987, §40, pp. 160–161; italics in the original), which Arendt reformulates as "representative thinking," clearly evoking her idea of imagination as "re-presenting what is absent." And so, she argues that to formulate a reflective judgment is to "consider a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to [one's] mind the standpoints of those who are absent." This effort, she adds, is not "a question (…) of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else (…), *but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not*" (Arendt, 2006, p. 237; italics added).

To think representatively, then, we need to activate our imagination and "bridge the abyss to others," while gaining distance from what is closest to us. "The only condition for this exertion of imagination," Arendt says, "is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests" (Arendt, 2006, p. 237). But this also shows that reflective judgment requires wonder as presented here. Through wonder, I become open to the difference of another person without trying to reduce it to what is similar to me and thereby appropriate it.[8] This means that wondering at others helps me acknowledge that there is nothing obvious about my own point of view – about how I am interested in the world – and allows me to gain distance from my "own private interests." In terms of my argument, then, reflective judgment is political because it establishes relationships across differences in which one's own perspective is decentered.

But this is not to say that, in reflective judgment, I am supposed to completely forget myself, so to speak. After all, "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" means that I can neither appropriate somebody else's point of view as my own nor allow them to appropriate my point of view as their own. Indeed, Arendt observes that

> by his [sic!] manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is, and this disclosure, which is involuntary, gains in validity to the degree that it has liberated itself from merely individual idiosyncrasies (Arendt, 2006, p. 220).

It seems, then, that only by getting out of my head, by transcending my idiosyncrasies in relating to others, do I manifest (come to be) who I am. And this

[8] Cf. Iris Marion Young (2001, pp. 220–225) on the role of wonder in what she called "asymmetrical reciprocity" of reflective judgment.

point begins to show not only the general political importance of reflective judgment but also its specific relevance to thinking about the political in the Anthropocene. I conclude by looping back to this critical political challenge.

Towards a conclusion – back to the Anthropocene

In reflective judgments, then, I express what is peculiar to me, at the same time as I acknowledge what is peculiar to others. My suggestion is that the relationships established in this way translate into an experience of agency that is likewise relational. Here, the agency of others – the fact that who they are and what they do cannot be reduced to who *I* am and what *I* do – is seen not as a threat to but as a supporting condition of my agency. Reflecting on the diversity of others brings me back to myself and helps me manifest myself as an agent. In this reading, then, to be an agent means to experience oneself as partly limited by others. I propose this as a starting point for rethinking agency in the Anthropocene.

Regarding the challenge of relating to other-than-human beings, it could be argued that the openness to difference characteristic of reflective judgment can be extended beyond the human realm. After all, a difference is a difference, and if we are ready to acknowledge the diversity among us, humans, we should do the same for other beings. Finally, reflective judgment is, essentially, a response to the crisis of understanding – or it may even make this crisis a permanent feature of understanding. The very concept of the Anthropocene, its many interpretations, and alternatives to it can be seen as products of reflective judgment as presented here.

However, these general remarks immediately provoke further questions. For example, even if we acknowledge the diversity of other-than-human beings, does that mean we can relate to them as *agents* (all of them? only some of them?)? Similarly, what role do other-than-human beings play in human reflective judgments? Can other-than-human beings *make* judgments, or can they only be *taken into account* in our judgments? Finally, the communicability of reflective judgments means that the novel senses they propose should be characterized by some degree of stability; if successful, a reflective judgment is accepted as offering an apt interpretation

of the phenomenon it addresses. What degree of stability can reflective judgments achieve in the radically unstable time of the Anthropocene, though? And how can they achieve it?

The argument I have presented in this paper thus intentionally points beyond itself towards further points that need addressing. However, one thing that hopefully follows from my considerations here is this: having presented the Anthropocene as a foundational political challenge and having shown how it can be experienced through the faculties of imagination, wonder, and reflective judgment, all centered on non-appropriative relating, I want to suggest that confronting the Anthropocene requires, first and foremost, thinking about and practicing adequate forms of relating. *Dealing with the Anthropocene is a relational matter*, and however we answer questions such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, we should focus on the arrangements that enable good (that is, I propose, non-appropriative) relationships across the plurality of beings, human and other-than-human.

References

Arendt, H. (1972). *Crises of the Republic*. A Harvest Book.

Arendt, H. (1978a). *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego: A Harvest Book.

Arendt, H. (1978b). *The Jew as Pariah. Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*. New York: Grove Press.

Arendt, H. (1990). Philosophy and Politics. *Social Research*, *57*(1), 96–103.

Arendt, H. (1992). *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (1994). *Essays in Understanding*, *1930-1953. Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*. Schocken Books.

Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (2006). *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Books.

Aristotle (n.d.). *Metaphysics* (W.D. Ross, Trans.). The Internet Classics Archive. https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html

Barker, K. (2019). *A Political Theory of Wonder: Feelings of Order in Modern Political Thought* [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Los Angeles]. e-Scholarship. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4hv1z257.

Bendik-Keymer, J. (2022). Beneficial Relations Between Species and the Moral Responsibility of Wondering. *Environmental Politics*, *31*(2), 320–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1868818.

Bendik-Keymer, J. (2023). *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder: How the Mind's Original Joy is Revolutionary* (M. Morrison, Illus.). Bloomsbury Academic.

Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age.* The University of Chicago Press.

Descartes, R. (2017). *The Passions of the Soul*. Early Modern Texts. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf.

Dryzek, J.S., & Pickering, J. (2019). *The Politics of the Anthropocene.* Oxford University Press.

Ferdinand, M. (2022). *Decolonial Ecology. Thinking from the Caribbean World* (A. P. Smith, Trans.). Polity Press.

Ferguson, M. (2022). "Wonder at What Is as It Is": Arendtian Wonder as the Occasion for Political Responsibility. *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, *53*(2), 261–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2022.2085520.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press.

Hyvönen, A.E. (2020). Labor as Action: The Human Condition in the Anthropocene. *Research in Phenomenology*, *50*(2), 240–260. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341449.

International Union of Geological Sciences. (2024). *The Anthropocene*. https://www.iugs.org/_files/ugd/f1fc07_40d1a7ed58de458c9f8f24de5e739663.pdf?index=true

Irigaray, L. (1993). *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (C. Burke & G. C. Gill, Trans.). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Kant, I. (1987). *The Critique of Judgment* (W. S. Pluhar, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company.

La Caze, M. (2013). *Wonder & Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics*. State University of New York Press.

Latour, B. (2015). Telling Friends from Foes in the Time of the Anthropocene. In C. Hamilton, Ch. Bonneuil & F. Gemenne (Eds.), *The Anthropocene and*

the Global Environment Crisis – Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch (pp. 145–155). Routledge.

Lisowska, U. (2024a). Towards Non-Appropriative Relating: Environment-Building as World-Making. *Environmental Ethics*, *46*(4), 437–452. https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics2024123189.

Lisowska, U. (2024b). Zadziwienie jako kategoria filozofii polityki – przyswojenie swoistości versus zawłaszczenie. *Ruch Filozoficzny*, *80*(4), 97–114. https://doi.org/10.12775/RF.2024.031

Lisowska, U. (2025). Towards Ecological World-Making: Bringing Hannah Arendt and Malcom Ferdinand Together. *Ethics and the Environment, 30*(2), 71–87. https://doi.org/10.2979/een.00019.

Mouffe, Ch. (2005). *On the Political*. Routledge.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2007). *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2008). *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions.* Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2023). *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*. Simon & Schuster.

Rockström, J. (2025). Diagnosing Earth's Tipping Points: Where We Stand in the Anthropocene. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1653860.

Schinkel, A. (2021). *Wonder and Education. On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Steffen, W., Crutzen, P.J., & McNeill, J.R. (2007). The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature? *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment*, *36*(8), 614–621. http://dx.doi.org/10.1579/0044-7447(2007)36[614:TAAHNO]2.0.CO;2.

Whyte, K. (2021). Against Crisis Epistemology. In B. Hokowhitu, A. Moreton-Robinson, L. Tuhiwai-Smith, S. Larkin, & C. Andersen (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (pp. 52–64). Routledge.

Young, I.M. (2001). Asymmetrical Reciprocity: on Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought. In R. Beiner & J. Nedelsky (Eds.), *Judgment, Imagination and Politics. Themes from Kant and Arendt* (pp. 205–228). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Author Note

Dr Urszula Lisowska is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Wrocław. She has published a book on Martha C. Nussbaum (in Polish) and is currently working on a book on politics in the Anthropocene, which is under contract with Routledge. Her papers have appeared in *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental Values*, and *Environmental Philosophy*, as well as in a number of Polish journals. She is a member of the editorial board of the quarterly journal *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia*. Address for correspondence:

University of Wrocław, Institute of Philosophy, Koszarowa 3/20, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland. Email: urszula.lisowska2@uwr.edu.pl

Citation

Lisowska, U. (2026). Wonder to Imagine Better – Thinking Politics in the Anthropocene. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *76* (4), 5–24. DOI: 10.18276/aie2026.76-01.

„Analiza i Egzystencja" 76 (2026), 25–45
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2026.76-02

ARTICLES

GEOFF BOWE
ORCID: 0000-0003-1470-5039
Istanbul Technical University
Email: gbove@itu.edu.tr

Image and Power in the Socratic Problem

Keywords: Socrates, Sages, Plato, image, politics, power
Słowa kluczowe: Sokrates, mędrcy, Platon, obraz, polityka, władza

Abstract

This paper reinterprets the Socratic problem through the lens of image and power, arguing that the historical Socrates is best understood not as the originator of a philosophical method or doctrine but as a powerful ethical image whose authority reshaped the meaning of philosophy itself. Rather than attempting to reconstruct a system of propositions from Plato's early dialogues, I contend that the genre of the *logoi sokratikoi* reveals something more significant: the construction and deployment of the image of Socrates as a vehicle of intellectual and moral influence. Plato's *Apology*, constrained by its historical setting and its claim to eyewitness testimony, provides the closest access to Socrates' self-presentation. There, Socrates emerges not as a methodological thinker but as a protreptic figure whose power lies in exhortation and example.

Central to this self-fashioning is the story of the Delphic Oracle. By presenting himself as divinely commissioned yet ignorant, Socrates crafts an image of paradoxical authority—human wisdom grounded in acknowledged ignorance. This image operates as a form of power: it legitimizes his public mission, unsettles Athenian political authority, and displaces traditional claims to expertise. The divergence between Plato's and Xenophon's versions of the Oracle further demonstrates how competing representations of Socrates reflect differing investments in the power of his character.

Finally, by situating Socrates within the older tradition of the Seven Sages, the paper shows that his enduring influence derives less from doctrinal content than from the symbolic and cultural power of his image as a sage. Across Greek, Roman, Christian, and Islamic traditions, Socrates functions as an exemplar whose authority lies in embodied practice rather than in a theoretical system. The Socratic problem thus becomes not merely a question about historical reconstruction but an inquiry into how philosophical power operates through image, narrative, and cultural memory.

Introduction

"I entrust my soul to the keeper of sages' souls."[1]

What we call the Socratic problem—that of how to distinguish the philosopher Socrates and his philosophy from the character Socrates in the writings of Plato, Xenophon, and other Socratic writers—has generated an enormous body of literature since Schleiermacher's (1818/1852b) essay "On the Worth of Socrates as a Philosopher" (Burnet, 1928; Kahn, 1996; Prior, 2006; Brickhouse & Smith, 2000; Taylor, 1955; Vlastos, 1991). Schleiermacher sees the problem as one of how to reconcile the rather amiable and unassuming character that Socrates is described as being with the towering figure who is represented as the impetus of a whole new period in philosophy, indeed as one of the most influential philosophers in history. Stated succinctly by Prior:

> "Socrates is one of the most famous and influential figures in the western intellectual tradition; but who was he? His disciples included the most influential philosophers of his time, who are credited by historians of philosophy with founding several schools; but what did he teach them?" (Prior, 2006, p. 25).

One way to think of this is to try to reconcile the rather bland Socrates that one sees in the writings of Xenophon with the more profound figure we see in the dialogues of Plato. The common way to frame this issue is to say that Xenophon was no philosopher, and as such his accounts of Socrates are not

[1] Socrates' last words according to al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik, 90.13, as cited in Alon (2006, p. 323).

very philosophically astute, whereas Plato was *too much* of a philosopher, and as such he infuses his Socrates with ideas and theories that extend far beyond the purview of Socrates the man. Given such a context, one is tempted to say that the "real" Socrates lies somewhere in between the two, and to answer Schleiermacher's problem by saying that it was Plato's Socrates, and not the historical Socrates, who has exerted such a profound influence on Western culture under the name Socrates.[2] The problem goes deeper than this, however, for we are still left with the rather embarrassing problem of knowing very little about the most influential philosopher in history. Socrates inspires and informs Hellenistic philosophy, the early Christian and Muslim traditions, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, existentialism, and postmodernism in ways too extensive to catalogue. Given this, it seems not unnatural to ask two questions. What philosophical positions did Socrates hold and what kind of philosophical methodology did he employ? What kind of philosopher was he? I think that it is a mistake to think that an answer to the second question can be supplied by an answer to the first, for the simple reason that there is good evidence to believe that philosophy, for Socrates, was not a set of philosophical positions, or even a methodology (Brennan, 2006, p. 297). Philosophy, in the context of Socrates, must be understood under the rubric of that old formula, so oft repeated—philosophy as a way of life (Dorion, 2006, p. 94). I proceed in the following manner. First, I discuss attempts to understand Socrates as a philosopher in terms of positions and methodologies and address the limitations of such an approach. Second, I discuss the nature of Socratic writings (the *Sokratikoi Logoi*) and the relation of this kind of writing to Plato's *Apology*. Third, I argue that there is good reason to accept the *Apology* as an account of the historical Socrates, and that this leaves us with a picture of Socrates as a non-methodological philosopher with a protreptic mission. Fourth, I attempt to demonstrate that this protreptic Socrates can be seen both in Plato's *Apology* and in Plato's dialogues, mostly implicitly, though sometimes explicitly in the latter. Fifth, I examine the story of the Delphic Oracle as it appears in Plato's *Apology*, and the importance of how it differs from the version told in Xenophon's *Apology*.

---

[2] Tad Brennan raises the possibility that "the real Socrates may have been just as repetitive and platitudinous, just as philosophically unfruitful, as Epictetus was" (2006, p. 297). He asks whether the philosophical sophistication of the Platonic dialogues may owe more to Plato than to the historical Socrates.

Finally, I suggest that the Oracle story connects the historical Socrates with a different tradition than that of methodological or propositional philosophy, namely the older tradition of the Seven Sages. The upshot of this enquiry is that Socrates' philosophy should not be understood as reducible to a method or a set of philosophical positions but rather understood through an appreciation of Socratic philosophy as a way of life. The implication of this is that the Socratic problem is mitigated by understanding that it is a question framed from the point of view of philosophy as a methodological approach or a set of consistent philosophical claims.

Socrates' Philosophical Positions, Socrates' Methodology

Responses to the Socratic problem range from suggestions like those of Burnet (1928) and Taylor (1955) that everything in Plato's dialogues is based somehow on something that Socrates said, to the more recent and most influential account of the twentieth century, that of Gregory Vlastos, who maintains that the Socrates of Plato's so-called early dialogues differs from that of Plato's middle dialogues in a way that can help us uncover the historical Socrates. According to Vlastos (1991, p. 49), where the Socrates of the early dialogues differs from the Socrates of the middle dialogues, we can discern the positions and methodology of the historical Socrates in the former. This approach both depends on and supports a developmentalist view of Plato, such that Plato begins by writing simplex dialogues and begins writing his own mature philosophy in the so-called middle period. Such a view has recently come under significant criticism; Annas (2002) argues that there seems to be no clear-cut set of criteria to distinguish between early and middle dialogues, and even computer-assisted stylometric analysis (the dating of dialogues based on stylistic differences; Thesleff, 1982) has had little success in establishing a clear line of demarcation between early and middle dialogues (Kahn, 1996, p. 42). This is not the only problem with Vlastos' approach, however. There is no good reason to assume that the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues is not just as much a literary creation of Plato as the Socrates of Plato's middle dialogues, regardless of how well one is able to define the difference between early and middle dialogues (Prior, 2006, p. 28; Rowe, 2006). The Socrates that Vlastos generates out of that difference may merely mark the difference between two literary creations of Plato, an early Socrates and a middle

Socrates, while leaving the historical Socrates still shrouded in mystery. This possibility seems all the more probable given the differences between Plato's early Socrates and the Socrates of other Socratic writers, and is made perhaps even more probable once one considers that our two most important sources for the ostensible historical Socrates—Plato's early dialogues and the writings of Xenophon—fall under the category of what Aristotle called *Logoi Sokratikoi* (*Poetics*, 1447b; *Rhetoric*, 1417a).

Logoi Sokratikoi and Plato's *Apology*

Logoi Sokratikoi, or "Socratic conversations," were written by a number of disciples or intimates of Socrates, including Phaedo,[3] Antisthenes, Aeschines, Euclides, Aristippus, and Xenophon.[4] The originator of this form, according to a fragment attributed to Aristotle, was a certain Alexamnenos of Teos, of whom we know nothing (Kahn, 1996). If Plato's early dialogues are to be characterized as *Logoi Sokratikoi*, the defining mark of which is the employment of the figure of Socrates to explore philosophical themes with creative literary freedom, then the Socrates of the early dialogues is less of a key to the historical Socrates than Vlastos would wish.[5] *Logoi Sokratikoi* enable their authors to use Socrates as a spokesperson to explore their own ideas, even if such works represent attempts to work out what their author might have assumed Socrates might say about a particular issue or to represent how they assumed he would approach a particular topic.

---

[3] Diogenes Laertius also attributes a dialogue entitled *Simon* to Phaedo (DL 2.105).

[4] For a review of the evidence, see Kahn (1996, Chapter 1). For the principal collection of surviving texts and fragments, see Giannantoni (1991).

[5] Dorion (2006, p. 93) claims:

> "…the Socratic question, as it was debated from the time of Schleiermacher to the beginning of the twentieth century, is not only an unsolvable problem – as is shown by the lack of any agreement – but also a pseudo-problem. If the *Logoi Sokratikoi* are works of fiction, allowing their authors considerable scope for invention not only in the setting but also in the ideas expressed by the characters including Socrates, then it seems hopeless to try to reconstruct the thought of the historical Socrates on the basis of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*."

See also Dorion (2011, p. 14): "One of the reasons the Ancients never debated the Socratic problem is because they fully recognized the fictional nature of the *logoi sokratikoi.*"

Their authors are not, however, constrained by the desire to present a faithful historical reproduction of Socrates, but are rather free to see in Socrates, or employ Socrates in whatever they wish. This was recognized in ancient times. Consider St. Augustine's observation in *The City of God:*

> Because, in the disputations of Socrates, where he raises all manner of questions, makes assertions, and then demolishes them, it did not evidently appear what he held to be the chief good, every one took from these disputations what pleased him best (Augustine, as cited in Lapatin, 2006, p. 110).

An obvious example of how Plato can be seen to employ Socrates in the service of his own ideas is Plato's *Phaedo*. One might wonder why, in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue, which represents Socrates' last hours on earth, Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates a complex account of Plato's theory of recollection and theory of Forms, in the service of establishing the immortality of the soul, something about which Socrates says he is quite uncertain in the *Apology*—Plato's account of Socrates' trial. How could Plato show such disrespect for the martyrdom of Socrates as to employ Socrates' dying hours to articulate his (Plato's) own theories? Plato clearly indicates to us that he was not present at Socrates' execution (he was ill—Phd. 59b), and the report of the execution is given second hand through *Phaedo*, long after the actual event. One possible explanation of Plato's use of the *Phaedo* in this way is to read the dialogue as Plato's *homage* to Socrates, his way of saying, "Look, Socrates, at what your life meant to me, of what it inspired in me." Regardless of the explanation, what the *Phaedo* makes clear is that even Socrates' execution is an opportunity to employ the figure of Socrates to explore issues of concern to Plato (metaphysics and the afterlife) in Plato's own fashion. Historical accuracy is not the intention of the dialogue, or, one might say, of any of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*.

There is perhaps one of Plato's writings, however, that falls outside the category of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, namely Plato's *Apology*.[6] For certain reasons, I think that this writing can get us closer to the historical Socrates, yet even the *Apology* has identifiable limitations. One limitation in using the *Apology* as evidence regarding the historical Socrates is the ambiguous nature of the document itself (Leibowitz, 2010, pp. 5–6).

[6] For a list of commentators who defend this position, see Dorion (2011, p. 17, n. 44).

Is it, like Xenophon's *Apology*, the author's defence of Socrates, or is it an account of Socrates' defence of himself? Xenophon claims that others have furnished us with details of the trial and that his aim is to describe Socrates' preference for death and defend Socrates' character.[7] Plato never gives us such straightforward accounts of his intentions, but begins *in scene*, as it were, and as such we may plausibly raise the question, "Is this how Plato would defend Socrates as he understood him, or is Plato depicting his recollection of what Socrates actually said?"[8]

Dorion argues that we cannot exempt the *Apology* from the *Logoi Sokratikoi* because (i) there are several *Apologies* by several rival authors, and we have no reason to give priority to Plato's, and (ii) much of what happens in the *Apology* finds confirmation in other dialogues, hence, we must give these elements historical status even though they are admitted to be *Logoi Sokratikoi* (Dorion, 2011, pp. 17–18). To (i), one may reply that Plato claims to be an eyewitness at Socrates' trial, and that Xenophon remarks in his *Apology* that Socrates' trial has been well covered by others, suggesting that Xenophon does not dispute the details in any way that would render him a rival. While we know that Xenophon was not present at the trial, we should assume that he would have had access to other accounts of the trial no longer extant, and that he would not have remarked on sufficient coverage of detail were there important inconsistencies of detail. To (ii) one may say that while the *Logoi Sokratikoi* have creative licence, it would be extremely odd if they had nothing to say about the historical Socrates. I think that despite these limitations, we should take the putative purpose of Plato's *Apology* to be an account of Socrates' life and philosophical activity.

---

[7] Xenophon explicitly acknowledges earlier accounts of the trial: "Others have written on this theme, and all without exception have touched upon the lofty style of the philosopher, which may be taken as a proof that the language used by Socrates was really of that type" (*Apology,* 1).

[8] While there is no space to embark on a detailed treatment of it here, the simplest characterization of the *Memorabilia* is that it does what Plato's writings might be said to do if his dialogues were presented as a continuous volume starting with the *Apology*. In the *Memorabilia*, there is a discussion of the trial and an attempt to show that Socrates was wrongly convicted, followed by a number of anecdotal reports about Socrates' character and in-depth discussion of topics that interest Xenophon, employing the creative freedom of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, with Socrates serving as the mouthpiece for these views.

On its own, the *Apology* is admittedly limited in what it can tell us about Socrates, but it helps prevent us from attributing more than is warranted to the historical Socrates based on reading the early dialogues as historical accounts. I shall in fact be arguing that the picture of the historical Socrates that we can retain from the *Apology* and Plato's dialogues is that of a protreptic philosopher, who possesses neither doctrine nor philosophical method.

Another limitation of Plato's *Apology* as a historical source, one expressed by Morrison (2005), is that an attempt at historical writing would necessarily reflect the bias of Plato. Consider his remarks:

> "Plato's sincere efforts to present the essence of Socrates' views are likely to be so philosophically penetrating as to be unreliable guides to the views which Socrates actually expressed and would assent to." (Morrison, 2005, p. 106).

This may be true of the early dialogues, but it may be countered by Vlastos' contention that the *Apology* would be a failure if it varied too much from the truth of the trial (Vlastos, 1971, p. 3). Vlastos is correct. Morrison expects far too much objectivity from historical writing, thus setting up criteria for historical reliability that have never been met by *any* historian. If it is Plato's intention (as I think it is) in writing the *Apology* to give us an account of how Socrates defended himself, it remains the best and closest thing we have to a historical report of Socrates from the horse's mouth, and I will offer reasons for this below. We cannot hope for anything better.

I now intend to address in more detail why the *Apology* differs from Plato's other writings, and why, if this difference is significant, it presents us with a Socrates that is different from but related to the Socrates who appears in Plato's other writings. Two other things that need to be considered are the nature of Socratic protreptic—for that really is what one sees of Socrates in the *Apology*—and the way in which the account of the Oracle at Delphi in Plato's *Apology* differs from the account in Xenophon's *Apology*. Consideration of the Oracle trope in both authors links Socrates to a tradition outside of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*. Initially, however, the following points about Plato's *Apology* are worth considering:

1. Socrates speaks in his own voice and at length about his life. While it is certainly true that Socrates says things about himself in other

dialogues—his mother was a midwife,[9] and he had an interest in natural science in his youth (*Phaedo*, 96a)—it is possible to see these as literary tropes employed by Plato to further a point of dramatization, philosophical method, or doctrine.[10] Plato's dialogues employ Socrates in various and often inconsistent ways in the service of demonstrating points about aporia, elenchus, definition (methodological points) or about politics, metaphysics, love (philosophical claims). By contrast, as the *Apology* is an extended discussion of Socrates' life, with a clear purpose—to explain and defend Socrates' life—it would seem counterproductive to infuse it with much false elaboration.[11] Moreover, even if the *Apology* were Plato's attempt to defend Socrates' life instead of a presentation of Socrates' own defence, it stands to reason that it would still aim at the historical Socrates, not at a literary creation.

2. Plato is present at the trial, and attention is drawn to this by Socrates (*Apology*, 38b). The significance of this is that only at this point in his writings does Plato bear some responsibility for the truth of what he reports. Plato's credibility as an author is front and centre, for if he were at the trial, he would be at less liberty to employ the literary freedom of the *Sokratikoi Logoi*. This is not to suggest that Plato's *Apology* must be taken as a *verbatim* account of Socrates' defence. Nor does it mean that Plato's version of the defence is free of his own interpretation or embellishment. Plato is, however, constrained by

---

[9] See *Theaetetus* 149a. Prior (2006, pp. 33–34) argues that this image is difficult to reconcile with the protreptic Socrates of the *Symposium*. If the *Apology* is taken as our default picture of the historical Socrates, the midwife image is better understood as Plato's literary invention, whereas the protreptic mission finds corroboration in the *Apology*.

[10] Hence, in response to a claim like that of Nails (2006, p. 13): "Though Socrates denies outright [in the *Apology*] that he is a natural scientist, his familiarity with their investigations and his own naturalistic explanations make it no surprise that the jury could not tell the difference (e.g., *Theaetetus* 152e, 153c–d, 173e–174a; *Phaedo* 96a–100a)," I would reply that these references are marks of Plato's Socrates which indicate a difference from the Socrates of the *Apology*. Among other pieces of evidence from the Skeptics, Bett (2006, p. 299) notes that "Sextus (*Against the Professors* 7.10), criticizes Plato for misrepresenting Socrates as not solely concerned with ethics."

[11] This line of argument extends as far back as Schleiermacher (1818/1852a, pp. xiv–xv).

a degree of respect for fact in the face of other witnesses and other "defences" of Socrates, in a way that he simply is not in any of his other writings.[12]

3. In the *Apology* Socrates believes himself to be wise (23b). His wisdom consists in knowing that he knows nothing; he does not think that this particular brand of wisdom is worth much in comparison to divine wisdom. However, his reference to himself as a gadfly, his claims to have done a great service to the city (30e), and his suggestion, upon conviction, of a penalty of free meals at the Prytaneum in exchange for his services to Athens (36d) show just how much he thinks his human wisdom is worth. While Thrasymachus in the *Republic* may accuse Socrates of being ironic in saying he knows nothing (*Republic*, 337a), and while Socrates often says he knows nothing of how things stand in the dialogues, nowhere else but in the *Apology* does Socrates claim to be *wise* in virtue of not knowing, and nowhere else does he explain his intentions so explicitly. We should note here that the conception of wisdom as knowledge that is central to the *Republic* is quite different from the wisdom claimed by Socrates in the *Apology*. In the *Republic*, Plato, by incorporating formal knowledge into his account of (Pythagorean) wisdom, places it within human reach, but only for a select few (Plato, *Republic*, 476b).
4. Socrates claims that his life's mission, imposed by the Oracle at Delphi, is a protreptic mission.[13] While there are instances of others attributing this protreptic role to Socrates, for example, in the *Symposium* and the *Clitophon*, nowhere else does Socrates overtly attribute this role to himself. In his treatment of the *Clitophon*, Slings (1999) has argued at length that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is consistently implicitly protreptic. If Slings is right, this would suggest that Plato's dialogues employ a feature of Socrates in accordance with Plato's own literary and philosophical predilections, but that, in contrast to the *Apology*, the explicit feature is made implicit.

The first two points here suggest that the intended purpose of the *Apology* is to give an account of Socrates and not something else—an account of an historical

---

[12] That Plato is absent from the *Phaedo* is perhaps telling in this regard.

[13] Nails (2006, p. 13), following Dover (1968), suggests that the jury's perception of Socrates, influenced by Aristophanes' depiction of him, conflated sophistry and natural science.

event—Socrates' trial—that Plato witnessed along with over 500 other people. The latter two points suggest that Socrates' search for wisdom was a protreptic one. The involvement of the Oracle at Delphi in Plato's account of the trial is something that requires further investigation. As a way into this discussion, we might ask the following questions: Where or *who* was Socrates before Plato? With which tradition would he most likely be aligned if Plato had not written about him?

In the *Apology* Socrates claims that he has no interest in or knowledge of cosmological speculation, which would seem to differentiate him from the philosophical tradition of the Presocratics as much as the name "Presocratics" does. Xenophon tells us how Socrates expressed disdain for cosmological investigations that served no practical purpose—the kind of investigation for which Thales was so admired—but approved of them for use in navigation and the like. Consider further Aristotle's claim that philosophy is born of cosmological wonder and luxury—Socrates expresses disdain for both. Could Socrates truly be called a philosopher, if this is how philosophy was characterized before Plato? The problem is that to call Socrates outside of Plato's dialogues a philosopher imposes certain Platonic ideas about philosophy itself upon Socrates. What was a "philosopher" before Plato made Socrates its champion? What did Anaximander and Parmenides do? What did Pythagoras do? It seems that philosophers were engaged not in question and answer but rather in natural science and rudimentary metaphysics. In short, a philosopher, before Plato's reinvention of the philosopher as an inquirer into ethics, and then into metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology, is hardly what Socrates could have been prior to a Platonic conception of philosophy. Indeed, it is not with the tradition of the natural scientists of Miletus, the flux theorists of Ephesus, the mathematicians of Italy, or the qualitative pluralists who respond to Parmenides that Socrates aligns, any more than it is with the Sophists. If Socrates himself excludes himself from this philosophical tradition, as he does in the *Apology*, where are we to locate the historical Socrates? Because philosophy before Plato really means natural science, I suggest we look for the historical Socrates not in Plato's early dialogues, but rather in a tradition which precedes him and with which he seems more closely aligned. I am speaking of the tradition of the Seven Sages. My suggestion will be that a certain key part of the *Apology*— namely, the story of a quest for the wisest man initiated by the Oracle at Delphi (20e, ff.), together with its variant in Xenophon—finds its first expression within

a tradition that is closely related to, but not the same as, the philosophical tradition. The role that the Oracle story plays in Plato's *Apology* has been questioned by some scholars, and for good reason. It is to these considerations that I now turn before I go on in the final sections of this paper to show what I think the real significance of the Oracle story is.

The Oracle at Delphi in Plato and Xenophon

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates claims that his "mission" was initiated through his interpretation of the claim by the Oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest. What ensued upon Socrates learning this from Chaerephon was a protracted examination of those with reputations for wisdom in order to prove the god wrong. What resulted from these enquiries was Socrates' realization that he alone was wise in recognizing his own ignorance. Some have argued that Plato may have invented the whole story, and Xenophon's mention of the same story in his *Apology* may have been based on Plato's invention.[14] In fact, one reason to doubt the Oracle story is that Socrates would have had to have been known to be operating as a questioner and to have obtained some reputation for wisdom in order for Chaerephon to have put the question to the Oracle in the first place.

Even if we accept some truth in the story of the oracle in Plato's version, there is a significant difference between Plato's version and Xenophon's, one that is worth investigating. In Xenophon's version, the Oracle does not claim that Socrates was the wisest but rather the most "free, upright and prudent."[15] In an astute article, Dorion argues that the significance of such a difference lies in the fact that Xenophon's interest in Socrates lay in his

[14] Dorion (2011, p. 10) suggests that "there is nothing to say that it is not a myth first invented by Plato and later taken up and reinterpreted by Xenophon." Given what I take to be a working hypothesis about the intent of the *Apology*, this seems extreme, yet, as Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 12, n. 38) points out, even in Hellenistic times the story was highly regarded by some and rejected by others: the sceptic Archisilaus took the story as legitimate, whereas the Epicurean Colotes scoffed at it. Further remarks on other scholars' opinions regarding the truth of the story can be found in Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 29, n. 80) and Leibowitz (2010, p. 29 ff.). The suggestion that the story was invented extends at least as far back as R. Hackforth (1933).

[15] Xenophon, *Apology* 14.

character, not in his wisdom.[16] According to Dorion, when Xenophon sets out to defend Socrates against the charge of corrupting the youth, he emphasizes three Socratic qualities:

> *enkrateia* (self-mastery with regard to bodily pleasures), *karteria* (endurance of physical pain), and *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency). Xenophon frequently mentions these three qualities of Socrates in the rest of the *Memorabilia*, and for good reason: this triad forms the core of Socratic ethics in Xenophon's writings.[17]

That Plato would emphasize wisdom and Xenophon character here is telling, but what is equally telling is that in Plato's *Apology* Socrates' mission *began* as a result of consultation with the Oracle, whereas, according to Xenophon, Socrates immediately understands and elucidates the Oracle's meaning. Socrates had, by Xenophon's lights, been questioning things since childhood. Why would Plato cast things in this light? Even if Plato is being historically faithful to Socrates' claims at the trial, the question would then become

---

[16] Dorion (2006, pp. 100–101) claims: "In Xenophon's *Apology*, Socrates reports that the Pythia told Chaerephon 'that no man was more free (*eleutherioteron*) than I, or more just (*dikaioteron*), or more moderate (*sophronesteron*).' It is certainly remarkable that this response makes no mention of *sophia* – and this tends to confirm that *sophia* does not play as central a role in Xenophon as in Plato – but the choice of the three virtues that are mentioned is even more revealing, since it is entirely in accord with the preeminence Xenophon gives to mastery of one's pleasures and desires."

[17] See Dorion (2011, p. 19): "The exegetic choices are the following: either we prefer Plato's version to Xenophon's for reasons that have more to do with bias than the possibility of ruling in favor of one over the other (Vlastos 1991, [SIMP] pp. 288–289); or, rather than keeping one and disqualifying the other, we conserve both versions and strive to note their differences and most importantly interpret them in the framework of the philosophical convictions specific to each of the authors (Vander Waerdt 1993 [Vander Waerdt OSAP]). It seems quite likely that this type of comparative exegesis, because it revives the pertinence of positions hitherto discarded by the Socratic problem, will considerably enrich our understanding not only of the reception of Socratism but also of the authors who express themselves through the intermediary of Socrates." See also Prior (2006, p. 29): "Despite their differences of emphasis, our sources agree about several aspects of Socrates' life, character, philosophical interests and method. Where they concur, we have the best historical evidence about Socrates that we are likely to have. If we reject this evidence, we shall have nothing on which to base our account of the historical Socrates. Where our sources disagree, we may be unable to reconcile them, but in some cases we may not need to: both sides may present aspects of Socrates we ought not to dismiss."

why *Socrates* would cast himself in this light. The mention of the Oracle story causes a *thorubus* or disturbance among the jurors at *Apology* 20e. Why? I think it is because the jurors had heard a story like this before…

The Oracle and the Seven Sages

The Oracle story that Socrates tells at his trial is one that predates his trial by at least 150 years and one that the 501 jurors would certainly have known. Socrates says nothing short of "I call as my surprise witness The Oracle at Delphi." Now surely this has the forensic effect of showing that, far from disbelieving in gods, Socrates' own activities were commanded by Apollo.[18] Yet the trope of the Oracle and the denial of wisdom dates back to the time of the Persian King Croesus (ca. 595—547 BCE), and it is the centrepiece of the legends of the Seven Sages. Vander Waerdt (1993, p. 28) notes the precedent of the Oracle attributing wisdom to unsuspecting people, yet for whatever reason pays very little attention to the stories of the Seven Sages. We should keep in mind that Socrates was reputed to be a philodorean, or lover of Spartan culture, which is exactly the way in which Plato describes the Seven Sages in the *Protagoras*, the oldest extant account of them:

> "All these [the Sages] were enthusiasts, lovers and disciples of the Spartan culture; and you can recognize that character in their wisdom by the short, memorable sayings that fell from each of them they assembled together and dedicated these as the first-fruits of their lore to Apollo in his Delphic temple, inscribing there those maxims which are on every tongue— "Know thyself" and "Nothing overmuch." To what intent do I say this? To show how the ancient philosophy had this style of laconic brevity" (*Protagoras* 343a-b).

[18] In an insightful article, Janko (2006) suggests that Socrates' atheism may well have been equated with reading the myths allegorically in line with scientific investigation. Socrates' incredulity at Euthyphro's taking the story of the castration of Uranus by Cronos literally would fit such a characterization (*Euthyphro*, 6B ff). This story is mentioned again in the *Republic* as the kind of story that should be banned from the Kallipolis (*Republic*, 377e-378e). Yet it is a thin piece of evidence for attributing this kind of allegorizing to Socrates and again runs counter to the exchange in the *Apology*, where Socrates shows Meletus to hold two contradictory positions: that Socrates introduces new gods and that he believes in no gods at all (26B–28b). This, it seems, is a rather straightforward contradiction, and not one bound up with allegorical atheism of the kind Janko sees. The evidence for that kind of atheism is to be found, if anywhere, in Plato's dialogues, but not in the *Apology*.

With the exception of Thales, early practitioners of "ancient philosophy" represent a conception of philosophy quite different from the natural science that Socrates claims to know nothing of in the *Apology* (20c-26d). In short, Plato attempts, through this conception of τῶν παλαιῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, to merge the humanist tradition of the Seven Sages with philosophy, and the humanist concerns of Socrates along with it. We may say that Plato sees the historical Socrates as more closely aligned with this conception of "ancient philosophy" than with the philosophy of what we now call the Presocratics.

When Diogenes Laertius comes to distinguish the philosopher from the sage many centuries later, he attests to the fact that philosophers pursue wisdom, whereas sages have perfected it. In what follows, I want to suggest that the central feature of Socrates' reputation for wisdom overlaps in a significant way with a central feature of the Sage narrative, namely *the attribution of wisdom to one of the sages by the Oracle at Delphi*. Before I do so, however, that discussion needs to be prefaced by a bit more background on the extant work in which the Sage/Philosopher distinction and the Sage narrative emerge, namely Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers.* Diogenes classifies Greek philosophy into two main schools, the Italian school, starting with Pythagoras, and the Ionian School, whose founder was Thales. This is the story told by countless historians of Greek philosophy. However, Diogenes actually says that the first Ionian *philosopher* was Thales' student, Anaximander (DL Pro. 13). Diogenes also says that Pythagoras was the first person to call himself a philosopher:

> But the first to … call himself a philosopher [*philosophon*] or lover of wisdom [*philosophian*], was Pythagoras; for, said he, no man is wise [*sophon*], but God alone. All too quickly the study was called wisdom [*sophia*] and its professor a sage [*sophos*], to denote his attainment of mental perfection; while the student who took it up was a philosopher [*philosophos*] or lover of wisdom (DL Pro 8).

If Socrates thinks that he is wise, his account of wisdom is very different from Plato's account of wisdom, which would entail formal knowledge. Socrates' trademark is that he is the wisest because he knows that he knows nothing. But again, careful reading reveals that Socrates does not completely deny that he is wise in the *Apology*:

> The fact is, men of Athens, that I have acquired this reputation on account of nothing else than a sort of wisdom. What kind of wisdom is this? Just that which is perhaps human wisdom. For perhaps I really am wise in this wisdom (20d).

This is what Socrates says in the context of his trial, about the Oracle at Delphi. Chaerephon, an admirer of Socrates, asks the Oracle, "Who is the wisest?" and receives the reply, "Socrates." Socrates describes his life's mission as that of proving the Oracle wrong. He sets out on a search for someone wiser than himself, questioning politicians, poets, and craftsmen, ultimately determining that none of them seemed to have any wisdom of the kind he was seeking:

> I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either…" For on each occasion those who are present think I am wise in the matters in which I confute someone else; but the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this: "Human wisdom is of little or no value." And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: "This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom" (21d ff.).

Socrates never actually denies that he is wise. Socrates only actually denies that he is wiser than the gods. Socrates accepts that *he may be wise,* whereas Pythagoras denies wisdom altogether. For Pythagoras wisdom is beyond human capacity, whereas for Socrates, divine wisdom may be beyond human capacity, but clearly human wisdom is not. According to our original distinction, this makes Socrates a Sage, and Pythagoras a philosopher. However, Socrates, as I have intimated, has something more striking in common with the Sage tradition, namely the attribution of wisdom to him by the Oracle at Delphi, and his initial refusal to accept this attribution. The many different versions of this story in the Sage tradition all follow the same basic storyline:

- A tripod or bowl is found, and its ownership is disputed.
- The Oracle at Delphi is consulted.

- The Oracle declares that it should be given "to the wisest."
- It is given to one of the Seven Sages (different accounts name different sages).
- This sage refuses the prize and hands it off to the next sage, and the prize makes the rounds of all Seven Sages, all of whom refuse it, until it returns to the first sage to have received it.
- This sage then says it belongs to Apollo.

When the Oracle attributes wisdom to someone, the mark of their wisdom seems to be the acceptance that someone else is wiser than they are, thereby initiating a search for that person—a search that ultimately ends in failure and culminates in the conclusion that divine wisdom far surpasses that of men.

Sages and Philosophy as a Way of Life

Space here does not permit a discussion of Socrates as a sage beyond the connections with the Oracle at Delphi, but it is worth pointing out that the figure of Socrates is employed both in the context of the Stoic Sage by writers such as Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius and in that of the Muslim Sage by writers such as Abu Bakr al-Razi and al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik, whose report of Socrates' last words stands at the head of this article; in both traditions, Socrates is used as a foil, an exemplar, or an ideal. It is, of course, the case that these impressions are heavily dependent on the literary inventiveness of the *Logoi Sokratikoi*, but we should also consider that such writers were philosophers who were perhaps wise enough to see what the original Socratic disciples saw —a Socrates flexible enough to be the spokesman for their own ideas, in virtue of the fact that he himself was not laden with doctrines but rather manifested philosophy as a way of life.

References

Alon, I. (2006). Socrates in Arabic philosophy. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 317–336). Blackwell Publishing.

Annas, J. (2002). What are Plato's "middle" dialogues in the middle of? In J. Annas and C. Rowe (Eds.), *New perspectives on Plato, modern and ancient* (pp. 1–23). Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University.

Ausland, H. (2006). Socrates' definitional inquiries and the history of philosophy. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 511–535). Blackwell Publishing.

Benson, H.H. (Ed.). (2006). *A companion to Plato*. Blackwell Publishing.

Bett, R. (2006). Socrates and skepticism. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 298–311). Blackwell Publishing.

Blondell, R. (2002). *The play of character in Plato's dialogues*. Cambridge University Press.

Brennan, T. (2006). Socrates and Epictetus. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 285–297). Blackwell Publishing.

Brickhouse, T.C., and Smith, N.D. (2000). *The philosophy of Socrates*. Westview Press.

Brown, E. (2006). Socrates in the Stoa. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 275–284). Blackwell Publishing.

Burnet, J. (1928). *Greek philosophy: Thales to Plato*. Macmillan.

Dorion, L.-A. (2006). Xenophon's Socrates (S. Menn, Trans.). In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 93–109). Blackwell Publishing.

Dorion, L.-A. (2011). The rise and fall of the Socratic problem. In D.R. Morrison (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Socrates* (pp. 1–23). Cambridge University Press.

Dover, K.J. (Ed.). (1968). *Aristophanes: Clouds*. Clarendon Press.

Giannantoni, G. (Ed.). (1991). *Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae* (Vols. 1–4). Bibliopolis.

Gonzalez, F.J. (2002). Socratic elenchus as constructive protreptic. In G.A. Scott (Ed.), *Does Socrates have a method? Rethinking the elenchus in Plato's dialogues and beyond* (pp. 161–182). Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hackforth, R. (1933). *The composition of Plato's Apology*. Cambridge University Press.

Hanfmann, G.M.A. (1951). Socrates and Christ. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 60*, 205–233.

Janko, R. (2006). Socrates the freethinker. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 48–62). Blackwell Publishing.

Kahn, C.H. (1996). *Plato and the Socratic dialogue: The philosophical use of a literary form*. Cambridge University Press.

Kraut, R. (2006). The examined life. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 228–242). Blackwell Publishing.

Lapatin, K. (2006). Picturing Socrates. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 110–155). Blackwell Publishing.

Leibowitz, D.M. (2010). *The ironic defense of Socrates: Platoapostrophs Apology*. Cambridge University Press.

Long, A.A. (2006). How does Socrates' divine sign communicate with him? In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 63–74). Blackwell Publishing.

Morrison, D.R. (2000). Xenophon. In J. Brunschwig and G.E.R. Lloyd (Eds.), *Greek thought: A guide to classical knowledge* (pp. 775–792). Harvard University Press.

Morrison, D.R. (2005). On the alleged historical reliability of Plato's *Apology*. In R. Kamtekar (Ed.), *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito: Critical essays* (pp. 97–126). Rowman and Littlefield. (Reprinted from "On the alleged historical reliability of Plato's *Apology*," 2000, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, 82*(3), 235–265).

Morrison, D.R. (Ed.). (2011). *The Cambridge companion to Socrates*. Cambridge University Press.

Nails, D. (2006). The trial and death of Socrates. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 5–20). Blackwell Publishing.

Nehamas, A. (1992). What did Socrates teach and to whom did he teach it? *The Review of Metaphysics, 46*(2), 279–306.

Prior, W.J. (2006). The Socratic problem. In H.H. Benson (Ed.), *A companion to Plato* (pp. 25–35). Blackwell Publishing.

Rowe, C. (2006). Interpreting Plato. In H.H. Benson (Ed.), *A companion to Plato* (pp. 13–24). Blackwell Publishing.

Schleiermacher, F. (1852a). Introduction to the *Apology of Socrates*. In W. Smith (Ed.), *The Apology of Socrates, the Crito, and part of the Phaedo: With notes from Stallbaum, Schleiermacher's introductions, a life of Socrates, and Schleiermacher's essay on the worth of Socrates as a philosopher* (2nd ed., pp. xi–xix). T. Walton and Maberly.

Schleiermacher, F. (1852b). On the worth of Socrates as a philosopher (C. Thirlwall, Trans.). In W. Smith (Ed.), *The Apology of Socrates, the Crito, and part of the Phaedo: With notes from Stallbaum, Schleiermacher's introductions, a life of Socrates, and Schleiermacher's essay on the worth of Socrates as a philosopher* (2nd ed., pp. cxxix–clv). T. Walton and Maberly. (Original work published 1818).

Slings, S.R. (1999). *Plato: Clitophon*. Cambridge University Press.

Tarrant, H. (2006). Socratic method and Socratic truth. In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 254–272). Blackwell Publishing.

Taylor, A.E. (1911). *Varia Socratica: First series*. James Parker and Company.

Taylor, A.E. (1955). *Plato: The man and his work* (6th ed.). Methuen.

Thesleff, H. (1982). *Studies in Platonic chronology*. Societas Scientiarum Fennica.

Vander Waerdt, P. A. (1993). Socratic justice and self-sufficiency: The story of the Delphic oracle in Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 11*, 1–48.

Vlastos, G. (1971). The paradox of Socrates. In G. Vlastos (Ed.), *The philosophy of Socrates: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 1–21). Anchor Books.

Vlastos, G. (1991). *Socrates: Ironist and moral philosopher*. Cornell University Press.

Weiss, R. (2001). *Virtue in the cave: Moral inquiry in Plato's Meno*. Oxford University Press.

Weiss, R. (2006). Socrates: Seeker or preacher? In S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (Eds.), *A companion to Socrates* (pp. 243–253). Blackwell Publishing.

Xenophon. (1990). *Conversations of Socrates* (H. Tredennick, Trans.; R. Waterfield, Rev.). Penguin Books.

Author Note

Geoff Bowe holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Canada's McMaster University. He obtained Turkish citizenship in 2007 and the title of associate professor from the Turkish Interuniversity Council (UAK) in 2010. After a research fellowship at the University of Athens, Greece, in 1998–1999, Dr. Bowe taught at Bilkent University in Turkey (1999–2007), Boğaziçi University (2010–2011), and Thompson Rivers University in Canada (2007–2011). He was appointed to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at ITU by faculty vote in 2011. His research areas are ancient Greek philosophy, classics, history of ideas and philosophy of art. He has published articles in journals such as *Classical Philology*, *Acta Classica*, *Schole*, and the *Journal of Ancient History*. His books include *Plotinus and the Platonic Metaphysical Hierarchy* and *Platon'un Devlet'i Üzerine Makaleler* (in Turkish). Dr. Bowe currently teaches Philosophy of Art at the graduate and undergraduate levels at ITU's Taşkışla Campus in Istanbul.

Citation

Bowe, G. (2026). Image and Power in the Socratic Problem. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *76* (4), 25–45. DOI: 10.18276/aie2026.76-02.

„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.

„Analiza i Egzystencja" 76 (2026), 67–87
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2026.76-04

ARTICLES

MEHMET FATİH ELMAS
ORCID: 0000-0002-9728-2635
Bursa Uludağ University, Bursa, Türkiye
Email: mfelmas@uludag.edu.tr

Against *Entia Imaginationis*, with *Imagination*: Toward a New Conception of Religion in Spinoza

Keywords: nature, imagination, intellect, contingency, necessity
Słowa kluczowe: natura, wyobraźnia, intelekt, przygodność, konieczność

Abstract

From ancient times to the present day, philosophy, which makes a distinction between objects of knowledge and belief, has distinguished itself as a field of activity concerned not with things that are subject to time and space, but with those that cannot be otherwise under the form of eternity, or those that truly are. When it comes to the conversion of the ontological and epistemological horizon into the ethical realm, concepts such as goodness, the human good, and justice—even though they are framed according to time and space—are considered to be concepts that can be actualized as desires arising in the mind or *intuited* under the form of eternity. This points to two interdependent scenarios: recognizing an event or phenomenon within the context of time and space and comprehending it within the context of eternity. Two distinct cognitive faculties are at work in these two scenarios. For Spinoza, one of these is imagination; the other is reason. This article examines the function of imagination in Spinoza. Spinoza concludes that concepts such as 'Being', 'God', and 'religion', which are constructed on the basis of ideas acquired from random experiences in a fragmented or inadequate manner, must be removed from the mind. In contrast, by connecting the aspect of imagination that enables common

life to reason, we arrive at a conception of God that arises entirely from reason, in which humans can know themselves adequately under the guidance of reason, and at a related conception of 'religion'.

Introduction

In the 15th and 16th centuries, with the increasing use of rationality, experimentation, observation, and logical innovations in science, philosophical interventions aimed at stripping nature of its sacredness soon began to change the horizon of the conception of nature. With the philosophical revolutions that followed the scientific revolution, philosophy broke away from its recent past. As teleological physics was invalidated by mechanical physics, the relationships between God, nature, and humans were reconfigured. The idea of infinity, as a perfection comprehensible to the faculty of understanding, also enabled a godless cosmos. Philosophers who believed in the ideal of autonomy—that there is no authority to appeal to other than reason itself—and believed that they could understand themselves and nature by utilizing their own mental potential became convinced that they could solve all problems by relying on their own intellectual powers.

The 17th century was the age of thinkers who were avid followers of developments in mathematics and physics, who sought to decipher the natural world according to a mechanical model, who believed that truth could be found solely through the power of reason, and who, in this vein, addressed the metaphysical construction of physical reality. When it comes to the moral sphere, a philosophical discourse is expected to be in harmony with the sciences. Indeed, the philosopher feels obliged to develop a moral discourse that does not ignore the physical world and that takes into account what science says about this world. Therefore, the philosopher's task is to construct a realistic, autonomous, freedom-based system that is also systematic. This system must be constructed according to a model appropriate to human nature, taking into account the results of research on nature, rather than referring to supernatural forces that intervene in nature from outside.

Changing worldviews and the resulting social conditions have fostered a critical approach to religious beliefs. Questioning the understanding that this world has a final purpose, which can only be found in the afterlife, modern thinkers, taking into account the latest advances in science,

have worked on formulations based on more reasonable principles that do not neglect this world. As is well known, rules of ethics previously established for human action were presented for centuries as God's command/decree/law, helping to protect people from many disasters. However, in the 17th century, and especially from the 18th century onwards, under the great influence of critical rationalist philosophies, teachings began to proliferate according to which ethical rules were not revelation-based but reason-based, that is, that they originated from human reason itself. Modern humans have pursued what is consistent with reason. For a modern person, the fact that any law is divinely inspired does not strengthen that law or command; rather, it weakens it and makes it suspicious. Therefore, this 'belief' that the principles that determine what is practical originate from human reason has shown that religion is not the sole source of morality. The issues formulated on this subject generally revolve around the following question: Can a system of moral principles be established based solely on human reason, without reference to religion or sacred books based on revelation? During this period, attempts were made to liberate the source of ethics from religion and reestablish it on a scientific basis. In the modern era, humans are now the founding subjects of the realm of values that govern their sphere of action. Accordingly, a person's morality is not measured by their being a theist; an atheist can also live as an honest, honorable, virtuous citizen.

Every inquiry into human beings and their sphere of action ultimately takes place on the basis of an understanding of existence. One of the philosophers of the modern age who reflected on the possibility of people living together happily was Spinoza, and like every thinker, he too had an understanding of Being and what exists. As is well known, every kind of teaching, whether religious, scientific, or philosophical, is based on a particular anthropology. Spinoza analyzes human nature in natural terms. Spinoza's aim is essentially to establish an ideal of humanity, an understanding of humanity that can serve as a model of human nature and determine the direction of thought. What he aims to achieve with the human ideal he seeks to create by focusing on human nature is, in essence, first to expose the structure of the system that prevents people from realizing their inherent potential for action or life in their spheres of activity, and then to reestablish the system he has exposed. In the newly established order, people are offered a life in which they can live joyfully, freely, virtuously, and happily, based on the ideal established through this idea.

So how is this free, virtuous, and happy life modeled? Spinoza first presents faith and reason as concepts belonging to two distinct spheres. According to him, while reason seeks a truth that constitutes reality in thought, faith offers the individual a prescription for salvation in the realm of action. However, because religious figures ascribe different characteristics to faith, people are unable to find the opportunity to live in an order in which they can actualize their potential. In Spinoza, the distinctive aspect of reason is its ability to recognize, encompass, and know faith. Spinoza believes that if faith is stripped of these burdens, religion can have a positive effect on people in the practical sphere. In Spinoza, religious beliefs and explanations—even if superstitions cannot be entirely eliminated—are transformed by imagination and thus can be useful in establishing a common life with many irrational elements. In this regard, the imagination—which initially appears as the source of error—can make significant contributions to the development of reason. This article demonstrates that Spinoza, by pushing aside a conception of God based on imaginative ideas and the related understanding of religion, established a new understanding of God and religion through ideas based on the power of reason or guided by reason. In this context, the "new religion" to which Spinoza refers corresponds to all our desires and actions stemming from knowledge of God acquired through the systematic understanding of causes, whereas the religious person is one who lives solely under the guidance of reason and possesses the desire to actualize the good that arises within them in this manner.

Imagination as the source of error

Decoding the system that condemns people to a life contrary to their nature, depriving them of the possibility of living together happily, forces Spinoza to think within the theological-political sphere. According to him, the indecisiveness of people who constantly waver between hope and fear causes them to fall prey to superstitions born out of fear. People living under superstition rely most heavily on their imagination to guide their lives. Human communities, determined to exist and act within the grip of hope and fear, are most exploited by those in power. Depending on the situation, those in power sometimes fuel hope and sometimes fuel fear to keep people under control, impeding their capacity for action. They maintain their power by

making crowds who live according to ideas based on imagination desire their slavery as if it were freedom. In this respect, slavery is a state of passivity that arises with the contribution of the slaves themselves (Spinoza, 2002b, p. 750). The concept of power emerges as something desired by people as a result of the synthetic union of imagination and desire. This power calls on everyone to unite in solidarity around a power that rules over everything, yet in which no one can essentially find themselves. However, this solidarity is an invitation to a wholly passive act, inviting people to rally around the power that subjects them. Yet Spinoza's aspiration is an ethical community composed of people guided by reason—where passive allegiance is transformed into active solidarity. To actualize this longing, Spinoza begins with the elimination of superstitions and ideas from the mind that give rise to false perceptions. His operation is directed toward perceptions born of imagination, opinion, and inspiration.

Imagination creates general ideas about individual things. According to Spinoza, when people make judgments about things or situations, there are certain 'universal ideas' implicit in their judgments that guide their thinking. Based on these assumptions, they characterize things or situations as perfect or imperfect. As a natural tendency, they tend to understand everything that exists in nature by reducing it to a single genus, understood as the most comprehensive concept. What is "good" and "bad" is determined in light of these understandings. Accordingly, things that bring something into being as the most comprehensive concept are good, whereas everything that distances it from that concept is bad. However, according to Spinoza, good and evil do not, in fact, signify any quality in themselves. Nevertheless, people compare some things with others, believing that some have a greater share of the highest kind and others a lesser share, and that their perfection is proportional to their share of Being. In this belief, the measure of perfection (corresponding to the 'universal ideas' that guide people's thinking) is its correspondence to reality. However, according to Spinoza, these are mere universals, and universals are *nothing*. An idea must correspond to the object of which it is the idea, not to a universal idea. For example, the neighbor's cat is blue; it must necessarily correspond to the idea of blue, its own particular idea, not to universal ideas. This is because God is only the cause and creator of particular things (Spinoza, 2002c, p. 59). However, universal ideas are not like common notions that exist both in the part and in the whole and about which objective knowledge can be attained.

Rather, they are inadequate ideas consisting of singular things connected by certain similarities, coexistence, and similar associations within the horizons of time and space. In this respect, they are ideas that are far from explaining the nature of individual things (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 320). When taken on its own, a universal idea is only an idea, but when it presents certain ideals to the realm of existence insofar as it is an idea, its regulatory and constitutive aspect emerges. In the context of ideals, people have thought that nature operates according to a final cause. People who believe that God manages or determines everything according to a purpose have, in this respect, begun to believe that everything was created for them, and that they themselves were created to serve God. So much so that concepts found in the human mind, such as good and evil, virtue and sin, and beautiful and ugly, are all products of this belief (Spinoza, 2022a, p. 239). This idea of purposiveness is derived from the illusion of freedom that humans believe they possess. Teleology attributed to nature is essentially a result of the mental state of humans in their natural state. To Spinoza, this way of thinking seems quite reasonable in the natural state. This is because, ultimately, humans are not born with the knowledge of causes. People who come into the world unaware of the order of existence and of causes initially and naturally turn to things that are useful to them in order to sustain their existence; at this stage, it is their appetite that causes them to turn to the only real thing for them. Indeed, the first thing they become aware of is their choices and appetites. Therefore, they believe themselves to be free because they do not know the reasons that guide their actions. By looking at the final causes, they search for the reason behind everything in an external source, and when they cannot find anything, they turn inward. They then begin to think that nature, just like themselves, freely offers everything for their benefit. This principle of usefulness and free will leads them to consider nature on two levels: as ends and as means. Thus, people fall under the illusion that everything is a means to an end. Finally, they seek an external source that creates and shapes everything they see as a means, and from this, they imagine a governing force that they believe provides them with everything. Since they have no knowledge of the nature of this entity, they inevitably look to their own character and assign it a value:

> So it came about that every individual devised different methods of worshipping God as he thought fit in order that God should love him beyond others and direct the whole of Nature so as to serve his blind cupidity and

> insatible greed. Thus it was that this misconception developed into superstition and became deep-rooted in the minds of men, and it was for this reason that every man strove most earnestly to understand and to explain the final causes of all things. But in seeking to show that Nature does nothing in vain—that is, nothing that is not to man's advantage—they seem to have shown only this, that Nature and the gods are as crazy as mankind (Spinoza, 2002a, pp. 239–240).

What actually necessitates all research on teleology is a prejudice deeply embedded in the human mind. The reason it is embedded deeply within the human mind is related to the way misconceptions force themselves upon people. Even later learning what actually exists may not be enough to overturn previous judgments; it is quite difficult to get rid of a prejudice that has become a superstition. In this context, Spinoza gives the example of the sun:

> (…) when we gaze at the sun, we see it as some two hundred feet distant from us. The error does not consist in simply seeing the sun in this way but in the fact that while we do so we are not aware of the true distance and the cause of our seeing it so. For although we may later become aware that the sun is more than six hundred times the diameter of the earth distant from us, we shall nevertheless continue to see it as close at hand. For it is not our ignorance of it true distance that causes us to see the sun to be so near; it is that the affection of our body involves the essence of the sun only to the extent that the body is affected by it (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 264).

How is it possible to free oneself from misconceptions? It seems that the source of misconceptions lies, first, in a lack of knowledge about what something is and, second, in a lack of knowledge about the thing to which we are related. However, people generally prefer to praise or criticize something by attributing value to it rather than explaining its essence or nature. According to Spinoza, it was only with the discovery of mathematics that people found the opportunity to free themselves from this generally prejudiced way of thinking. Mathematics has taught us that we must be concerned with first causes, with essences, not with final causes. Those who read nature solely through the principle of utility can only understand its true order through mathematics, by reading it as a geometric model. After all, the philosopher's task is not to praise or condemn his subject, but only to understand it. Thus, the opportunity arises to learn *how things are in their own internal totality*, rather than what they are useful for in nature. In this respect, the geometric model or attitude has the power to free people from

teleology, voluntarism, and the illusion of freedom. The geometric attitude is essentially the demystification of nature. The elimination of illusions results in the discovery of meaning. Meaning essentially emerges with the exposure of anthropomorphic and teleological design. Therefore, for Spinoza, the idea of freedom is an illusion. Teleology stems from ignorance of causes, and, finally, *will* is clearly a fictitious term whose meaning is unknown. These three terms (teleology, voluntarism, and freedom), which are the pillars of the three great understandings upon which the classical system is built, give rise to an anthropomorphic conception of God and the universe (Bumin, 2012, p. 74).

Therefore, nature does not have a purpose like humans do. This general prejudice, to emphasize this again, is an illusion imposed on humans by the imagination. According to Spinoza, what humans call a teleological cause is actually an efficient cause, which is nothing other than their own desires. However, people are unaware of their desires and therefore live oblivious to the causes that guide them. Imagination shows people the crooked as straight and the straight as crooked. Therefore, the final causes appear to be the first causes:

> And since those who do not understand the nature of things, but only imagine things, make no affirmative judgments about things themselves and mistake their imagination for intellect, they are firmly convinced that there is order in things, ignorant as they are of things and of their own nature. For when things are in such arrangement that, being presented to us through our senses, we can readily picture them and thus readily remember them, we say that they are well arranged; if the contrary, we say that they are ill arranged, or confused. And since those things we can readily picture we find pleasing compared with other things, men prefer order to confusion, as though order were something in Nature other than what is relative to our imagination. And they say that God has created all things in an orderly way, without realizing that they are thus attributing human imagination to God—unless perchance they mean that God, out of consideration for the human imagination, arranged all things in the way that men could most easily imagine. And perhaps they will find no obstacle in the fact that there are any number of things that far surpass our imagination, and a considerable number that confuse the imagination because of its weakness (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 242).

In this case, the problem arises from people confusing real entities with the forms in which they imagine them to be. Spinoza points to two cognitive faculties that guide humans—imagination and reason—and identifies the cause of disagreement among philosophers as their tendency to explain real entities solely through their conceptions (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 266). An explanation must satisfy both of these faculties: "We see therefore that all the notions whereby the common people are wont to explain Nature are merely modes of imagining, and denote not the nature of anything but only the constitution of the imagination. And because these notions have names as if they were the names of entities existing independently of the imagination I call them 'entities of imagination' [*entia imaginationis*] rather than 'entities of reason' [*entia rationis*]" (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 243). Ideas based on imagination conceive of God *sub specie durationis*, under the aspect of time/flow. This imagined being is entirely anthropomorphic; it is shaped in the image of finite passions and modes of humans. However, by its nature, the mind contemplates things as real, necessary, and under the form of eternity, *sub quadam aeternitatis specie.*

Thus, there are two different ways of comprehending things: either under the conditions of time and space or under a form of eternity. Spinoza distinguishes the levels that enable these forms of understanding. In the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (*Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding*), he speaks of four types of knowledge (Spinoza, 2002d, pp. 8–9), but in the *Ethics* he combines the first two of these four types into the first order, defining them as inadequate knowledge that we encounter in the realm of sensibility and imagination (Spinoza, 2002a, pp. 267–268). Accordingly, the first type of knowledge (*cognitio primi generis*) consists of vague, random experiences; opinions (*opinio*) acquired through our senses from blurry and fragmented individual things; or knowledge based on imagination (*imaginatio*). This level of knowledge is, in essence, everyday knowledge in which we are submerged in passivity and captivity/bondage under the influence and/or determinism of sensuality and imagination. Since everyday knowledge consists of ideas formed in the light of nature's general order, it is not necessarily adequate. Here, we find the influences of the imagination and the passions that arise as a result of these influences. Therefore, the fundamental cause of error is inadequate ideas. These are actually images rather than ideas. Although they show the existence of the external object

and its effect on the body as 'images', they are actually only representations because they do not express/reveal the essence. They are linked to each other by memory as images or signs. However, their existence is necessary for the formation of knowledge. In fact, inadequate ideas are a necessity. In other words, right and wrong exist with the same necessity. The difference is that the wrong is the expression of an idea attached to the human mind, while the right is the expression of an idea attached to God.

According to Spinoza, humans are exposed to inadequate ideas in proportion to their infinite number of external extended parts. However, exposure to the first type of knowledge does not mean that we will remain stuck in this murky world. So, how is it possible for the human mind, which is by its very nature exposed to inadequate ideas, to reach adequate ideas?

The way out of this inadequate world is the second type of knowledge. This type of knowledge is the knowledge of the combination and separation of correlations. Whereas the first type deals with the knowledge of encounters, that is, the interaction of external parts with each other, the second type deals with the knowledge of how an individual's characteristic connections combine with and are disrupted by those of others. Therefore, the second type of knowledge is adequate because it is an action directed toward the knowledge of causes. At this stage, Spinoza puts his theory of 'common notions' to work. Simply put, a common notion is the idea of the combination of relationships between multiple things. The second type of knowledge (*ratio*) is rational knowledge, which allows us to reach common notions and adequate ideas about the properties of things through reasoning: "These (common) notions are our first adequate ideas; they draw us out of the world of inadequate signs" (Deleuze, 2005, p. 291). This level, at which reasoning and inference are essential, is our *rational* side that establishes relations and makes calculations; it leads us to the knowledge of causes. At this level, there is the possibility of thinking thoroughly about scientific or other causes and effects, including the connections of everyday life. In this respect, this level is the way out of slavery. Thus, it elevates human beings to universality. In other words, it reflects our subjectivity toward situations to which we are exposed as a natural consequence of living within relationships full of passivity, expressing a perspective that is captive to the necessity of finitude. Imagination is transformed into intellectual power, enabling ideas to be adequately interrelated. Therefore, the individual can experience the joy that arises from their own essence (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 366).

However, this is only one step toward reaching the truth. But in Spinoza, the true or highest level is the knowledge of essences, not connections, and is represented by the third type. As can be understood, the knowledge of essences is a step beyond the knowledge of connections.

The fact that things have the same order and connection as ideas, and therefore the mind appears as the idea of the body, directs the intellect more toward the formation of common notions and self-knowledge. The act of knowing is an activity aimed at bringing together, in an appropriate way, ideas that are inadequate with respect to the states of the body. In this respect, the third and highest level of knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) is intuitive knowledge that, after acquiring an adequate idea of the general order of nature, points to the fact that this general order actually operates in the essence of things (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 266). The faculty that enables us to possess common notions and adequate ideas at the second level is reason (*ratio*). At the third level, *intellectus* takes the place of *ratio*. This is because reason does not have the power to make humans happy or bring them happiness. The faculty of understanding in the sense of *intellectus* is a faculty of seeing/thinking bestowed upon humans as part of God's infinite power. The third level of knowledge is the level within the sphere of *intellectus*, which enables the comprehension of the intrinsic truth of existence beyond the temporal constraints of thought, under the form of eternity. What enables the human mind to reach this level is, in addition to the knowledge of causes provided by *ratio*, the possession of a part of God's *Intellectus*, and the power to see and know things with this part under the form of eternity, that is, as a whole within the whole. Here, the object reveals itself to the capacity for direct understanding. Love arises from this level of knowledge.

The human mind only comprehends the essence of its object, the body, by uniting with the idea of God at the third level, that is, by knowing itself (Rızk, 2012, p. 127).[1] To know oneself, it is necessary to compre-

[1] In his *Short Treatise*, Spinoza describes the levels of knowledge through the lens of the competent person as follows: "Opinion often leads us into error. True belief is good only because it is the way to true knowledge, and awakens us to things which are really lovable. So that the final end that we seek, and the highest that we know, is true knowledge. But even this true knowledge varies with the objects that come before it; the better the object is with which it happens to unite itself, so much the better also is this knowledge. And, for this reason, he is the most perfect man who is united with God (who is the most perfect being of all), and so enjoys him" (Spinoza, 2002c, pp. 67–68).

hend the object of the mind's idea, that is, the body, and to form adequate ideas about it. The adequacy of an idea means that, when considered independently of the object it represents, it possesses all the characteristics of a true idea (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 244). Therefore, to say that one knows something is equivalent to saying that one possesses an adequate idea of that thing, that is, the knowledge of its cause.

Common notion: The junction where imagination meets reason

Perhaps the most important issues Spinoza grappled with were the 'things' that are products of the imagination. Knowing that he could not eliminate them entirely, he attempted to transform them into knowledge. Accordingly, the most fundamental way to remove misconceptions from the mind is knowledge of their causes. For this, the geometric method is necessary. However, in order for humans to free themselves from the everyday problems that have taken hold of them and to see/understand themselves as part of infinite existence, they need a third type of knowledge beyond the knowledge of causes or rationality. Many can transition to rationality, but the third level is one that very few can bear. For this, it is important to build a structure that attempts to transform ideas that lead to all kinds of misconceptions. This is an operation that transforms error into truth and our passions and behaviors from passivity to activity, without completely negating them and while partially preserving them: "The central difference between the imagination and reason is the contingency of the former and the necessity of the latter. The common notion operates the transformation that makes the imagination permanent; it is the passage to reason" (Hardt, 2002, p. 103).

In Spinoza, the process does not progress dialectically. The common notion does not negate imagination but includes/brings it into the sphere of reason; that is, it combines it with reason while preserving it. Therefore, reason and imagination are not opposing or mutually exclusive concepts. Thus, the power that enables reason to be freed from the myths constructed around it is, in turn, a product of reason: the common notion. In this sense, Spinoza does not exclude the first type of knowledge but rather makes it a springboard for his system. The imagination, which constitutes the first type of knowledge, enables the transition to the second and third types of knowledge. Unlike opinion and inspiration, which are not subject to the laws of combinability,

the imagination makes it possible to conceive of combinable relationships. In this respect, it is imagination that prepares the conditions for the formation of common notions.[2]

Common notions, as defined above, are ideas concerning the composition of relationships between multiple things. They are of central importance in establishing reasonable relationships/connections between individuals and in protecting the individual (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 104). Spinoza divides common notions into two categories: the most universal and the least universal. The most universal ones are the least useful. The least universal ones generally represent a similar combination between two bodies that are compatible with each other. The former is the theoretical subject of the *Ethica*, particularly Chapter 2. The latter is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 in terms of its practical function (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 104). Common notions with a constitutive aspect in terms of practical function are 'magical' keys that transform passion into action, the vague and fragmented into the adequate, and imagination into reason. Hardt states that if magic is to be sought here, it lies entirely in the act of transformation. This transformation process is essentially central to the practical constitution of reason (Hardt, 2002, p. 101).

Spinoza's theory posits that when a body defined by a specific relationship between motion and rest combines randomly with another body, a unity composed of the parts of the two bodies is formed. Common notions can only be adequately grasped when they are equally present in both the part

---

[2] Huenemann draws attention to one point. According to him, common notions must attain a kind of special status by enabling us to access a privileged type of knowledge. But what is this status? (Huenemann, 2008, p. 100). Common notions are inherent in the nature/essence of thought because, due to their mental existence, they belong to the nature of the mind. This makes them inherent in every mind. This means that they are present in every being, since every physical entity has an idea. So, how can these notions, present in everyone's mind, elevate humans to the highest level of knowledge? What makes us more special than any other object? In Spinoza, not all ideas are equal. Each idea has its own power. The power of a human idea differs from that of the idea of any other living being. Since the human body is more capable than the bodies of other living beings in terms of capacity, and considering the parallelism between body and mind, ideas belonging to the body will also be more powerful. The conclusion drawn from this is that, in terms of the first level of knowledge, what distinguishes humans from other living beings and from one another is the ability to process imagination, which is the necessary path to attaining adequate knowledge.

and the whole (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 265; Huenemann, 2008, p. 9). With this understanding, they take on a biological meaning (Deleuze, 1988, p. 54). What is important here is the idea of harmony that occurs between multiple bodies. Second, there are certain things common to all bodies, whether they harmonize with each other or not: *extensio* and the principle of *motus et quies*. Ultimately, everything is combined under God's attributes. However, the conflict does not stem from common notions. To understand this, one must leave the realm of randomness and look at the situation from within.

Common notions are the only means by which people who are exposed to, forced to accept, or in need of inherently inadequate ideas can transform them into adequate ideas: they provide the key to the puzzle of how people can develop their powers of thought (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 90). Spinoza insists that these should not be confused with abstract and fictional concepts. What distinguishes common notions from abstract and fictional concepts is that they represent a unity of composition. In this respect, common notions are the means of understanding relationships as they are—in their true form: "In this sense, the common notions are more biological than mathematical, forming a natural geometry that allows us to comprehend the unity of the composition of all of Nature and the modes of variation of that unity" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 57).

Life is an area where modes encounter each other in terms of power—where they unite with each other, separate from each other, or defeat each other. In fact, in Spinoza, there is only composition in terms of the whole of nature; dissolution is not an issue. To say that both composition and dissolution exist in nature stems from our lack of understanding. Nature embraces all connections; therefore, only compositions occur in nature. When bodies encounter other bodies that increase their power, a communion is formed, and this gives them joy. In this respect, the constant relational state of bodies is the source of an ethical situation. To create shared notions, the composition of the relationship between bodies must exist in a way that brings joy and is in harmony with our existence. The practical function of common notions is to create common ground. Shared life makes it possible to organize relationships based on common notions (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 105). In other words, the emphasis on commonality refers only to the commonality of multiplicity by pushing uncertainties out of the mind; it does not eliminate differences but only allows us to form a small universal set

within the intersection of individuals. Otherwise, if a union were established by eliminating differences and considering only similarities, it would be called massification or collectivization rather than commonality; the aim here is not uniformity. A multitude formed by an encounter that increases the power of existence and action through individuals' understanding of common notions is always implicitly present; it emerges clearly and distinctly when the right conditions arise. Thus, common notions show that the development of reason and citizenship under the guidance of reason, through our shared effort to understand something we did not understand before, is linked to our mutual relationship with others and our ability to become something other than what we are (Hardt, 2002, p. 101).

Thus, the first adequate idea a person will have is the discovery of something common in the similarity between two bodies; this discovery leads to another discovery, which leads to another, and so on. Thanks to common notions, we go beyond the coincidences we observe by chance and grasp the harmony between modes, that is, the internal logic of the situation. Since a common relationship brings harmony, our power/strength of action necessarily increases.

The theory of common notions is the first step in preparing an ethical project in Spinoza. That is, the object of inquiry that enables us to take the first step toward the practical is the body. An analysis of the structure and relationships that constitute the body allows us to identify similarities between two bodies. Therefore, because we recognize the relationship between our body and another body, and because this encounter enables us to create a new relationship by achieving harmony through a common relationship, it is necessarily joyful. In other words, an analysis of the similarities and relationships between bodies provides the necessary criteria for choosing what is joyful, which is the 'first ethical choice' (Hardt, 2002, p. 96). In this choice, we gravitate toward harmonious encounters, that is, joyful passions, and avoid incompatible encounters, that is, sorrowful passions. This orientation and avoidance are themselves a choice, and this choice demonstrates that common notions are produced. This is because a common notion corresponds to the idea of the similarity of the composition between bodies. In this respect, the production of common notions is the first door that opens onto ethics.

Some commentators argue that the theme of common notions in Spinoza's philosophy points to an ontological break, a shift from speculation to practice (Spinoza, 2002, p. 100). At the practical stage, existence is no

longer a given order but rather a fabric woven from a tangle of combinable relationships. The problem is essentially one of ontological constitution. The most fundamental feature of this constitution is the expression of the causality of existence. The practical pursuit of common notions transforms an ontological inquiry into an ethical project. In other words, it shows how physical bodies and the theory of knowledge require each other and together create an ethical horizon.

Therefore, for Spinoza, the problem of knowledge is an ethical problem. Because it is an ethical problem, the levels of knowledge are related to modes of existence. What is the purpose/goal of knowing? The answer is clear: *eternal* happiness/bliss/satisfaction/fulfillment. Spinoza is the philosopher of a system in which ontology is linked to epistemology, and epistemology is linked to ethics; in fact, they are integrated. The connection between epistemic measures and modes of existence, and the parallelism between ethical and epistemic measures, facilitate the integration of epistemological concepts with those of ethics. That is, the truth of a thing and the certainty of that truth are based on the intrinsic relation of the idea to its reason. The adequacy of an idea is synonymous with its expression of reason. In this respect, expressing reason requires ontological analysis. This is because the adequacy of an idea is related to the structure and connections of existence. In fact, there is a parallelism between the characteristics of being and the characteristics of truth. The criteria that define *being* are the same as the criteria that make an idea true. Therefore, the analysis takes on an onto-epistemological character. Thus, the adequacy of an idea depends on its externalization of its own path of genesis/production. This path is necessarily determined by the structure and connections of being. In other words, our knowledge of being is measured by the number of our adequate ideas. Indeed, knowledge is formed as the power of thought is filled with adequate ideas. In Spinoza, the place where the issue of truth leads us and leaves us at the boundary is, therefore, the issue of power. By employing the characteristics of existence and power, he transforms the epistemological scene into an ethical one. This transformation is, in general, the answer to how we can reach adequate ideas in a context where a large part of human life is immersed in inadequate ideas. In short, the stones on the path that leads from inadequate ideas to adequate ones lead to the establishment of an ethical and, more specifically, religious architecture.

Conclusion

Spinoza, who examined the power of superstition that led people to strive for the slavery they embraced as if it were their freedom, targeted the theologies of church officials and clergy who sought to subjugate people. The aim is to expose the system that enslaves people by relying on so-called religious teachings in order to gain power. This act of disclosure is actually aimed at dismantling the display of transcendence constructed outside people by those in power, whose entire strength is derived from people. For Spinoza, reason is always in pursuit of a truth that constitutes reality. In contrast, faith is a set of doctrines that offers a personal recipe for salvation related to the individual's practical actions. However, because of the clergy, who impose other characteristics on faith related to the sphere of human action, individuals cannot find the opportunity to live in an ethical and political order in which they can experience freedom or actualize their potential. If faith is freed from these burdens, it can have a positive effect on people in the practical sphere. Thus, imagination, which initially appears as the source of error, can make an important contribution to the development of reason. In other words, beliefs can be beneficial in organizing communal life in a way that incorporates many irrational elements that serve the development of reason. So, what is the role of imagination in the development of the intellect? In Spinoza's philosophy, each emotion contains the nature of an external body with which the individual interacts or to which the individual is connected through the nature of their own body. In this respect, emotion contains both a unique structure and a common element. Therefore, in passive or inadequate connections, imagination can produce passive and common affections. In other words, in inadequate encounters, imagination can contribute to the development of the intellect through its effort to create common notions that sprout from the idea of harmony. Thus, a system free from dogmas that cause or may cause debate can be established within the emerging universal belief system (Spinoza, 2007, p. 182).

Therefore, imagination and intellect are concepts belonging to two separate spheres. The distinguishing feature of the intellect is its ability to recognize and encompass imagination, that is, its capacity for knowledge. Through this ability to know, the imagination, which is the source of error, is harnessed to develop the intellect and increase the power of action. In this context, religious beliefs and explanations—while not entirely eliminating

superstitions—are transformed by imagination. Spinoza advocates for the struggle for freedom of thought and expression alongside this operation of the imagination. In doing so, he restricts religion-based views of power concerning the sphere of action and, just as importantly, removes the veil of transcendence that camouflages power, revealing that the thing called power is a structure built by the power of the people themselves.

An ethics based on Spinoza's ideas is a wholly naturalistic doctrine or way of life that states that we will become competent through understanding/knowing our own nature, as opposed to a moral system that offers a recipe for good and evil to which people must conform in their actions. This is because there is nothing in our nature that prevents us from existing or hinders our power to live. Therefore, the very act of reflecting on what exists is an act that prepares the ethical, and the only ethical thing in life is to organize encounters that will increase our power to act and to distance ourselves from those that will diminish it. However, we must find a way to increase our power to act by organizing encounters with modes that are compatible with our own nature, through points of compatibility. In other words, to make the state of nature livable, we must organize random encounters. In the natural state, where humans search randomly for what is useful to them, they strive to destroy bodies that do not match or combine with their own. However, if people organize themselves in pursuit of what is useful, they try to meet within relationships that are compatible with those of others. This second effort is the true benefit that should be pursued. While pursuing the true benefit, we will of course encounter some negative situations, but we strive to combine our relationship with relationships that are compatible with ours in every way. This effort yields the maximum level of joyful emotion. Thus, our power to act increases as much as possible. Here, the true meaning of *conatus* emerges: the effort to carry out an action that, guided by reason, leads to adequate ideas and, consequently, effective emotions. What determines virtue is the continuity of this effort. Virtue is the effort to preserve one's existence by acting in accordance with the laws of human nature (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 323). The highest virtue of the mind is understanding. Virtue is a desire, born of joy, that grasps the ontological necessity of things in relation to the infinite at the third level of knowledge. Therefore, what is called virtue is actually the activity of organizing the experience of the blurred perceptions to which we are exposed in passivity in accordance with the knowledge of the necessity that prevails in nature.

In Spinoza, the highest thing that a mind, which is active as long as it understands, can comprehend is God as an absolutely infinite being (Della Rocca, 2008, p. 187). The knowledge of God is the highest good of a mind (Spinoza, 2007, p. 60). As the highest good of the mind, knowledge of God is the guarantor of all our other knowledge. Everything in nature expresses the concept of God to some degree. Hearing this voice requires recognizing what is natural. As our knowledge of natural things increases, we arrive at the divine. Knowledge of the divine is the common good of all who pursue virtue. This commonality arises from the natural necessity of reason. Everyone rejoices equally in this commonality and experiences the pleasure of sharing their joy with others. This desire is, in fact, the essence of the mind. As the knowledge of God preserved/contained in the essence of the mind increases, the mind will strive to make the good it desires for itself accessible to everyone. In this context, the actions the mind performs simply because it possesses knowledge of God will be good and beneficial.

Here is the measure of the new religion and the new piety in Spinoza: "Whatever we desire and do, whereof we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, that is, insofar as we know God, I refer to Religion [*religio*]. The desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason, I call Piety [*pietas*]" (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 339). Divine knowledge is dependent on the systematic understanding of causes. At this stage, it is no longer a religion of imagination, but one of understanding. Understanding that the infinite existence reached by attempting to relate the causes and patterns of things to common relationships is an inherent necessity of reality is the highest good of the mind: "The desire to know God leads to the third type of knowledge and the true pleasure of existence. Under these conditions, the ethics approach and speculative desire coincide within what can be called the *experience of infinity*" (Rızk, 2012, p. 263). In Spinoza, the speculative path of knowledge and the ethical path of individual and social liberation express/follow one and the same route. The mind can only know its own essence by grasping the necessity of the infinite. The condition for knowing its own essence is an ethical encounter in ethics realized through the experience of the body.

As can be understood from the criterion of the new piety, a person must first and foremost know themselves. Knowing oneself means knowing one's body and bodily parts, one's mind and mental parts, along with their causes,

in a proper manner. Only in this way can one comprehend that they are in God under the form of eternity:

> Eternity is the very essence of God insofar as this essence involves necessary existence (Def. 8, I). Therefore, to conceive things under a form of eternity is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God's essence as real entities; that is, insofar as they involve existence through God's essence (Spinoza, 2002a, p. 376).

According to the new conception of religion, a religious person knows that everything that happens in nature occurs by necessity from divine nature and that, therefore, labeling events as bad essentially stems from ignorance, which causes us to perceive things inadequately within the confines of time and space. The devout person is aware that the awareness of necessity is freedom. With this awareness, they understand things based on the relationships that bind them together and the circumstances that separate them, defining them according to their nature or power. Thus, they do not get stuck between hope and fear and need no transcendent power or myth.

References

Bumin, T. (2012). *Tartışılan modernlik: Descartes ve Spinoza*. YKY.

Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: Practical philosophy* (R. Hurley, Trans.). City Lights Books.

Deleuze, G. (2005). *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza* (M. Joughin, Trans.). Zone Books.

Della Rocca, M. (2008). *Spinoza*. Routledge.

Gatens, M., Lloyd, G. (1999). *Collective imaginings: Spinoza, past and present*. Routledge.

Hardt, M. (2002). *Gilles Deleuze: An apprenticeship in philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.

Huenemann, C. (2008). *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical essays*. Cambridge University Press.

Rızk, H. (2012). *Spinoza'yı anlamak* (I. Ergüden, Trans.). İletişim Yayınları.

Spinoza, B. de. (2002a). Ethics. In M.L. Morgan (Ed.), *Complete works* (S. Shirley, Trans., pp. 213–382). Hackett Publishing Company.

Spinoza, B. de. (2002b). Political treatise. In M.L. Morgan (Ed.), *Complete works* (S. Shirley, Trans., pp. 676–754). Hackett Publishing Company.

Spinoza, B. de. (2002c). Short treatise on God, man, and his well-being. In M.L. Morgan (Ed.), *Complete works* (S. Shirley, Trans., pp. 31–107). Hackett Publishing Company.

Spinoza, B. de. (2002d). Treatise on the emendation of the intellect. In M.L. Morgan (Ed.), *Complete works* (S. Shirley, Trans., pp. 1–30). Hackett Publishing Company.

Spinoza, B. de. (2007). *Theological-political treatise* (M. Silverthorne & J. Israel, Trans.; J. Israel, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Author Note

Mehmet Fatih Elmas is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Bursa Uludağ University, Türkiye. His MA focused on Spinoza and his PhD on Levinas. His research centers on modern philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics, with a particular interest in the intersections of ethical responsibility, religious thought, and contemporary philosophy. Email: mfelmas@uludag.edu.tr

Citation

Elmas, M.F. (2026). Against *Entia Imaginationis*, with Imagination: Toward a New Conception of Religion in Spinoza. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *76* (4), 67–87. DOI: 10.18276/aie2026.76-04.

„Analiza i Egzystencja" 76 (2026), 89–115
ISSN (print): 1734-9923
ISSN (online): 2300-7621
DOI: 10.18276/aie.2026.76-05

ARTICLES

MARIUSZ TUROWSKI
ORCID: 0000-0002-3285-0515
University of Wroclaw
Email: mariusz.turowski@uwr.edu.pl

Realism, Imagination and Ontology: Human Development and the Post-Liberal Turn in Contemporary Political Philosophy

Keywords: Liberalism, human development, political realism, C. B. Macpherson, democratic theory

Słowa kluczowe: Liberalizm, rozwój społeczny, realizm polityczny, C. B. Macpherson, teoria demokracji

Abstract

This article expounds upon a salient theme of the contemporary post-/anti-liberal transformation, which is broadly conceived as an opposition to the agenda of social (human) development. The primary objective of this paper is to present an alternative theorization of the social (human) development approach proposed by C. B. Macpherson, as a response to the current crisis of liberalism (and the late-liberal democracy) and liberal political philosophy. The argument is articulated through the following four stages. The introduction maps out the problem and some aspects of the broader undertaking to which the current study belongs. The first main section of the text presents a map of positions and processes involved in invalidating the "meta-empire of late liberalism." The second main part delineates Macpherson's interpretation of the liberal political ontology as having the potential to reaffirm the concept of social (human) development and circumvent the repercussions (or alternatively reorient them) of the neorealist/anti-idealist wave of criticism currently confronting liberalism as a political system and the discipline of liberal

political philosophy. The conclusion of the study discusses the anticipated consequences of Macpherson's defense of developmental liberalism, especially in relation to a possible integration of two theoretical contexts: progressive/critical social philosophy and the tradition of positive-freedom liberalism.

Introduction

The following reflections are part of a research initiative dedicated to the reconstruction and reaffirmation of the "positive" social and political philosophy of liberalism, with social development (human development) serving as its guiding principle. The most prominent, effective, and recognized variant of this intellectual family is the human capabilities approach, represented by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Sabine Alkire, Mozaffar Qizilbash, and Ingrid Robeyns.[1] The human capabilities approach is implemented through trans-, inter-, or multi-disciplinary projects integrating numerous fields of the social sciences and humanities. Social philosophy, political philosophy, positive psychology, welfare economics, and philosophy of economics (meta-economics) play a prominent role, as does "world philosophy" (comparative and pluralistic philosophy). My research focuses on a lesser-known version of this orientation that was introduced to contemporary political thought by C. B. Macpherson through his anti-possessive, developmental theory of democracy based on a series of normative and ontological assumptions and implications. Macpherson's theoretical program is rooted in the tradition of social, pluralistic, idealistic, and ethical liberalism of J. S. Mill and T. H. Green, currently exemplified by the ideas and practices of participatory, radical, and deliberative democracy, as well as the concepts of positive freedom, human autonomy, and broadly understood "republican good" (Carole Pateman, David Held, Carol C. Gould, John Christman, Nancy Hirschmann, Philip Pettit, Elizabeth Anderson,

[1] The main textbooks, compendiums, and collections of monographic articles provide an overview of the general idea and specific assumptions, claims, arguments, results, applications, and controversies surrounding this research program. These texts also present and analyze the literature (sources and discussions). See, for example, Chiappero-Martinetti et al. (2020); Comim et al. (2018, 2024); Comim and Nussbaum (2014); Deneulin and Shahani (2009); Düwell et al. (2014); Fukuda-Parr (2009); Lessmann and Rauschmayer (2014); Nussbaum and Sen (1993); and Robeyns and Brighouse (2010).

and others). Macpherson's work can also be seen as an extension of and a contribution to the broad stream of critique of the laissez-faire (neoliberal) economy and society. This progressivist tradition of sociopolitical thought is founded on Thorstein Veblen's analysis of "conspicuous consumption," R. H. Tawney's egalitarian objections to the "acquisitive society," and Karl Polanyi's concept of "fictitious commodities."

The present project endeavors to make two primary contributions. Firstly, it considers Macpherson's concept and the entire current of developmental liberalism (also described as eudaimonic liberalism) from a comparative perspective within the context of world philosophy and pluralistic (de-parochial) sociopolitical thought. A predominant theme in this case is the developmental and emancipatory-egalitarian dimensions and potentials of Muslim law and the Islamic normative system, primarily in the areas of human rights, environmental rights/environmental ethics, gender equality, and human and social welfare. Secondly, the project explores the relationship between liberalism and liberal political philosophy, on the one hand, and the category of social development (human capabilities, growth, prosperity, happiness, quality of life, developmental ethics, developmental democracy, and other related theoretical programs), on the other hand. It tries to define the conditions for using the category of human/social development in contemporary political and social philosophy as such.

The subsequent considerations pertain to the latter area in which this project seeks to achieve its goals and make its contributions. In light of recent scholarship on liberalism, which faces a worldwide attack as a mainstream "background culture" and ideology of modernity (Ivison, 2024a; Kelly, 2022a, 2024; Lefebvre, 2024a), the initial section of the text delineates the diagnosis and consequences resulting from those challenges. The liberal "meta-empire" has been criticized for its absorption by capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. It has also been the subject of censure on account of its lack of "a strong common moral horizon around which community can be built" and for disregarding "concerns and moral motivations of ordinary people" (Deneen, 2018; Fukuyama, 2022; Ignatieff, 2017; Rose, 2022). Consequently, this polemical trend targets the 20th-century paradigm of practicing, teaching, and institutionalizing political theory and philosophy. The establishment of this paradigm (the analytic tradition, distinguished from the continental one) is associated with John Rawls's liberalism of "justice as fairness" and "political liberalism." The post-analytic turn can be defined as a realist and minimalist trend

in political theory that repudiates Rawlsian liberalism as an "ideal theory," deeming it a manifestation of moralism, which is an expression of the "inflation" of moral aspirations. The second part of the article discusses selected points from Macpherson's theoretical-political project that are relevant in the context of a potential defense of developmental ("eudaimonic") liberalism in the face of the political-realist critique of late democracy. This section argues that the post-analytic turn, in its methodological and epistemological attempts to redefine the entire field of political philosophy, critically diminishes prospects for social (human) development, along with related concepts such as human capabilities, developmental democracy, or the idea of political and socioeconomic equality as such. The concluding remarks of this article explore the potential for reaffirmation and recuperation of these concepts, even though they are fundamentally questioned. This final section proposes a synthesis of progressive and critical social philosophy with the tradition of positive-freedom liberalism. This integration is particularly salient in the context of the problematic theoretical and normative ramifications of political realism, as identified by Macpherson and Finlayson, as well as by numerous liberal authors, including Stuart Hampshire and Judith Shklar, for whom "realism about politics and normative aspiration are not mutually exclusive" (Gadomski, 2025; Ivison, 2024a, p. 13; Ivison, 2024c).

Liberal Political Philosophy and The Realist Turn: The Rise and Demise of Meta-Empire

The ideas of social development and contemporary centrist liberalism (or, more broadly, modern centrist liberalism, understood historically, systemically, functionally, and structurally at the same time) face similar challenges. Liberal political philosophy, an academic/intellectual project supporting liberalism and liberal democracy as a sociopolitical system, has been the subject of criticism and claims that it is in crisis. As a discipline, it establishes a specific mode of management, normalization, standardization, and normativization of the structures of knowledge. The crisis it faces is a crisis of philosophy, theory, and political thought in practice. It encompasses applications, implementations, and realizations, as well as the requirement to expose theory and philosophy to influences, determinations, and conditions

arising from the environment, context, various ontologies/ontics, phenomena, processes, trends, orientations, and movements. Regardless of whether the crisis is incidental, single, exceptional, circumstantial, or permanent and systemic, it should be linked to the dynamics of the development and transformation of the discipline of political philosophy as an expression and reflection of liberal political culture. The terminal stage of "centrist liberalism" (social, political, economic, cultural, interstate/intersocial, i.e., global order/system) entails epistemological and methodological revolutions (changes and paradigm shifts) in the structures of knowledge and the accompanying institutions. These changes manifest in diverse forms, traversing extensive and deeply entrenched domains of knowledge production (Ascione, 2021, 2024; Lee, 2011; Wallerstein, 2011; Wilkin, 2023). In this exposition, the discussion is limited to the post-analytic turn, with particular attention to the notion of the political and the concomitant concept of political realism/amoralism.

The post-analytic turn is a realist and minimalist trend in political theory initiated by Walter Lippmann, Joseph Schumpeter, Friedrich Hayek, Bernard Berelson, and Giovanni Sartori (Fèvre, 2022; Hagemann, 2022; Held, 2006, pp. 77–92, 125–157; Macpherson, 1977, pp. 22, 48–50, 77–92; Reinhoudt & Audier, 2018; Schefold, 2022). It is currently represented primarily by Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, Matt Sleat, Edward Hall, John McCormick, and Mark Philp. This trend rejects liberalism as an "ideal theory," considering it a manifestation of moralism, which is an expression of the "inflation" of moral aspirations (Ivison, 2024a). In this instance, we observe a continuation, to a certain extent, of the disputes between idealism and anti-idealism regarding democratic theory at the turn of the 20th century. This is analogous to the positions of conservative Victorian critics of "economism," "parliamentary anarchy," or "dehumanized" liberal political culture, such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold (Goldman, 2002, 2011; Lippincott, 1938). Simultaneously, it evokes the "debates" between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann concerning the relationship between politics, the political identity of individuals, and the public sphere in relation to phenomena such as the widespread, mass, and anonymous circulation of information, views, opinions, attitudes, preferences, and choices (Bjørkdahl, 2024; Curtis, 2020; Macpherson, 1977, pp. 69–76). In its latest incarnations, the trend targets the 20th-century paradigm of practicing, teaching, and institutionalizing political theory and philosophy, the establishment of which is associated with

John Rawls's liberalism of "justice as fairness" and "political liberalism." Duncan Bell considers Rawls's "ideal theory" to be the most important element of the meta-tradition of utopian studies, which emerged and solidified after the anti-utopian decades following World War II (Bell, 2026).[2] In a "technical" sense, the ideal theory is the substantive equivalent of the category of realistic utopia, according to John Rawls's famous formulation: "By showing how the social world may realize the features of a realistic Utopia, political philosophy provides a long-term goal of political endeavor, and in working toward it gives meaning to what we can do today" (Bell, 2026, p. 21; Rawls, 1999b, p. 128).

The meta-tradition of analytical political philosophy refers to numerous and diverse domains of social and intellectual life, both theoretically and institutionally.[3] Since the 1970s, it has also been the primary framework for research and educational activities in philosophy and law departments, mainly in the US and the UK, and has had a significant impact on academic centers worldwide. This was primarily made possible by the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy*, *State*, and *Utopia*, followed by works in the traditions of public reason liberalism (Jürgen Habermas, Gerald Gaus, Kevin Vallier) and deliberative-epistemic conceptions of democracy (David Estlund, Cheryl Misak, Robert Talisse). The "ideal theory" or "realistic utopia" ("meta-utopia," following Bell's designation, or "utopia of utopias" in Nozick's case[4]) has served as a methodological tool within the framework of idealization, modeling, and approximation ("partial

---

[2] It must be noted that the aforementioned considerations do not take into account alternative approaches to "ideal theory" or the associated polemics, particularly in the context of philosophy and critical theory concerning ideology, marginalization, exclusion, stigmatization, and epistemic and hermeneutic injustice (see, for example, Mills, 2005, 2018; Noe, 2020).

[3] Of course, this study cannot include any discussion of the long, complicated history, the wealth of problems, or the various trends and approaches (necessarily plural) within analytic philosophy. Attempting to define this tradition, without limiting it to the context of social and political philosophy, is also beyond the scope of this study. It is necessary to refer to the extensive literature and research related to the current investigations: Bevir (2011a); Bevir et al. (2007); Braybrooke (2006); McDermott (2008); Steinmetz (2005); Vrahimis (2013); and Wolff (2013). See also footnote 6 below.

[4] Unlike classical utopian theories, which offer a single, static vision of an ideal society, the utopia of many potential (imagined) possible worlds allows each individual living in a libertarian minimal state to choose one that is fully consistent with their own

compliance")[5] concerning the "problem of stability" in the theory of justice. This problem focuses on the criteria for evaluating arguments in favor of principles of justice as well as on the establishment of priorities among these principles when designing institutions and applying them to the basic structure of a well-ordered society (Rawls, 1999a, pp. 154–158, 398–440; 1999b, pp. vi, 3–6, 143–144, 159–168). It can also be considered the basis for distinguishing and justifying the two contemporary traditions of political philosophy: analytical and continental (Arnold, 2020; Owen, 2016).[6]

The challenge posed by ideal theory within post-analytic criticism and the fundamental changes across the entire field/discipline that we are experiencing as a consequence of these processes did not, however, consist solely in methodological doubts. As Elizabeth Anderson suggests, "Knowledge of the better does not require knowledge of the best [i.e.] … [a] system of principles of conduct [that] would settle all possible claims on our conduct in all possible worlds, or in the best of all possible worlds" (Anderson, 2010, p. 3). According to Amartya Sen, the attempt to reduce overt injustices requires reflection and comparative judgments. In this case, identifying fully just political systems is neither necessary nor sufficient (Owen, 2016, pp. 178–179; Sen, 2006, p. 217; Sen, 2009, pp. 12, 58). Furthermore, the primary challenge lies not in the systematic, consistent, and exhaustive separation of analytical and continental currents. Rather, what we are dealing with is a fundamental revaluation and radical reconstruction of political philosophy, analogous to that experienced by political science and international studies (especially international relations theory), which were built on the paradigm of statism and positivism (states as subjects and actors of positive international law) and transitioned to the paradigm of realism (Anghie, 2004, pp. 211–220; Anghie, 2015; Christov, 2024; Forrester, 2019, pp. 140–171; Guilhot, 2011; Kelly, 2022a, p. 116; Kelly, 2022b, pp. 409–428). Within these projects, the normative models of political thought, theory, and philosophy are primarily being questioned (Williams, 2005).

idea of a good life rather than conforming to designs resulting from consensus among all (Nozick, 1974, pp. 311–312, 328; see also Bell, 2026; Lehto, 2025; Novak, 2022).

[5] See, for example, Erman and Möller (2015); Larmore (2018). For the diversity of approaches and methodological reservations concerning ways of understanding "ideal theory," see also Robeyns (2008).

[6] See however also: Chin and Thomassen (2016); Chin (2016); Vrahimis (2022); Critchley (2001, pp. 54–74); Critchley (1998, pp. 5–13).

At the same time, as a consequence of the post-analytic and realist turn, attempts are being made to "rewrite" the history of political thought, including redefinitions of liberalism, democracy, and republicanism. There is an emphasis on the role of authors such as Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Lenin, and, above all, Schmitt, instead of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, who were the main sources of inspiration for Rawls's argument about justice as the first virtue of social institutions (Geuss, 2008, pp. 23–40; Kelly, 2022b, pp. 3, 20, 24, 305–367). The prevailing conception of politics is undergoing a profound metamorphosis, culminating in the realization that the notion of "the political" stands as the crux of political thought (Kelly, 2022a, pp. 113–116). Such a reformulation is accompanied by significant normative and ontological shifts, including a repudiation of the substantive notion of a moral-political system or ethics in politics, of the idea of natural law or the laws of nature as a set of rights, obligations, and principles, and the "statist" approach.

The inspiration for the above-mentioned realist/amoralist currents, as well as their methodological and epistemological basis, lies in the changes that took place in the perception and practice of the professionalization of analytic political philosophy in the 20th century. The historical and ideological genealogies of this tradition have been formulated in studies such as *Liberalism in Dark Times* by Joshua Cherniss; *Liberalism Against Itself* by Samuel Moyn; John Rawls: *The Path to a Theory of Justice* by Andrius Gališanka; and, above all, *In the Shadow of Justice* by Katrina Forrester (2019). Those research projects, aimed at providing an appropriate historicization and contextualization of Rawls's thought and liberal political philosophy, have presented a different picture than the one widely accepted in "canonical" studies, programs, and institutional designs. The theory of "justice as fairness" was perceived as having been shaped by the context of the Cold War's "clash of ideologies" with libertarianism and communitarianism as its main opposing approaches. In this case, the point of contention lies in beliefs concerning the distribution of and access to rights and freedoms, agency and empowerment, a just state, the rule of law, and social and political power. These doctrines assign a central role to the individual and individualism within the idea of autonomy. They are challenged by references to real, empirically obtained dimensions of identity, recognition, and the rights of groups and communities, as seen through the lenses of global politics, geopolitics, and cosmopolitanism, for example (Kelly, 2022a, pp. 113–114). These issues

have been discussed since at least the publication of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* (Gowan, 2010; Owens, 2007; Tuck, 1999). They were crucial to the development and success of liberal theory in the context of the Cold War (particularly in the works of Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, and Friedrich Hayek, who – along with Rawls – were strongly influenced by this context but contributed also to its transformation and refinement). Currently, they form the basis of the post-Rawlsian (and therefore post-analytic) trend represented by researchers whose intellectual trajectories and goals differ significantly from those pursued in *A Theory of Justice* or *The Law of Peoples*. Authors such as Charles Beitz, Simon Caney, Thomas Pogge, Chandran Kukathas, Andrew Altman, and Christopher Heath Wellman study phenomena of migration, humanitarian disasters, and the expansion of supra- and anti-state networks, centers, and sources of wealth, influence, control, and resource appropriation. They also discuss new theories of war, including cosmopolitan, systemic, and postcolonial approaches (those referring to conflicts waged under persistent colonization or coloniality) (Altman & Wellman, 2009; Caney, 2005; Fabre, 2012; Hutchings, 2019; Kelly, 2022b; Keohane, 2012; Kukathas, 2003, pp. 255–270; Kukathas, 2020; Sassen, 2016, 2021).

Another alternative to the liberal-analytic approach, combining methodological and anti-moralistic aspects, emerged as part of a methodological revolution in intellectual history (historiography) associated with the Cambridge School (John Pocock, John Dunn, Quentin Skinner, and James Tully). The traditional moral language of political theory and philosophy, which focused on individual freedom and the principles of justice that underpin society, was challenged within this new genealogical approach to normalization and professionalization developed under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, as well as Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams (Kelly, 2022a, p. 114).[7] Here, politics and normativity were subjected to procedures of "archeologization" to reach

[7] As in the case of other major trends and orientations in contemporary political and social philosophy (political theory, social theory) and the social sciences and humanities as such, it is impossible here to reconstruct, even in terms of its main foundations and "components," the concept/program of "contextualization studies" in historiography. See, for example, Bevir (2011b); Browning (2016, pp. 67–88, 111–133); Koikkalainen (2011); Turowski (2014, p. 57 (n. 156), p. 121 (n. 468), pp. 448–450); Turowski (2021, pp. 10, 56); and Whatmore (2021, pp. 61–66).

the invisible, excluded, and "contingent" layers of history, events, beliefs, discourses, and speech acts concerning domination, struggles for power, and resistance instead of justice and the search for "the first virtue of social institutions." The discourse within this domain is predominantly influenced by Machiavellian, Nietzschean, and Schmittian neo-realists. This paradigm, centered on the concept of "the political," combined with the contextualism of the Cambridge School, problematized the general methodologies of approaching and expressing political science issues in legalistic language which had previously effectively "colonized" liberal political thought (Forrester, 2011, 2019, pp. 241–246; Hall, 2024; Purdy, 2019; Shklar, 1986). It also challenged the notion of an autonomous individual and its "eudaimonistic" interpretations (referring to the idea of human/social flourishing). Consequently, the notion of individual development (human and social capabilities) is regarded as an ahistorical, decontextualized, and therefore apolitical "idealized-moralized essence" that is detached from the realm of politics.

Developmental Liberal Democracy – Political Imagination Against Dystopian Reality?

As mentioned in the introduction, these reflections contribute to a larger project centered on the concept of social development as it relates to C. B. Macpherson's human capabilities program. This author's perspective is considered pioneering for contemporary "liberal eudaimonism." While there is no clear or direct line of influence, let alone a "programmatic" relationship, among the various representatives of this orientation, their common historical and ideological sources, among other factors, suggest more than a coincidence or parallelism between approaches that differ in all other dimensions (Ballingall, 2010; Cunningham, 2019, pp. 74–77; Turowski, 2014, pp. 40–42, 311–313, 414–415). In the case of Macpherson, this shared tradition refers to his attempts to reconstruct, reevaluate, and reaffirm liberal ("Western") democracy. The aforementioned endeavor is further supported by the author's additional theoretical proposals regarding the "real world of democracy" in the 20th century. He examines the historical-genealogical dimensions of "possessive individualism", tracing its development from Hobbes through Bentham. The discussion also encompasses

the 20th-century post-liberal and neoclassical perspectives of John Chapman, John Rawls, Isaiah Berlin, and Robert Wolff, as well as Milton Friedman's neoliberalism. Additionally, the doctrine (theoretical system) of liberalism is addressed. Macpherson's examination encompassed both dimensions, which he designated as "realized." They found expression in his conceptualization and study of "developmental/positive democracy" (as opposed to "protective/defensive/negative democracy," or the "democracy of negative freedom") as a model of sociopolitical system and of human nature (Macpherson, 1973, 1977). Concurrently, he endeavored to capture and present the changes that these dimensions underwent as a result of historical evolution. In his works, including *The Real World of Democracy* (Macpherson, 1966; see also: Macpherson, 1973, pp. 157–169; Macpherson, 1987), he rejects the "Cold War thematization of the discipline" (following the normalization and professionalization of the analytical-liberal paradigm, as discussed in the previous section of the current text). He does not subscribe to the notion of distinguishing liberal democracy—as a coherent system of moral principles and practices of OUR freedoms—from *their* "communism," "third world totalitarianism," or "third world tyranny," or of construing an identity and scientific-institutional canon based on such a dichotomy. According to Ian McKay (2014, 2017, and a publication announced for 2019; see also Cunningham, 2019, pp. 7, 12, 21), Macpherson performed a series of "iconoclastic acts" in this context, thereby destabilizing the accepted, reified oppositions and polarizations of the time. These dualisms were impossible to remove in epistemological and methodological terms because they were pragmatically and ideologically necessary and useful. Conversely, by demonstrating the existence of and critiquing the relationship between liberalism (liberal democracy) and capitalism, he examined the latter primarily as the context of liberal democracy. He examined it with all its inconsistencies and lack of coherence, but above all, in all its geographical and historical diversity, rather than as a theoretical, trans- and ahistorical, speculative, and abstract essence that refers, in one way or another, to any "substance" of liberalism. This is his original approach to the problem of political ontology (ontology of democracy or ontology as such) especially as it was explored in his 1973 book, *Democratic Theory*: *Essays in Retrieval*.

In Macpherson's concept of political ontology, the central category is human development. It is linked to the notions of capacities and powers (Macpherson, 1966, pp. 52–59). There is an obvious convergence here with

Amartya Sen's analyses concerning human capabilities, which are examined in relation to two basic concepts: capabilities and the potential to transform them into functioning, defined as valued ways of being and living or valuable beings and doings (agency) (Alkire, 2016; Sen, 1995, pp. 36–55). Capabilities, and therefore freedoms, are understood "positively," as in the tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, and T. H. Green, in the context of their "translation" into human powers, and not negatively as the absence of constraints on choices and actions. Macpherson places particular emphasis on the social and relational nature of human capacities and development. They are "received" from others in the form of direct gifts or help, or as a guarantee of security (Macpherson, 1973, pp. 40–41). This approach refers to one of the most important components of Macpherson's entire theoretical construction: the idea of "power transfer" (Macpherson, 1962, pp. 53–61; Macpherson, 1966, pp. 40–43; Macpherson, 1973, pp. 10–14, 16–19, 40–52, 64–66). Apart from constituting a pivotal element of Macpherson's theoretical contribution to contemporary social and political philosophy, it was also a contributing factor to the controversy surrounding this contribution and its subsequent interrogation and rejection.[8] It was considered a manifestation of an ahistorical, essentialist, fundamentalist, and abstract position in which human abilities and powers are reduced to strictly understood, static, unchanging, and predetermined "essences" or "nature" (along with their assigned teleological goals) (Cunningham, 2019, pp. 87–88; Gould, 1989, pp. 332–333, n. 7; Gould, 2004, pp. 32, 48; Hansen, 2015, pp. 232–233). These accusations were directed at both his critical thesis of possessive individualism and his more affirmative analyses of developmental democracy and ontology. In both cases, there appears to be a misinterpretation or a deliberate refusal to comprehend Macpherson's "open" (transdisciplinary or "agnostic") methodology (Ballingall, 2010; Cunningham, 2019, pp. 69–70, 87–89; Hansen, 2015, p. 352, n. 27; McKay, 2014, pp. 318–320; McKay, 2019; McManus, 2024; McManus, 2025, pp. 162–175; Neal, 2012; Turowski, 2014, pp. 55–59, 448–450, 461–462). Nevertheless, the most salient aspect in this case is the separation of substantive components of his approach, including

[8] See Carens (1993), in which such objections are raised by most contributions; Hansen (2015, pp. 3–14, 269–304); and Hansen and Caterino (2019, pp. 46–51). A thorough examination of the criticisms of specific aspects of Macpherson's theory is provided by Townshend (2000) and Turowski (2014).

theoretical frameworks and conceptual models, as well as the political ontology of democracy, from historical analysis. Readers and critics of his work are not always cognizant of the depth to which these "doctrinal-structural" elements are embedded in his historiographical research studies. For example, we can point to his famous—and again controversial—interpretations of the socioeconomic context of Thomas Hobbes's theory of power, society, and the state, which resulted in their "suspension" from academic recognition (Turowski, 2021, pp. 7–13, 33 n. 2). In these interpretations, the category of power—and its "transfer" among individuals in society—is key to understanding the political anthropology, epistemology, ontology, technology, and theology developed by this thinker, the founder of liberalism. This ontological dimension of Hobbes's thought has garnered attention in the most recent scholarly works (Lloyd, 2012), [9] but historically, it has been marginalized, with greater emphasis placed on the ideological and political contexts.

Concluding Remarks: Retrieving Egalitarian Liberal Political Philosophy

In light of the above considerations, three brief postulates are hereby formulated concerning the critique of the realist and anti-developmental approach in contemporary post-liberal political thought. These postulates are followed by a concise outline of a program of reaffirmation of liberal political philosophy in response to "the fact that liberalism is under attack worldwide" (Lefebvre, 2024b, p. 30).

1. First, despite the categorical tone sometimes imposed by the content and subject matter of the discussion on this topic, as well as by the form in which it is conducted, the methodology of criticism of developmental/centrist liberalism is far from unambiguous and definitive. However, the undermining of the "ideal theory paradigm" can be said to be subject to limitations in its scope. The issue under consideration here appears to extend beyond the binary opposition between the ideal and the non-ideal. This assertion holds

[9] Lloyd (2012, pp. 53–54) notes–along the line of interpretation offered by Macpherson, but also for example Strauss (Turowski, 2022), although her reading concentrates on gender/feminist aspects of Hobbesian political theory–that the essence of power, according to Hobbes, is its "relativity/relativism" (non-absoluteness), comparability, and competitiveness (rivalrous nature).

particularly true in the context of Rawls's "original" theory of justice. This concept itself has undergone significant modifications in this respect. In its final formulation, as presented in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, the author posits that the principles of justice may vary depending on the criteria adopted in the original position. Consequently, it is not possible to address (and speculate upon) only one "ideal" concept of justice (i.e., its principles and rules of priority established through reflective equilibrium, which determines the "transition"/"connection" between the real and theoretical/ideal orders) (Owen, 2016, pp. 178–179; Rawls, 2001, pp. 65–66, 132–134; Sen, 2009, pp. 12, 58).

2. Secondly, with regard to the "substantive" or argumentative dimension, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the ramifications of the realist turn, as articulated, for instance, by Lorna Finlayson (2015, pp. 111–135). She posits that delineating a boundary (and the criteria for disciplinary, academic, and intellectual legitimacy) between the ideal and the non-ideal entails the recognition of the former as a domain characterized by insurmountable demands. Consequently, the latter is presented as requiring the acceptance of all conditions imposed by the "real world" on imperfect human beings and human nature in its entirety. From this perspective, the notions of political subjectivity/agency and social change are conspicuously absent, as are any philosophical, intellectual, and critical discourses associated with these matters. In turn, political debates function as a means of "pacifying" all voices of opposition, including those that are at odds, for example, with liberalism and its implicit sexual or racial exclusivism. However, a more assertive attitude of "political realism" toward critical voices and demands can also be recognized. It is reminiscent of an apology for boundless imperialism, the blaming of rape victims ("rape-mythologizing"), or depictions and fantasies of savagery, primitiveness, and "anti-civilizational barbarism" in the name of fear and moral panic (or other "non-ideal constraints," such as unfavorable historical, social, or economic conditions; disagreement; human vulnerability or human nature as such; and problems of institutional design etc.). The paradoxical result of this kind of attitude, apart from the delegitimization of the ideal, is the depoliticization of the non-ideal, which effectively amounts to accepting it as something unchangeable (Finlayson, 2015, pp. 115, 130–131).

3. An intriguing correspondence can be identified between Lorna Finlayson's remarks and C. B. Macpherson's methodological and programmatic reflections in the introduction to his work *The Life and Times of Liberal*

Democracy (Macpherson, 1977, pp. 5–8, 22). In this study, he discusses models of liberal democracy and, more broadly, the state of contemporary liberal political thought. Macpherson presents the changes, developments, and transformations between and within these models as examples of dynamic processes of idealization on the one hand and "realization" on the other. These processes include movement and circulation from a protective/realistic model to a developmental/idealistic model, which is then replaced again by a realistic pluralistic-elitist-market model, followed by an orientation towards a participatory model, again idealistic. In this manner, Macpherson sought to substantiate his argument (and a segment of his overarching theoretical standpoint) in favor of a combination of developmental democracy (in terms of classical "social liberalism") and participatory democracy (in its contemporary form, incorporating "radical-deliberative" perspectives) (McManus, 2025, pp. 172–173). In this way, he opposes "pure realism," which leads to the "extinction" of such political dynamics within a kind of "reverse Platonism" with frozen essences of anarchy in the state of nature, the struggle for survival and security, and the acceptance of any normative order introduced as a result of a "positivistic" decision by a "Machiavellian-Schmittian" prince-sovereign-god.

Macpherson's theoretical framework, despite the infeasibility of incorporating it more comprehensively within the scope of this presentation, provided the foundational theoretical and methodological underpinnings for this study. One of the factors contributing to its distinctive status is its potential role as a response to the contemporary criticism of and crisis of liberalism (and liberal political philosophy) previously outlined. This response addresses two distinct aspects: firstly, the general crisis confronting this ideological orientation and discipline, and secondly, the prospects for defending or reviving the philosophical and political project centered on human capabilities/social development. As previously stated, this project can be considered in relation to other significant endeavors that offer critical perspectives on "laissez-faire tendencies" in historiography and the theoretical framework of the economy and society of the Western world. One such concept is Karl Polanyi's notion of "fictitious commodities," which refers to assets/goods that are valued higher than their real economic value. Polanyi's perspective asserts that land, labor, and capital – the predominant "productive inputs" within the modern capitalist system – ought first and foremost to be comprehended as the fundamental elements indispensable

for the establishment and fortification of economic processes within the context of social existence. Without these factors, all members of society are vulnerable and will eventually fall victim to selfishness, greed, and the accumulation and concentration of capital.

What would be the primary conclusion to be drawn from the considerations presented in this text, in relation to a broader spectrum of research objectives and in anticipation of further efforts in this area? It is imperative to acknowledge the substantial body of criticism that has been previously outlined. This criticism targets the alleged "meta-imperial," "geocultural," and "ideologically centric" (hegemonic) status of developmental liberalism. It results in anti-analytic, post-analytic, and post-liberal initiatives and the realist shift in contemporary political philosophy. Two primary forms of control over Polanyi's "fictitious commodities"—racialization and financialization—are subject to a process of systemic-ideological displacement/forgetting, silencing, or ignorance/invisibility, which seems to be the consequence of the "realist turn" (Bray, 2019, pp. 96–136). These factors, following Finlayson's remarks, act as indelible elements. They obstruct access to all the eudaimonic means associated with these "commodities" (thereby precluding their fulfillment in any manner other than "fictitious," thereby undermining their definition and "essence" as dispositions for social development/human capabilities) (Crespo, 2022; Huta, 2020; Tomer, 2011; Vittersø, 2016). This "blockade" is defined in the classical language of critical philosophy, sociology, and radical economics as exploitation/extraction in its transformation toward commodification/reification ("net power transfer" in Macpherson's terms or domination in terms of republican liberalism/positive freedom liberalism). In contemporary studies and theoretical perspectives (which abandon an anti-liberal bias), it is considered with reference to categories such as accumulation by dispossession (David Harvey), land grabbing (Klaus Dörre), expulsion (Saskia Sassen), expropriatory governance (Mike Levien), and uprooting/disanchoring (Burawoy, 2021), and even the very concepts that are at the root of this entire tradition: class, class formation, and conflict, the proletariat and proletarianization in the era of deindustrialization (Forrester, 2024; McCarthy & Desan, 2023; Winant, 2024), but also the idea of freedom (de-alienation) (Gould, 2020) and multidimensional social, political, and economic (substantive, not only instrumental) equality (Christiano, 2008; Kolodny, 2014; Manor, 2025).

References

Alkire, S. (2016). The capability approach and well-being measurement for public policy. In M.D. Adler, M. Fleurbaey (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of well-being and public policy* (pp. 615–644). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199325818.013.18.

Altman, A., Wellman, C.H. (2009). *A liberal theory of international justice*. Oxford University Press.

Anderson, E. (2010). *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton University Press.

Anghie, A. (2004). *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*. Cambridge University Press.

Anghie, A. (2015). Legal Aspects of the New International Economic Order. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, *6*(1), 145–158. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hum.2015.0016.

Arnold, J. (2020). *Across the Great Divide: Between Analytic and Continental Political Theory*. Stanford University Press.

Ascione, G. (2021). Knowledge in an age of transition: Wallerstein and the future. *Socio*, 15, 105–125. https://doi.org/10.4000/socio.11074.

Ascione, G. (2024). *Concept formation in global studies: Post-Western Approaches to Critical Human Knowledge*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Auda, J. (2008). *Maqasid Al-Sharia'h as Philosophy of Islamic Law*. International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Auda, J. (2017). *Reclaiming the Mosque: The Role of Women in Islam's House of Worship*. Claritas Books.

Ballingall, R. (2010, June 1–3). *A Defence of Human Nature in Aristotelian Practical Science: The Unlikely Example of C.B. Macpherson* [Paper presentation]. Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, Concordia University, Montreal. https://cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2010/Ballingall.pdf.

Bevir, M. (2011a). *Histories of analytic political philosophy. History of European Ideas*, *37*(3), 243–248. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.10.003.

Bevir, M. (2011b). *The Contextual Approach*. In G. Klosko (Ed.), The Oxford handbook of the history of political philosophy (pp. 11–23). Oxford University Press.

Bevir, M., Adcock, R., Stimson, S.C. (Eds.). (2007). *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges Since 1880*. Princeton University Press.

Bhambra, G.K. (2014). *Connected Sociologies*. Bloomsbury.

Bhambra, G.K., Holmwood, J. (2021). *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bhambra, G.K. (2024). Postcolonial and Decolonial Reconstructions. In P. Gopinath, L. Brueck (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial and Decolonial Literature* (pp. 71–83). Routledge.

Bjørkdahl, K. (Ed.). (2024). *The Problematic Public: Lippmann, Dewey, and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Bell, D. (2026). What is Utopia? History, Theory, Tradition. In D. Bell, D. Mao, Utopia (pp. 5–27). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198922919.003.0002.

Bray, M. (2019). *Powers of the Mind: Mental and Manual Labor in the Contemporary Political crisis*. Transcript Verlag. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839441473.

Braybrooke, D. (2006). *Analytical Political Philosophy: From Discourse, Edification*. University of Toronto Press.

Browning, G. (2016). *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation*. Oxford University Press.

Burawoy, M. (2021). Going public with Polanyi in the era of Trump. In L. Hossfeld, E.B. Kelly, C. Hossfeld (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Public Sociology* (pp. 10–21). Routledge.

Buzan, B., Lawson, G. (2014). *Capitalism and the Emergent World Order*. International Affairs, *90*(1), 71–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12096.

Caney, S. (2005). *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Carens, J. (Ed.). (1993). *Democracy and Possessive Individualism: The Intellectual Legacy of C. B. Macpherson*. State University of New York Press.

Chiappero-Martinetti, E., Osmani, S., Qizilbash, M. (Eds.). (2020). *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Chin, C. (2016). Beyond analytic and continental in contemporary political thought: Pragmatic methodological pluralism and the situated turn. *European Journal of Political Theory*, *15*(2), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885115582076.

Chin, C., Thomassen, L. (2016). Introduction: Analytic, Continental and the question of a bridge. *European Journal of Political Theory*, *15*(2), 133–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885115582078.

Christiano, T. (2008). *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and Its Limits*. Oxford University Press.

Christov, T. (2024). Liberalism and international political thought. In D. Ivison (Ed.), *Research handbook on liberalism* (pp. 79–96). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109034.00011.

Comim, F., Nussbaum, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Capabilities, gender, equality: Towards fundamental entitlements.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139059138.

Comim, F., Fennell, S., Anand, P.B. (Eds.). (2018). *New frontiers of the capability approach.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108559881.

Comim, F., Anand, P.B., Fennell, S. (Eds.). (2024). So*cial Choice, Agency, Inclusiveness and Capabilities*. Cambridge University Press.

Crespo, R.F. (2022). *The Nature of the Economy: Aristotelian Essays on the Philosophy and Epistemology of Economics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Critchley, S. (1998). Introduction: What Is Continental Philosophy? In S. Critchley, W.R. Schroeder (Eds.), *A Companion to Continental Philosophy* (pp. 5–13). Blackwell Publishers.

Critchley, S. (2001). *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Cunningham, F. (2019). *The Political Thought of C.B. Macpherson: Contemporary Applications*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Curtis, W.M. (2020). Democracy Versus Neoliberalism: The Second Dewey-Lippmann Debate. *American Political Thought*, *9*(2), 285–316. https://doi.org/10.1086/708391.

Deneen, P. (2018). *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale University Press.

Deneulin, S., Shahani, L. (Eds.). (2009). *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach: Freedom and Agency*. Earthscan.

Dewey, J. (1939). *Freedom and Culture*. G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Duderija, A. (2014). *Maqasid al-Shari'a, Gender Non-patriarchal Qur'an-Sunna Hermeneutics, and the Reformation of Muslim Family Law*. In A. Duderija (Ed.), *Maqasid al-Shari'a and Contemporary Reformist Muslim Thought* (pp. 193–218). Palgrave Macmillan.

Düwell, M., Braarvig, J., Brownsword, R., Mieth, D. (Eds.). (2014). *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Erman, E., Möller, N. (2015). Practices and principles: On the methodological turn in political theory. *Philosophy Compass*, *10*(8), 533–546. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12245.

Fabre, C. (2012). *Cosmopolitan War*. Oxford University Press.

Fèvre, R. (2022). Wilhelm Röpke: The Social Crisis of Our Time. In T. Biebricher, W. Bonefeld, P. Nedergaard (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism* (pp. 121–135). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198861201.013.8.

Finlayson, L. (2015). *The Political Is Political: Conformity and The Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield International.

Finlayson, L. (2016). *An Introduction to Feminism*. Cambridge University Press.

Forrester, K. (2011). Hope and Memory in the Thought of Judith Shklar. *Modern Intellectual History*, *8*(3), 591–620. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000369.

Forrester, K. (2019). *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.

Forrester, K. (2024). Capitalism and the Organization of Displacement: Selma James's Internationalism of the Unwaged. *Political Theory*, *52*(4), 659–692. https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231213663.

Fukuda-Parr, S., Shiva, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of Human Development: Concepts, Measures and Policies*. Oxford University Press.

Fukuyama, F. (2022). *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Gadomski, M. (2025). Making Sense of Political Normativity. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, *30*(6), 856–889. https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v30i6.3480.

Geuss, R. (2008). *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton University Press.

Goldman, L. (2002). *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: The Social Science Association 1857–1886*. Cambridge University Press.

Goldman, L. (2011). Conservative political thought from the revolutions of 1848 until the fin de siècle. In G. Stedman Jones, G. Claeys (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (pp. 691–719). Cambridge University Press.

Gould, C.C. (1989). *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Co-operation in Politics, Economy, and Society*. Cambridge University Press.

Gould, C.C. (2004). *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights*. Cambridge University Press.

Gould, C.C. (2020). Socializing the means of free development. *Philosophical Topics*, *48*(2), 81–103. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics202048216.

Gowan, P. (2010). *A Calculus of Power: Grand Strategy in the Twenty-First Century*. Verso.

Guilhot, N. (Ed.). (2011). *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory*. Columbia University Press.

Hagemann, H. (2022). Economic crisis policy. In T. Biebricher, W. Bonefeld, P. Nedergaard (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Ordoliberalism* (pp. 427–435). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198861201.013.29.

Hall, E. (2024). Ideological Self-Consciousness: Judith Shklar on Legalism, Liberalism, and the Purposes of Political Theory. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, *41*(1), 105–125. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052524000347.

Hansen, P. (2015). *Reconsidering C.B. Macpherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond*. University of Toronto Press.

Hansen, P., Caterino, B. (2019). *Critical Theory, Democracy, and the Challenge of Neo-Liberalism*. University of Toronto Press.

Held, D. (2006). *Models of Democracy* (3rd ed.). Polity Press.

Huta, V. (2020). How Distinct Are Eudaimonia and Hedonia? It Depends on How They Are Measured. *Journal of Well-Being Assessment*, *4*(3), 511–537. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41543-021-00046-4/.

Hutchings, K. (2019). Cosmopolitan Just War and Coloniality. In D. Bell (Ed.), *Empire, Race and Global Justice* (pp. 211–227). Cambridge University Press.

Ignatieff, M. (2017). *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World*. Harvard University Press.

Ivison, D. (2024a). Introduction: The vicissitudes of liberalism. In D. Ivison (Ed.), *Research Handbook on Liberalism* (pp. 1–28). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109034.00006.

Ivison, D. (2024b). Histories of liberalisms. In D. Ivison (Ed.), *Research handbook on liberalism* (pp. 62–78). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109034.00010.

Ivison, D. (2024c). A taxonomy of injustice. In C. Kirkby, W. Sadurski, K. Walton (Eds.), *Law, Politics, and Responding to Injustice* (pp. 30–50). Routledge. https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781032676159-3.

Kelly, P. (2022a). From Professionalisation and Normalisation to Genealogy and Realism: The Challenge of Liberalism in Contemporary Political Theory. *Society*, *59*(2), 110–118. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00702-2.

Kelly, P. (2022b). *Conflict, War and Revolution: The Problem of Politics in International Political Thought*. London School of Economics Press.

Kelly, P. (2024). The Post-Liberal Movement. In D. Ivison (Ed.), *Research Handbook on Liberalism* (pp. 276–291). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109034.00024.

Keohane, R.O. (2012). Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism. *International Relations*, *26*(2), 125–138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117812438451.

Koikkalainen, P. (2011). Contextualist Dilemmas: Methodology of the History of Political Theory in Two Stages. *History of European Ideas*, *37*(3), 315–324. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.10.010.

Kolodny, N. (2014). Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *42*(4), 287–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12037.

Kukathas, C. (2003). *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

Kukathas, C. (2020). Immigration and Freedom. In J. Knolle, J. Poskett (Eds.), *Migration* (pp. 18–49). Cambridge University Press.

Larmore, C. (2018). The Truth in Political Realism. In M. Sleat (Ed.), *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice* (pp. 27–48). Columbia University Press.

Lee, R.E. (2011). The modern world-system: Its structures, its geoculture, its crisis and transformation. In D. Palumbo-Liu, N. Tanoukhi, B. Robbins (Eds.), *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (pp. 27–40). Duke University Press.

Lefebvre, A. (2024a). *Liberalism as a Way of Life*. Princeton University Press.

Lefebvre, A. (2024b). Liberal conceptions of the self. In D. Ivison (Ed.), *Research Handbook on Liberalism* (pp. 30–44). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109034.00008.

Lehto, O. (2025). Power to the powerless: Evolutionary freedom as emancipation. In M. Novak (Ed.), *Liberal Emancipation: Explorations in Political and Social Economy* (pp. 79–101). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-94406-2_4.

Lessmann, O., Rauschmayer, F. (Eds.). (2014). *The Capability Approach and Sustainability*. Routledge.

Lippincott, B.E. (1938). *Victorian Critics of Democracy: Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, Lecky*. University of Minnesota Press.

Lloyd, S.A. (2012). Power and Sexual Subordination in Hobbes's Political Theory. In N.J. Hirschmann, J.H. Wright (Eds.), *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes* (pp. 47–62). The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Macpherson, C.B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford University Press.

Macpherson, C.B. (1966). *The Real World of Democracy*. Clarendon Press.

Macpherson, C.B. (1973). *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*. Clarendon Press.

Macpherson, C.B. (1977). *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Macpherson, C.B. (1987). Problems of Human Rights in the Late Twentieth Century. In C.B. Macpherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice* (pp. 21–43). Oxford University Press.

Manor, A. (2025). Second-Order Political Equality and the Limits of Civic Accountability: A Reply to Giavazzi. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *54*(2), 83–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.70011.

McCarthy, M.A., Desan, M.H. (2023). The Problem of Class Abstractionism. *Sociological Theory*, *41*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/07352751231152489.

McDermott, D. (2008). Analytical Political Philosophy. In D. Leopold, M. Stears (Eds.), *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (pp. 11–28). Oxford University Press.

McKay, I. (2014). A Half-Century of Possessive Individualism: C.B. Macpherson and the Twenty-First-Century Prospects of Liberalism. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, *25*(1), 307–340. https://doi.org/10.7202/1032806ar.

McKay, I. (2017). Challenging the common sense of neoliberalism: Gramsci, Macpherson, and the next left. In L. Panitch, G. Albo (Eds.), *Rethinking Democracy: Socialist Register 2018* (pp. 275–297). New York University Press.

McKay, I. (2019, June). *The real world of democracy? C. B. Macpherson's critique of the Cold War reification of 'liberal democracy,' 1965* [Paper presentation]. Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference. https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/documents/conference/2019/51.McKay.pdf.

McKay, I. (n.d.). *A New Method of Liberty: Gramsci, C.B. MacPherson, and the Next Left*.

McManus, M. (2024, July 16). *C.B. Macpherson on retrieving liberal radicalism.* Liberal Currents. https://www.liberalcurrents.com/c-b-macpherson-on-retrieving-liberal-radicalism-2/

McManus, M. (2025). *The political theory of liberal socialism*. Routledge.

Mignolo, W.D. (2007). Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2–3), 449–514. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647.

Mignolo, W. (2021). *The politics of decolonial investigations*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mignolo, W.D., Walsh, C.E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press.

Mills, C.W. (2005). "Ideal Theory" as Ideology. *Hypatia*, *20*(3), 165–183. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00493.x.

Mills, C.W. (2018). Through a Glass, Whitely: Ideal Theory as Epistemic Injustice. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, *92*, 43–77.

Noe, K. (2020). White Habits, Anti-Racism, and Philosophy as a Way of Life. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, *58*(2), 279–301. https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12365.

Novak, M. (2022). Conceptions of Utopia in Modern Liberal Thought: Is There a Liberal Utopia? *Utopian Studies*, *33*(1), 144–160. https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.33.1.0144.

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

Nussbaum, M., Sen, A. (Eds.). (1993). *The Quality of Life*. Clarendon Press.

Owen, D. (2016). Reasons and practices of reasoning: On the analytic/continental distinction in political philosophy. *European Journal of Political Theory*, *15*(2), 172–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885115587120.

Owens, P. (2007). *Between War and Politics: International Relations and the Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Oxford University Press.

Purdy, J. (2019, October 29). What John Rawls missed: Are his principles for a just society enough today? *The New Republic*. https://newrepublic.com/article/155294/john-rawls-missed-create-just-society.

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology*, *15*(2), 215–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005.

Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies*, *21*(2–3), 168–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353.

Rawls, J. (1999a). *A theory of justice (Revised edition).* The Belknap Press.

Rawls, J. (1999b). *The Law of Peoples: With "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*". Harvard University Press.

Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard University Press.

Reinhoudt, J., Audier, S. (2018). *The Walter Lippmann Colloquium: The Birth of Neo-Liberalism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Robeyns, I. (2008). Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice. *Social Theory and Practice*, *34*(3), 341–362. https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract200834321.

Robeyns, I., Brighouse, H. (Eds.). (2010). *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*. Cambridge University Press.

Rose, M. (2022). *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right*. Yale University Press.

Sassen, S. (2016). At the Systemic Edge: Expulsions. *European Review*, *24*(1), 89–104. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798715000472.

Sassen, S. (2021). The Limits of Power and the Complexity of Powerlessness: The Case of Immigration. In G. Delanty, S. P. Turner (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory* (2nd ed., pp. 456–465). Routledge. https://doi.org// 10.4324/9781003111399-39.

Satgar, V., Ntlokotse, R. (2023). Introduction. In V. Satgar, R. Ntlokotse (Eds.), *Emancipatory Feminism in the Times of COVID-19: Transformative Resistance and Social Reproduction* (pp. 1–20). Wits University Press. https://doi.org/10.18772/22023078264.

Schefold, B. (2022). Theoretical Context: Ordoliberalism as a New Synthesis of Earlier German Economic Thought. In T. Biebricher, W. Bonefeld, P. Nedergaard (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism* (pp. 3–20). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198861201.013.1

Sen, A. (1995). *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2006). What Do We Want From a Theory of Justice? *Journal of Philosophy*, *103*(5), 215–238. https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil2006103517.

Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. The Belknap Press.

Shklar, J. (1986). *Legalism: Law, Morals, and Political Trials*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Steinmetz, G. (2005). *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*. Duke University Press.

Steinmetz, G. (2023). Concept-quake: From the History of Science to The Historical Sociology of Social Science. In D. Fassin, G. Steinmetz (Eds.), *The Social Sciences in the Looking Glass: Studies in the Production of Knowledge* (pp. 21–80). Duke University Press.

Therborn, G. (2022). *The World and The Left*. New Left Review, *137*, 23–73.

Therborn, G. (2024). *The Future and The Left*. New Left Review, *145*, 27–41.

Tomer, J.F. (2011). Enduring happiness: Integrating the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, *40*(5), 530–537. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2011.04.003.

Townshend, J. (2000). *C.B. Macpherson and the Problem of Liberal Democracy*. Edinburgh University Press.

Tuck, R. (1999). *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order From Grotius to Kant*. Clarendon Press.

Turowski, M. (2014). *C.B. Macpherson: „Indywidualizm posiadaczy" a dylematy współczesnej ontologii politycznej*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.

Turowski, M. (2016). Inclusive Versus Exclusive Public Reason: Invitation to Comparative Political Philosophy or the Affirmation of "Liberal Hegemony"? *Synthesis Philosophica*, *31*(1), 151–167. https://doi.org/10.21464/sp31111.

Turowski, M. (2021). Islamization, Modernization, and Civiliational Analysis. *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia*, *15*(4), 81–92. https://doi.org/10.19195/1895-8001.15.4.5.

Turowski, M. (2022). *Hobbes Studies Revisited: The Strauss – Macpherson Debate*. Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT.

Turowski, M. (2024). Metafizyka Muzułmańska—Kryzys, Reformacja, Transformacja, Reintegralizacja? *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia*, *19*(1), 7–17. https://doi.org/10.19195/1895-8001.19.1.1.

Vittersø, J. (Ed.). (2016). *Handbook of Eudaimonic Well-Being*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42445-3.

Vrahimis, A. (2013). *Encounters between analytic and continental philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Vrahimis, A. (2022). Political Philosophy, Political Theory, and the Analytic-Continental Divide. International *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, *30*(1), 86–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2021.2022411.

Wallerstein, I. (2011). *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914*. University of California Press.

Whatmore, R. (2021). *The History of Political Thought: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Wilkin, P. (2023). Every Day I Write the Book: Geoculture as Dominant Ideology in the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, *29*(2), 377–400. https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2023.1190.

Williams, B. (2005). *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (G. Hawthorn, Ed.). Princeton University Press.

Winant, G. (2024). The Baby and the Bathwater: Class Analysis and Class Formation After Deindustrialisation. *Historical Materialism*, *32*(2), 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206x-20242655.

Wolff, J. (2013). Analytic Political Philosophy. In M. Beaney (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (pp. 795–822). Oxford University Press.

Author Note

Mariusz Turowski is a philosopher and translator; a university professor in the Department of Social and Political Philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Wrocław; an honorary visiting professor in the Department of Philosophy at Bursa Uludağ University; and the Research Director of the Institute for the Studies of Islam. He is the author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of 20 books. His most recent works include: Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (*Maqāṣid aš-Šarīʿa jako filozofia prawa muzułmańskiego. Perspektywa teorii systemów*), ed. and transl. (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought; in preparation); A. Yilmaz, H. Özler, M. Turowski, and D. Geylani (eds.), *Political psychology: A Companion* (Istanbul: Istanbul University Press, 2026); *Introduction to Islamic Metaphysics* (*Wprowadzenie do metafizyki muzułmańskiej*), ed. (Bursa: Sentez Yayıncılık, 2022); and *Hobbes Studies Revisited: The Strauss-Macpherson Debate* (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, 2021).

Citation

Turowski, M. (2026). Realism, Imagination and Ontology: Human Development and the Post-Liberal Turn in Contemporary Political Philosophy. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, *76* (4), 89–115. DOI: 10.18276/aie2026.76-05.