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META-POLITICAL COGNITIVISM AND THE PLACE OF TRUTH IN POLITICS

ABSTRACT: In this paper I discuss how the need for defining truth in a political context retains its importance even in the light of the insistence from political realists that such attempts will necessarily fail.¹ I mention two debates in the political philosophy that intersect at this issue. The first is the dispute between those who, like Rawls, adhere to epistemic agnosticism and deny that we can have an operational definition of truth in politics and those who, following Habermas, argue that our political propositions always have truth values. The second debate is that between political moralists and political realists. I then try to show why both realists and moralists need to amend their views in order to fully take into account the complexities of the political domain. Moralists need to recognize that the realists are correct in denying the effective applicability of general moral principles, while realists err in thinking that moral principles in politics must only be general in nature. By incorporating the possibility of particularism in politics we can also find the plausible candidate for the operational view of the concept of truth – the pragmatist conception as elucidated by William James. This can then help us develop more meta-political cognitivism more fully and apply it to a wide range of issues in political philosophy, one of the most important being the efficacy of deliberative democracy.

KEY WORDS: Deliberation, cognitivism, realism, truth, pragmatism

1. Political epistemology and cognitivist meta-politics

One of the key disputes in political epistemology is between those who, following Rawls (Rawls 1993)², argue for epistemic abstinence (or agnosticism) and those who,

¹ The author is a researcher on a project no. 179067, funded by the Ministry of education, science and technological development of the Republic of Serbia.
² See also: Rawls 1995; Rawls 1999; Raz 1990..
following Habermas (Habermas 1990; Habermas 1995) and, more recently Estlund\(^3\) argue for what Landemore calls ‘political cognitivism’ (Landemore 2017)\(^4\). More explicitly, on the one side there is the claim that the concept of truth has no place in politics and that we must remain agnostic regarding the truth-value of political claims, while on the other side there is the view that the notion of truth is unavoidable and that political claims have knowable truth values. In recent years the field of political epistemology expanded rapidly with the advent of works arguing for one side or the other. This doesn’t exhaust the range of questions posed within political epistemology, but it is the crucial one in the context of deliberative democracy. Specifically, it is tied to the question of whether deliberative mechanisms are genuinely viable and efficacious, or whether they represent misguided idealizations of the realm of politics. The problem of deliberative democracy is, then, how effective it can be, which is the main factor for deciding whether introducing deliberation to the current, procedural, model of democracy is worthwhile or not.

To deliberate in a political arena simply means to argue for a position on a particular issue by stating reasons (either rational or personal) before a group of involved citizens. Citizens can engage on any topic, ranging from municipal to global, strictly economic or divisively ethical. The outcome of that effort can then serve as an indication of what it is that engaging in a dialogue can accomplish. Although the ideal outcome of deliberation might seem to be a consensus between participants, such as in the cases of a jury, political deliberation more often strives for increased understanding of and receptiveness toward views different from our own.\(^5\) However, the question of how exactly the terms of the discussion – what is the degree of moderator involvement and are they even present at all, how long a discussion should last, will end in a vote – doesn’t have a clear conceptual answer. Unlike in the case of evaluatively thick concept of liberal democracy, if we try to examine the deliberative approach at the same level, our answers to the most pertinent political questions will appear more ambiguous and less successful (Erman 2012).\(^6\) Consequently, we will be unable to emphasize the importance of a deliberative approach and we will fail to recognize just how it can supplement the liberal view. How is this complex problem related to the dispute between epistemic agnostics and epistemic cognitivists?

In this paper, I aim to show that the case for political cognitivism lies at the heart of this issue. Even though it seems trivial, political philosophy has only recently begun

\(^3\) Similar points are made in Estlund 2007.

\(^4\) Helene Landemore, „Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy“, *Social Epistemology*, 31 (2017).

\(^5\) See, for instance: Macdonald 2008; Forst 2011. Eva Erman, „In Search of Democratic Agency in Deliberative Governance“, *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2012).

\(^6\) For an alternative view, see: Dingwerth 2014.
to truly benefit from the integration of the theoretical and the empirical. However, there still seems to exist a certain gap. Even the most recent papers in political epistemology do not attempt to genuinely discuss how we should view the concept of truth as applied to politics, or, for that matter, what kind of definition of truth can be fruitfully applied, if at all, to the domain of the political. Regardless of how sound the arguments for cognitivism are, they are still vulnerable to different types of criticisms without committing to a particular view on this matter. In order to fully explore this line of thinking, I will first explore the motivations behind the currently predominant view of political realism. Second, I discuss which view of truth should we adhere to if we are to provide support for political cognitivism. Since the basic tenet of this view, as in its meta-ethical counterpart, is that proposition given in the political domain have truth-values, we need to first understand just what understanding of truth is readily applicable in this context, and to what degree. Finally, I conclude the paper by suggesting further avenues for research into these issues.

2. Between truth and reality

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, Rawls was highly reluctant to give truth any place in the realm of the political. The reasoning behind this reluctance lies in what Rawls called ‘the fact of disagreement’ and ‘the fact or reasonable pluralism’. Namely, Rawls’ concern stems from the observation that if two sides in dispute insist on being right, then the disagreement can only deepen, rather than be overcome through deliberation. Waldron (Waldron 1999) reiterated this view by saying that:

Whatever else we wish away in our elaboration of ideal models of civic republicanism and deliberative democracy, we should not wish away the fact that we find ourselves living and acting alongside those with whom we do not share a view about justice, rights or political morality.

As Landemore further elucidates:

Unlike the early Rawls of A Theory of Justice (1971), the later Rawls proposes to seek a consensus of merely ‘reasonable’ views, whose truth is neither to be as-

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7 See for instance Landemore, „Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy” and Estlund, Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework.

8 Another issue in this context is delving into the empirical aspects of deliberation in order to connect them to the question of moralism and realism. I discuss this in Šoć 2016. In the next section I will outline an aspect of this problem from a different angle.
asserted nor denied and is indeed left entirely out of the equation. (Landemore 2017, 278-279)

In other words, instead of the potentially deleterious insistence on political objectivism, we should hold all truth-claims irrelevant and strive for overlapping consensus (Rawls 1993). Such a view proceeds from the observation that the fact of disagreement is an inescapable part of our political reality. By saying that truth is our goal, instead of a reasonable disagreement, we emphasize that which represents the dividing factor between conflicting groups of individuals, rather than promoting the means to bring the two sides closer together. As Rawls notes:

The political conception itself does not speak to this question. It aims to work out a political conception of justice that citizens as reasonable and rational can endorse on due reflection […]. With that done, the political conception is a reasonable basis of public reason and that suffices. (Rawls 1993b, 128)

Such a view is usually called constructivist. An alternative to it has been put forward by Cohen in the form of an epistemic approach that consisted of three main elements: (1) a procedure-independent standard of correctness of political claims; (2) a cognitive approach to voting; and (3) a Bayesian process of belief adjustment (Cohen 1996). Habermas goes even further than this. In direct opposition to Rawls, he sees the very fact of the existence of disagreement as a confirmation that there is a place for truth in politics. Namely, if two sides didn’t presume to be right, there would be no genuine political discussion, and thus no disagreement in the first place (Habermas 1995, 89). Our ambition to persuade others in what we believe directly implies that we hold our beliefs to be true. Thus, both the proponents of epistemic cognitivism and the proponents of epistemic agnosticism in politics hold the same starting point – the reality of political disagreement. However, it is precisely this reality that means quite different things for different theorists. For Rawls, as we mentioned, that meant the exchange of arguments without appealing to the concept of truth, as this would effectively emphasize the bases for division and intolerance. In addition, as Landemore notes, „deliberative democrats have assumed that the value of democratic procedures in resolving disagreement lies essentially in the values they express (such as respect, equality, and reciprocity, among others), not explicitly or at all in their knowledge-aggregating, let alone truth-tracking, properties, or in their ability to produce ‘better’ outcomes.” (Landemore 2017, 277-278).

However, the potential that deliberation might have for producing outcomes that are better than a simple aggregating procedure might produce is hard to demonstrate through conceptual analysis alone. For instance, we could intuitively say that there are three key elements that democratic institutions ought to satisfy in order to provide

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9 See, for instance, Rawls 1993a, 245–269.
optimal outcomes that are in line with democratic values and citizens’ preferences. If we take the institution of voting as our key element, we can, also following Kant, say that voting should be free, equal and independent from outside pressure. Ostensibly, deliberative democrats might want to claim that each of these aspects is promoted by the institution of deliberation. However, the immediate question is how can we know that this is really the case and, furthermore, given the way politics works in reality, can we ever truly implement these normative requirements? According to a strand of criticisms made by those who adhere to political realism, it is impossible. This, then, implies that insisting on the truth values of our normative political claims is futile. On the other hand, according to political cognitivists, it is ‘unavoidable’ (Landemore 2017, 284). Here is where the debates between epistemic agnostics and epistemic cognitivists intersect with the debates between political realists and political moralists.

There are numerous ways in which political realists tend to criticize moralism. Discussing such theories, Matt Sleat says that:

The problem with contemporary liberal theory is that its insufficient regard for the facts has impeded its ability to fulfill its normative ambitions of providing guidance for political action and reform. Greater concern for the facts, either in relation to implementing the recommendations of ideal theory in the real (non-ideal) world or through incorporating those facts into normative theorizing itself, will produce a theory more suited to guiding action here and now. The more facts one incorporates, the more realistic theory will be. (Sleat 2016, 29)

This sort of criticism is repeated by many authors and, as Sleat also notes, the crucial deficiency of such political theories is that they are impracticable. He goes even further, saying that moralist theories – resting on extra-political systems of morality, betray the autonomy of the political and conceive it, to use famous Geuss’ words, merely as applied ethics (Geuss 2008, 6). These criticisms are especially pertinent in the case of deliberative democracy, discussed conceptually, because all of the normative requirements mentioned above, actually do precede the practice of deliberation and the evaluation of political realities.

On the other hand, both moralism and realism aim to satisfy what Bernard Williams calls the ‘basic legitimation demand’ (BLD) – the demand that the state ought to act and exercise its power in a way that is in principle justifiable to every citizen (Williams 2005, 4). This doesn’t mean that every political decision must be tested at a referendum, but that it has to be such that every citizen could agree with it. In other words, every political theory, whether realist or moralist, will try to show how a set of political goals and actions brought about to satisfy those goals can be legitimate. The main

10 See, for instance Valentini 2009 and Wiens 2012.
distinction between the two is that moralists hold that an independent system of morality must be established prior to political agency, if we are to know how to act within the political realm, whereas realists, as we have seen, aim to incorporate as many facts as possible, in order to render a political theory practicable. One other crucial problem of moralism, as Sleat sees it (Sleat 2014, 8), is insisting on rationality of and consensus between political agents. In short, it paints too narrow a picture, thus restricting the scope of possibilities for effective application of political theories to political practice. The main issue with rationality is underdetermination – i.e. the fact that many different options for acting might appear equally rational, while the main concern with consensus is the fact of widespread and deep political disagreement – i.e. the fact that it is practically impossible, for democratic societies, to reach unanimity on any political, social or economic issue. It might appear that these problems settle the case in favor of realism and against moralism, and agnosticism against cognitivism.

However, even though the complexities of political life underdetermine policy proposals and may thus render claims that certain proposal, or any political proposition in general, has truth value, we can also point out a similar problem for political realists. On the one hand, insisting on rationality does ‘significantly underdetermine moral and political questions’. On the other hands, the facts themselves do, too. We can take any significant political dispute – from long-standing ones such as disputes about the ethics of abortion as outlined in the US Supreme Court decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade*, to the more recent ones, such as the issues raised by the outcome of US elections in 2000, 2016 and 2020. We might say that parties in these disputes take relevant facts seriously, but no view can successfully account for and provide a generally acceptable solution to the given set of pertinent facts. More specifically, in some of the mentioned cases even the Supreme Court judges had disagreements that required statements of dissent, whereas the solutions to the problems of US elections (and numerous other examples of disputed results of voting) would require an extensive overhaul of the electoral system, which is far from forthcoming. Furthermore, when a political theory, taking into account relevant facts, aims to proceed in some direction, the amount of facts clearly doesn’t do much good. Just like moral principles are insufficient to help us reasonably reach an acceptable proposal, facts too underdetermine political actions. In other words, starting from the same set of data, one can proceed in various, and mutually incompatible ways.

Nevertheless, we may ask ourselves why must moralism be constrained to such an analysis? The reason why this section uses the phrase ‘between truth and reality’ is

\[\text{See for instance the difference between the analyses of proportional voting espoused by Brighouse and Fleurbaey (2010, 137-155) and Brennan, who even questions the very ethics of (and the need for general) voting, especially compulsory voting (Brennan 2009, 2011; Brennan and Hill, 2014).}\]
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because the insistence on truth in politics and the insistence on political realities seem to surprisingly clash. Where we would expect that truth and reality are naturally inseparable, the adherents to realism are generally suspicious of talking about political ‘truths’. Isn’t it, however, possible to commit to some norms or values without having the ambitions that are, to quote Bernard Williams, almost imperialistic (Williams 2005, 23), or to, vice versa, find a way to not separate truth and reality in politics? The history of ethics shows us that this is more than mere possibility.

As is clear from the way realists criticize moralists, they assume that political moralism (or idealist political theories in general) is generalist in nature. This is evident in Sleat’s argument from underdetermination and Williams’ charge against liberalism for being imperialistic. The key characteristic of generalism in this context is that it is exceptionless. If that were the inevitable consequence of holding a moralist worldview, then it would indeed be as implausible as realists claim. After all, however we formulate a principle that is to guide our political actions, there are bound to be situations in which it is either inapplicable or comes in conflict with some other principle. One of the most famous examples in Rawls’s Theory of Justice, which outlines two principles that would make every society in any time genuinely just. In Justice as Fairness, he gives the following formulation of the two:

1) Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all;
2) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: a) They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; b) They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (Rawls 2001, 42-43).

As Rawls elucidates in A Theory of Justice, both these principles fall under the more general conception of justice:

All social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage. (Rawls 1971, 62)

We need not go into the various issues that have arisen since the formulation of these principles, but suffice it to say that Rawls himself recognized, as we noted at the beginning of the paper, that the actual disagreement across political spectra shows, at the very least, that the stated principles are difficult to apply in real-world situations, which is why he didn’t think it would be useful to talk about truth of differing viewpoints, but rather about the striving for overlapping consensus.
However, even if some forms of political moralism are generalist, that isn’t the only option, as there are various particularist views of morality that needn’t be at odds with realism – from Aristotle’s virtue ethics and its numerous contemporary versions, to Dancy’s attempt to formulate, as he puts it, ethics without principles (Dancy 2004). In addition, ethical cognitivism is fully compatible with particularism. Indeed, even the political cognitivists such as Landemore or Estlund need not subscribe to any particular epistemic position, although, analogously to particularism in ethics, a natural fit might be the contextualist view of knowledge (which itself does hold that our knowledge-claims have truth values).12

Moreover, in conjunction with the problem of underdetermination that potentially pertains to realism and moralism alike, we can see that both views could use some refinement. To that end, we need more than just a conceptual discussion about merits and demerits of these views – in this context, we need a theory of democracy that will be able to somehow recognize and encompass both the reality, diversity and complexity of political life, and the autonomous significance of relevant moral considerations. One promising avenue of exploration in formulating such a theory is the analysis of deliberative democracy fully integrated with recent empirical research.13

Now, while such an approach does have to be formulated in detail, one of its key foundational issues is the role that our understanding of truth will play in shielding a moralist theory from the sort of attacks typically leveled by political realists. As I mentioned before, we, ironically, must introduce a concept of truth within political moralism because political realism is in essence anti-cognitivist.

3. A pragmatic view of truth

I have said at the beginning of the paper that the recent development in political philosophy has been dubbed ‘epistemic turn’. As Landemore mentions, the epistemic approach to deliberative democracy focuses on just one of its several relevant aspects. And while she does lay out a strong case for political cognitivism (Landemore 2017), she seems to hold a prima facie plausible view that, in Habermasian terms, the very fact that political agents engage in extensive debates and fervently (often even toxically) work for their particular causes, suggest that they implicitly already assume that their utterances have truth values. In itself, such an insight is intuitive, but unfortunately incomplete. To supplement the Habermasian cognitivist suggestion, we should also engage in something Rawls thought political theory shouldn’t do, and that is discuss how to understand the concept of truth itself. There are two main reasons to be wary of meta-

12 See, for instance, Ichikawa 2017.
13 I discuss the results of this research in Šoć 2019 and, in greater detail, in Šoć 2021 (forthcoming).
political cognitivism. First, as Landemore also noted, a political actor insisting on a proposition being true and the contrary one being false seems to deepen the divisions in a society. Second, there are numerous theories of truth and there is no consensus in that particular area of philosophy about what view is the most plausible. Therefore, it would seem that engaging in such an endeavor would mean that we tried to clarify a complex issue by raising another complex issue that itself isn’t sufficiently clear. However, I believe there is a middle road between abstaining from attaching any particular cognitivist theory to our political utterances and thoroughly deciding on the proper theory of truth before applying it to the realm of politics. We can offer a plausible suggestion and try to show why we think it fits the overall picture painted by cognitivists while trying to allay the most pertinent concerns of the realists. A good preliminary candidate for the acceptable view of truth in politics would be the one that could incorporate both some of the key moralist insights with some of the main components of realism.

Let us now consider one such view – the pragmatist theory of truth. In what follows, I will only provide an outline of the way in which we can apply pragmatism to politics. While this seems almost like a tautology, I will try to show that such an appearance is based on one misconception of pragmatism that is very close to the misconception that realists have about moralism. There are numerous ways to understand the concept of truth from the pragmatist perspective, as the history of pragmatism is highly complex and by no means monolithic.14 What I propose to do is take the view of truth as espoused by William James in his paper „Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” (James 2011, 211-227):

‘The true’, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of the course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas. The ‘absolutely’ true, meaning what no further experience will ever alter, it that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. (James 2001, 222)

As we can see, the key notion that James connects to the truth is that of expediency. To that he attaches the notion of relevancy a few pages later (James 2001, 226). Namely, he notes that there is ‘the Truth with a big T’, but that there are also concrete truths that need to be recognized:

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14 The two valuable recent entries pertaining to pragmatism are Levine 2019 and Misak 2018.
Concrete truths in the plural need be recognized only when their recognition is expedient. A truth must always be preferred to a falsehood when both relate to the situation; but when neither does, truth is as little of a duty as falsehood. If you ask me what o’clock it is and I tell you that I live at 95 Irving street, my answer may indeed be true, but you don’t see why it is my duty to give it. A false address would be as much to the purpose. (James 2011, 226)

As we can see, James here recognizes an important fact of our communication, which can readily be applied to the realm of politics, and that is the need for purposeful exchange in order to obtain something mutually beneficial. Although the brief exchange about the time of the day may seem as too trivial to be thought of in this context, it is actually quite significantly related to how we communicate politically. Namely, when I want to know what time it is, I need a quick and reliable information for some more or less important purposes (I want to see if my watch is working properly, I am in a hurry for a meeting and so on). When I get asked about the time, it is quite a waste of it if I provide a superfluous information just as much as if I provided a falsity. So, the maximum benefit for both parties in that brief exchange is to communicate about the time of the day as quickly and as accurately as possible. Thus to say that it is a noon at noon is to state a proposition that is true. But, unlike in Aristotle, this is not the truth simply because it indeed is noon, but because it is the most expedient way to operate in the world. That expedience, however, is not grounded merely in subjective preferences of groups or individuals, but is based to a large extent on how the world itself is structured. The truth value of a sentence is, in other words, grounded in something that is objective. The reason why pragmatism combines the notion of expediency that appears subjective has to do with its roots in Kantian idealism, which denies that we can ever know the reality as it is in itself. To define the concept of truth by referring solely to the objective states of affairs would imply that this state of affairs is something that is fully within our cognitive reach. As Geuss says in his recent book (in the context of criticizing moralism’s idealized view of rationality), ‘our problem as reasoners is to think things through the best we can in a world in which cognitive capacities are limited, and we cannot think forever’ (Gaus 2011, 262). However, James, like Kant, doesn’t want to remove all objectivity from his worldview. Thus, there has to be something in reality that makes our actions expedient and useful.15

Such a view might, however, seem to consider the notion of truth in a way that completely ignores the intuitive sense that are propositions have to be connected to some actual state of affairs. However, this would be wrong, as James himself immediately notes: ‘A favorite formula [for describing my doctrine is] that by saying whatever you find it pleasant to say and calling it truth you fulfill every pragmatic require-

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15 For the connections between pragmatism and idealism, see Margolis 2010.
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ment. I leave it to you to judge whether this be not an impudent slander’ (James 2011, 226-227). If such an accusation were founded, then James’ notion of truth would be relegated to the context of some particular expediency and be effectively negated. For instance, if it is in my interest for my neighbor to miss their job interview, I would expediently say that it is an hour earlier than it is and thus make them be late. However, we need only consider such a scenario for a couple of moments before realizing why would James call the stated accusation a slander. Namely, expediency is by no means easy to achieve and it certainly isn’t as particular to someone’s local interests. In a much different sense, the truth for James is that which works. But to work, it has to be both relevant for some particular context and in a profound way agree with the world.

Here we can see how James’ definition can be a comfortable fit with political cognitivism. Consider an economic policy proposal. Economic crises often invite large stimulus programs and balancing of the budget. As so often happens, different political parties hold different views on which measure is the best for the citizens. Some claim that minimum wage should be raised, whereas some claim that the state should raise taxes in order to fill holes in the budget. Others still may hold that the state should lower taxes and promote spending in order to kickstart the economy. Which proposal is the right one? For political realists, that question is not as important as the analysis of the complex interplay between political and socio-economic forces in a particular country. Politicians will decide what they’ll decide, guided often by their self-interest and (re)election prospects, and the key to understanding politics is looking at the underlying currents that guide concrete policy decisions. However, for a political cognitivist, any such analysis would be incomplete if we didn’t take the truth-value of a proposition into account since politicians themselves, and by extension the citizens who elect them, hold themselves to be right and their opponents to be wrong (as the Habermasian intuition shows16, according to Landemore). But, without a concrete notion of truth, how could we tell? Applying James’ view, we could say abstractly that the true proposal is the one which is most expedient. But expedient for whom? Without further clarification, it is easy to see why pragmatism might seem like a relativist and an unhelpfully pluralist position. After all, for the politicians who run on programs grounded in economic liberalism, it is expedient to argue for tax cuts, because that is what their constituents expect.

On the other hand, those who run on a platform of social democracy want to typically raise taxes (especially for the wealthiest) because, according to their view, by filling the budget you can redistribute the money more justly. But this is not what James would claim. To be expedient in his sense is not to cater to your constituents.

16 It is worth noting that Habermas is also commonly viewed as a pragmatist. See for instance Misak 1999.
We said above that the truth is what works, and to work means to be in accordance with how the world is. Thus, with the assumption of some basic economic goals such as raising the per capita GDP, reduction of unemployment and the having ability to make capital investments (schools, hospitals, infrastructure, etc.) the accurate response to the economic crisis will be the one that achieves this and the wrong one will be the one that fails. The one which fails will not be wrong because people lost their jobs as a consequence, because they experienced increased suffering, or because the politicians who enacted such a proposal weren’t reelected. To say such things would mean to embed into the discussion the very type of general principles criticized by Guess, Sleat or Williams. Rather, we have to recognize what it is that was right about some particular proposal. Namely, the reason that, say, tax cuts worked, was that such a measure grasped something of the states of affairs existing in the world (in some particular place, region, country, etc.) and that politicians and citizens expediently acted upon it. The world, as it were, provided no obstacles, and the reason why there were no obstacles was because our view of the world was true. In a very trivial sense, I can try to go through the door, but the door will be the obstacle on my way out. Thus, the proposition ‘The way out of the house is through the door’ is false. Its falsity stems from something that prevents me to effectively act upon my proposition and my failing to find the expedient way to get out of the house. Thus, it is not simply that it is ‘pleasant’ or ‘useful’ for me not go through the wooden structure in front of me, it is that the wooden structure relevantly negates my proposition about going out of the house through it.

Seen this way, James’ pragmatist view of truth offers a broad and readily applicable standard for determining whether a proposition is true or false without resorting to any form of trivial relativism. What James does show is the awareness for context of an utterance and its relevance. In that sense, his view is not generalist, but particularist, because we have to make determinations of truth and falsity based on the states of affairs in the world but in such a way that we always have to discuss specific circumstances we are in. As James himself notes:

Health in actu means, among other things, good sleeping and digesting. But a healthy man need not always be sleeping, or always digesting, any more than a wealthy man need be always handing money, or a strong man always lifting weights. [...] Truth makes no other kind of claim and imposes no other kind of ought than health and wealth do. All these claims are conditional the concrete benefits we gain are what we mean by calling the pursuit a duty. In the case of truth, untrue beliefs work as perniciously in the long run as true beliefs work beneficially. (James 2011, 222, 225)
4. Conclusion

As we have seen in the last section, there is a way in which we might claim that our statements in the area of politics have truth value. They can be true of false and their truth makers will be something that exists in the world. However, the formal criterion by which we will measure our proposition against the states of affairs in the world has to do not with the very fact, nor with some general moral principle, but with the question of whether something works. As the last quote from James shows, the long-term success of a concrete policy is predicated upon our view somehow being in line with the way the world works and any short-term gains of the falsity will eventually yield to long-term failures. For instance, a resource-rich country (such as Angola or Venezuela) can suffer economically because of the policies that seemed to benefit those who enacted them, but which resulted in the objective suffering of the vast majority, which then put in danger even the perceived benefit of the decision-makers. This is a standard that cognitivists can fully embrace, moralists can predicate upon particular ethical principles and realists can incorporate within their analyses.

Furthermore, the proponents of political realism can find common ground with the pragmatist approach for a reason different than the one we would assume if we adopted the ‘slanderous’ interpretation. Namely, because pragmatism is fully particularist, and doesn’t refer to some abstract principle, worries such as the one formulated by Sleat should be easily dispelled. Namely, in order to be true in accordance with pragmatism, a policy proposal has to be fully worked out within the confines of a particular political system and society within which it will be formulated. To do otherwise would mean to, say, blindly copy an economic proposal that worked in some particular country and think that it will work identically in a different country. However, what works in Finland won’t necessarily work in China. Also, as we have witnessed in recent months across the world, tracking the cases of the pandemic differs in its efficiency from country to country. Some countries, such as China, can enforce a strict months-long lockdown, while in others attempting to employ such a measure for the similar amount of time would not be readily met with the same acceptance. Now, to say this doesn’t mean to proclaim that an approach is entirely right or wrong by some ideal standard, and that is exactly the point – according to James’ pragmatism, such judgments are unnecessary. The proposition ‘Three months lockdown is preferable to merely giving recommendations for wearing masks and keeping distance’ is true in China because it works in China, while it is false in Sweden because it would fail in Sweden. To say this doesn’t mean to say, abstractly, that both $a$ and $\neg a$ are true at the same time, but that the world is a complex whole which consists of entirely different moving parts and that to be expedient regarding one part means to take into account all of its specificities, rather than to try and adopt a sin-

17 As James indignantly notes, this doesn’t mean that by use we are referring to the ‘lowest material utility’ (James 2011, 227).
gular approach. Analogously to ethical particularism, we might call this approach epistemic particularism.

Because particularism fits naturally within a comprehensive explanatory model in politics both ethically and epistemically, just like in the case of realism and pragmatism, there can also be a common ground between political realists, who have typically been political non-cognitivists, and moralists, who, like Landemore, seem to favor the idealized approach:

At any rate, it seems to me that under relatively ideal deliberative conditions rational consensus retains a great deal of normative appeal as the hoped-for by-product of a successfully conducted exchange of arguments, because, pace Rawls, it can serve as a signal that a form of probable truth has been reached. (Landemore 2017)

At the beginning of this paper we stated that one of the crucial issues with which various political approaches are faced is the efficacy of democratic decision-making. To that end, we outlined how the recent ‘epistemic turn’ favors the view that the decisions we reach, or the propositions we make can have truth values. But, to go beyond this as a mere suggestion, we explored how pragmatist view of truth can help us flesh out such a proposal in a way that could bridge the gap between political cognitivists and political non-cognitivists, who also tend to be political realists. Transferring these discussions to the debate between realists and moralists, we have seen that they too share some common views that become obscured by the failure to distinguish between generalist and particularist ethics. And while we haven’t explored this topic further, James’ view of the truth has shown robust particular features that can incorporate both the intuitions of an ethical particularist and alleviate concerns of the political moralists. To go into greater detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, in the end, that if we are on the right track, then there is a way in which a number of key political concepts, e.g., a theory of deliberative democracy, proposed to supplement democratic decision-making mechanisms, can be successfully analyzed in terms of its efficacy. Namely, to determine whether some particular view is plausible and applicable, we need to examine its particular aspects, which means that the proper approach to deliberation, and to Landemore’s cognitivist suggestions, would be to examine how deliberation actually works on the ground. If such an examination was successful, it would subsequently inform normative political theories, be they realist or moralist, while also helping to bridge the gap between the two.

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18 As mentioned before, I analyze some of the results from this perspective in Šoć 2021.
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Andrija Šoć

**Meta-politički kognitivizam i mesto istine u politici**

(*Apstrakt*)

U ovom radu razmatram u kom je smislu neophodno definisati istinu u političkim okvirima čak i u svetlu insistiranja političkih realista da takvi pokušaji nužno moraju propasti. Govorim o dve debate u političkoj filozofiji koje se dodiruju upravo na tom pitanju. Prva je debata između onih koji, poput Rolsa, zastupaju epistemički agnostizam i poriču da možemo imati operacionalnu definiciju istine u politici, i onih koji, sledeće Habermasa, tvrde da naši iskazi u oblasti politike uvek imaju istinosnu vrednost. Druga je debata između političkih moralista i političkih realista. Potom pokušavam da pokažem zašto i moralisti i realisti moraju donekle izmeniti svoje gledište kako bi u potpunosti zahvatili svu kompleksnost političkog života. Moralisti moraju prihvatiti da su realisti u pravu kada poriču primenljivost opštih moralnih principa, dok realisti greše tvrdeći da moralni principi moraju imati opšti, generalistički karakter. Inkorporirajući plauzibilnost partikularističkog pristupa u politici lako možemo pronaći plauzibilno i primenljivo određenje istine – pragmatičko švatanje Vilijama Džejmsa. Ovo nam, kako na kraju tvrđim, može pomoći da u punjem smislu razvijemo meta-politički kognitivizam i primenimo ga u rešavanju različitih otvorenih pitanja u političkoj filozofiji, među kojima je jedan od najznačajnijih pitanje efikasnosti deliberativne demokratije.

**Ključne reči:** Deliberacija, kognitivizam, realizam, istina, pragmatizam