A Methodological Turn in Political Philosophy:
Making Political Philosophy More Scientific?[1]

Tereza Křepelová
Masaryk University, Brno

Abstract: The emergence of the first literature concerning the methodology of political philosophy, which we have witnessed over the last decade, indicates a general methodological shift within the discipline. This shift can be interpreted as a sign of the ongoing adjustment of political philosophy to the domain of science that had already begun when analytical political philosophy incorporated from logical positivism the premise of the unity of method of science and philosophy. The urge to have an epistemic source of justification for normative political theories lead analytical political philosophy to the development of various methodological frameworks from among which reflective equilibrium became the most influential one and nowadays it is being considered as the most widely used method in the contemporary political philosophy overall. Reflective equilibrium aims to provide knowledge that falls into the same category as scientific knowledge; however, it can also lead to various normative distortions resulting in the elimination of metaphysics, meta-ethics and religious claims from the normative part of political philosophical theorising. These normative distortions not only can result in epistemically wrong conclusions; above all, they implicitly affirm the normative propositions of political conceptions of liberalism. Hence, the prevalence and uncritical use of reflective equilibrium might narrow the topical scope and undermine the reflective and critical role of the discipline of political philosophy itself.

Key words: political science, political philosophy, methodology, analytical political philosophy, logical positivism, political liberalism, epistemic value, epistemic justification, reflective equilibrium, philosophy of science.

The past decade in the discipline of political philosophy was marked by new thought-provoking phenomena as we witnessed the emergence of the first propaedeutic literature summarising methods and methodological frameworks, mostly dedicated to analytical approaches (see e.g. Blau 2017, Floyd 2017, List and Valentini 2016, Leopold and Stears 2008, Dowding 2016). This trend indicates a shift towards a method-based (or even a method-driven) inquiry, which can be interpreted as a sign of an ongoing tendency to establish a more scientific political philosophy and to affirm its status in science in general. To understand the cause of this methodological shift, we need to see it in the broader context linked to the problematic position of political philosophy within political science and the system of science as such, which can be partly attributed to the general separation between the domains of philosophy and science. This separation is mirrored in their institutional division into the sciences and the humanities. That, however, does not usually apply to political philosophy, which is more often based in institutions' political

science departments.[2] It is their common subject of study – politics – which links political philosophy to political science rather than to philosophy. For this reason, the problem of the epistemic status of political philosophy within political science becomes even more apparent as the growing discrepancy between the disciplines negatively influences political philosophy in many practical aspects.[3]

While political science justifies and legitimises its epistemic authority by referring to its methods, which should lend its inquiry basic replicability and validity, in political philosophy the vast majority of authors still do not perceive their endeavour as a methodologically-based process (Leopold and Stears 2008, 1). Consequently, political philosophy lacks a wide consensus on existing methodological approaches and frameworks (Dryzek et al. 2006, 6) that would provide a clear idea of how it should be done and subsequently how its outcomes can be assessed. Political philosophy is divided by its inner ideological tensions and, owing to this, has become fractured into 'a number of parochial professionally and intellectually inspired discursive enclaves' (Gunnell 1993, 268). Gunnell's point refers to the fact that the often-disputable normative outcomes of political philosophy are for many (scholars and the general public as well) indistinguishable from the subjective political preferences hidden in the complicated philosophical language. These facts, in many ways, result in a confusing discussion within political philosophy itself, as it is not clear which disagreements are caused by misunderstanding the disputed matter, which can be attributed to the form of its justification and which are a consequence of the un-reflected and un-explained methodological presuppositions. This, subsequently, contributes to overall non-transparency which decreases the trustworthiness and epistemic authority of the whole discipline.

There is empirical evidence for this trend. A survey conducted among American political philosophers found that only 24 per cent of them agreed with the statement: 'Political philosophy is respected among political scientists' (Moore 2010, 266). The survey also revealed that political philosophers think that their publication and conference opportunities are low compared to those of empirical political scientists; accordingly,

---

2] In this regard, see also the professional academic organisations of political science (e.g. ECPR, APSA, IPSA) which usually have a sub-section dedicated to the discipline of political philosophy/theory, (see Kaufman-Osborne 2010, 659). Furthermore, Kaufmann-Osborne describes the political philosophy/theory as one of the substantive subfields of political science, that reflects common status within the region of the United States (Kaufman-Osborne 2006, 44).

3] The growing gap between the disciplines already negatively influences the quality of knowledge that both disciplines produce. While political philosophy, in general, ignores the findings of empirical political science and political philosophers predominantly comment on their own works (the so-called narcissistic attribute of political philosophy) and consequently its outcomes lack social and scientific relevance, political science, on the contrary, faces banality of part of its research, which is conducted with a view to methodological feasibility, rather than the palpability of a particular issue or examined phenomenon (see Shapiro 2005, 179). Similarly, Gerring and Yesnowitz stressed that in political science we encounter the accumulation of socially irrelevant researches, whose authors in many respects lack the theoretical guidance not only for their interpretation, but for the very justification of their realisation (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006, 104).

they hold the view that political philosophy overall is under-represented within political science (see Moore 2010). A second survey (Moore 2011) on political philosophy teaching practices found that 26 per cent of schools that teach political science have no political philosophy on the curriculum (Moore 2011, 124). Based on this survey, it is clear that political philosophy is being treated as non-essential in a large proportion of political science departments (Moore 2011, 124). This problem was also reflected in the discussion about the marginalisation of political philosophy in the American academic environment (see e.g., Kasza 2010, Hawkesworth 2010, Brown 2010).

The current methodological discussion can be thus interpreted as an effort by political philosophers to adjust to the domain of science rather than philosophy, in order to restore and secure political philosophy's position within political science. This article outlines the historical context of the division between political science and political philosophy, which will clarify where the discussion on methods within political philosophy comes from. In particular, I discuss the heritage of logical positivism's claim on the unity of method of science and philosophy, which analytical political philosophy has adopted. I also examine the current dominant methodological framework of analytical political philosophy – reflective equilibrium – which aims to provide knowledge that falls into the same category as scientific knowledge. Nonetheless, due to its epistemic desiderata it leads towards various normative distortions that favour the political conceptions of liberalism and therefore negatively influence the critical role of political philosophy by putting it in an affirmative position towards a particular ideology. Thus the paper outlines the sources of these normative distortions and examines the general overlap between the heritage of logical positivism and analytical political philosophy, its methods and political liberalism. This general outline provides a comprehensive view of the changes through which political philosophy as an academic discipline is passing. This should aid self-reflection within political philosophy – one of the signs of healthy development in any academic discipline.

1. CONTEXT: THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Although the roots of political science can be traced with confidence to ancient Greek political philosophy, its current practice is most influenced by the birth of the social sciences in the 19th century (Berg-Schlosser and Stammen 2000, 16) when it was emancipated from philosophy and emulated the natural sciences to reach the status of an authentic science (Winch 2003, 1). While *science* can be defined as 'a cumulative way to reach the objective truth through formal argument and regulated observation' (Leca 2010, 530), political philosophy, on the other hand, has a more ambivalent character. As a *philosophy,* it could be considered as part of the *vita contemplativa* that is formed by purely thinking about, critically evaluating, and persistently doubting, the limits of our knowledge (Leca 2010, 526). The adjective *political,* however, implies that it is also linked to the *vita activa* – the world of real politics, to which it aims to serve as a guide (Leca 2010, 526). This subsequently implies that the normative, prescriptive and evaluative ambitions

of political philosophy are inherently problematic for the (alleged) norm-neutrality declared by contemporary political science (see e.g. Kellstedt and Whitten 2013, 18). Max Weber defined the vocation of political science as the study of 'what is' rather than 'what ought to be', which belongs to the domain of politics itself (Gunnell 2010, 1397). The normative status of political philosophy is therefore linked with the normative status of politics. For this reason, the position of political philosophy in the system of science became dubious.

The revolutionary tendencies in the social sciences that called for the strict separation from philosophy were, however, rather a 'Jacobin affair' (Godin and Klingeman 1996, 10). This label refers to the ruthless and remorseless way in which the new-born social sciences, rooted in positivist epistemology, treated the 'ancien régime' of the branches with philosophical foundations. One of the memorable features of this debate was Peter Laslett's famous quotation: 'For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead' (1956, 6). According to him, the 'death' of political philosophy was partly caused by the terrible experience of World War II, which engendered a sceptical reaction to great political-philosophical projects. Sociological thinking, flourishing at the time, suddenly explained the problems of political philosophy as mere epiphenomena of socially-determined facts, which could be revealed exclusively through the empirical analysis of society. Laslett largely blamed logical positivism for this 'death', because it questioned the status of ethical judgments and raised the question of whether political philosophy is possible at all (see Laslett 1956, 9). Similarly, Leo Strauss emphasised that behind the decline of political philosophy stood positivism, which rejected political philosophy as unscientific and therefore illegitimate (1988, 346).

Nonetheless, to understand the genuine cause of the decline of political philosophy (and subsequently also the cause of its resurrection), we need to focus on its state in the middle of the 20th century. If we compare the influence and importance of interwar political-philosophical endeavour, we will hardly find any works that could equal the importance of pre-war or turn-of-the-century output (Wolff 2013, 7). This idea was expressed by Isaiah Berlin, who in a 1962 article claimed that the 20th century had so far produced no distinctive set of influential canonical works that would raise any innovative and fundamentally important thoughts to stimulate the discipline intellectually. Brian Barry pointed out that political philosophy was established on the study of past writers (1970, 1). Similarly, David Easton, from the behavioural side of the barricade, attributed the 'poverty of political theory' to its devotion to historical analysis (1951, 36). Thus the alleged death (or decline, to be more precise) of political philosophy in the last century can be explained not only as the consequence of the rise of logical positivism, the behavioural revolution and the overall triumph of science over philosophy, but also as a result of its own degeneration, intellectual staleness and lack of development. Nonetheless, subsequent global cultural-political changes brought new stimulus to political philosophical theorising as political philosophers were challenged by the question: how can we live together in pluralistic and heterodox societies, divided as they are by the deep

political disagreements[4] of their citizens? Thus the subsequent rebirth of the discipline in the early 1970s can be interpreted as a reaction to the limits of behavioural and purely empirical research that was unable to provide answers to the normative questions that were previously presented in political science (Heywood 2005, 25).

2. THE NEW SCIENTIFIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

2.1. Positivism and political philosophy: friends or foes?

However paradoxical it may appear, and despite Laslett's claim that it was largely logical positivism that killed political philosophy, it was also logical positivism that created a new political philosophy, the so-called analytical political philosophy that quickly became one of the most influential and dominant strands within political philosophical theorising. As noted in the introduction, the first literature on the methods of political philosophy is mostly concerned with its analytical branch. The reason the discussion of methods within political philosophy is centred on this approach will be clearer when we look at the intellectual heritage of logical positivism, which analytical philosophy incorporated. As one of the most prominent representatives of logical positivism, Bertrand Russell, stated: 'Modern analytical empiricism […] is thus able, in regard to certain problems, to achieve definite answers which have the quality of science rather than of philosophy' (1945, 834).[5] The unity of scientific method that would be applicable to both domains of knowledge (philosophy and science) is the idea that actually opened the door for (political) philosophy to acquire a similar epistemic status to the one the social sciences gradually gained during the 20th century. The unity of scientific method required a solid and consensually-accepted definition of what qualified as 'scientific' – the so-called demarcation principle that would serve as a criterion upon which we can distinguish scientific from pseudo-scientific arguments (Moses and Knutsen 2012, 39). This demarcation principle was for the logical positivists the criterion of verification, which excluded pseudoscientific, ethical and metaphysical claims that were considered meaningless because they could not be subjected to finite and evident testing that would conclusively identify them as true or false[6] (Moses and Knutsen 2012, 39; Hacking 1975, 94). As one of the intellectual fathers of logical positivism, Rudolf Carnap, stated:

4] The deep political disagreement can be (drawing on R. Talisse) linked to the persistent disagreements over fundamental moral doctrines that can be hold by sane, intelligent, sincere, and informed persons, therefore for 'every citizen holding a plausible doctrine, there are other citizens holding opposing but also plausible doctrines' (Talisse 2009, 13).

5] Russell's term 'modern analytical empiricism' can be used interchangeably with logical positivism – see e.g. Creath 2017.

6] This did not disqualify philosophy as such, the key role of which – according to the logical positivists – was to determine and bestow the meaning of language as a representation of the empirical (sensually perceptible) reality (Schwartz 2012, 63; Pincock 2016, 94).

'In the domain of metaphysics, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless. Therewith a radical elimination of metaphysics is attained.' (Carnap 1932: 60-61, in Hacking 1975: 96) The heritage of positivism can be summarised as the insistence that statements be testable – and consequently verified, confirmed or shown to be false. The 'new' philosophy that was supposed to fulfil these criteria is generally known as analytical philosophy and, in the field of political science, this role was assigned to analytical political philosophy.

As the term suggests, analytical political philosophy is part of a general philosophical strand known as analytical philosophy, linked to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition and nowadays it is the dominant philosophical tradition in the English-speaking world (Beaney 2013). Thus analytical philosophy can be perceived as a methodological counterpart to the tradition of phenomenological philosophy – especially concerning the role of the individual philosopher and his or her subjective perspective from which analytical philosophy tries to abstain. Analytical philosophers, unlike phenomenologists, do not believe that philosophy is immersed in subjectivity; indeed, philosophy should abstain from it. The starting point, where, according to analytical philosophy, subjectivity ends, is language (Peregrin 1992, 8; Dummett 2014, 5).

Nevertheless, it is questionable to what extent analytical political philosophy has been influenced by analytical philosophy. Jonathan Wolf (2013, 4) defined three main intellectual sources that analytical political philosophy incorporated from analytical philosophy. First, the rejection of idealism (in a Hegelian sense) associated with the idea of social holism that society or the state exists as an independent moral and metaphysical entity that needs to be studied within its own autonomous levels of macroscopic analysis (Fay 2002, 67). This feature is clearly visible in contemporary Western political philosophy, which is predominantly individualistic as it considers the individual as the main entity of political philosophical theorising. Second, the emphasis on logical consistency – therefore the requirement for internal validity of normative propositions, e.g. 'ex falso quodlibet' (statements are capable of being simultaneously true) and deductive closure (the requirement that any statement that is logically entailed by the theory also belongs to the theory) (for more, see List and Valentini 2016, 14-15). Third, the conceptual analysis, since the concepts are the main building units of our thinking represented by language.

According to the claim for the unity of method in science and philosophy raised by the logical positivists, analytical political philosophy aims to gain knowledge that falls into the same broad category as science (McDermot 2008, 11). As noted above, its domain is primarily normative, so while social scientists try to determine the facts about empirical reality, analytical political philosophers concentrate on what ought to be done in the light of these facts (McDermot 2008, 11). On this count, analytical political philosophy exceeded the expectations of logical positivists in many regards. Conceptual analysis, logical consistency and methodological individualism became important though not the only components of the new political philosophical theorising. More importantly,

analytical political philosophy combined two seemingly incompatible elements – logical analysis and normativity, which became embedded in the new way of 'scientific' moral theorising linked to the method-based inference of normative statements and the method-based justification of normative political theories. Therefore the main features of contemporary analytical political philosophy (drawing on Miller and Dagger, 2003, 446–9) can be defined as follows:

(1) It is essentially separate from deep metaphysical questions about the meaning of human life,

(2) It involves conceptual clarity and argumentative rigour,

(3) It is normative,

(4) It addresses a plurality of competing values, and

(5) It aims to serve as the public philosophy of a society of free and equal citizens who have choices to make about how their society is organised.

2.2. The elimination of metaphysics as a shared viewpoint of political liberalism and analytical political philosophy

When we examine the aforementioned features of analytical political philosophy, we find a normative overlap with the requirements of political liberalism. It is the combination of methodological individualism and the aspiration to formulate normative and prescriptive theories to address deep disagreements in society that is, in many regards, also the starting position of political liberalism. The underlying aim of philosophical endeavour in the liberal political perspective is not to determine 'what we ought to do' but rather 'what we ought to do when we don't agree on what we ought to do'. This is reflected in Miller and Dagger's fourth point, in which they stated that analytical political philosophy addresses a plurality of competing values that result in deep disagreement in society. Their first point, about the separation of analytical political philosophy 'from deep metaphysical questions', is the inevitable consequence of the aspiration to address deep disagreement that emerges in the sphere of metaphysics and as such cannot be conclusively resolved, verified or falsified.

Political liberalism proposes a similar requirement for the avoidance of metaphysical doctrines in the sphere of 'the political' (Nussbaum 2011, 16), which can best be understood in contrast with perfectionist[7] or comprehensive liberalism. Drawing on Rawls, political liberalism aims for 'a political conception of justice as a freestanding view. It offers no specific metaphysical or epistemological doctrine beyond what is implied by the political conception itself' (Rawls 1995, 10). This refer to the general liberal idea of desirability of the neutral state, that should be 'neutral among different conceptions of the good life and comprehensive doctrines' (Wall 2015, 163). 'Freestandingness' - as the

---

7] Perfectionist liberalism can be defined as a 'family of views regarding the conception of the good life, and not just our role as citizens'; or views about 'the ultimate nature of the human good' (Larmore 1996, 122, 132).

core element of the neutrality of the state - can be therefore attributed to the way these doctrines are derived (thus by the method through which we derive such doctrines, norms and normative theories). For Rawls in particular, 'freestandingness' was guaranteed by the 'neutrality' of the original position (Gaus and Van Schoelandt 2017, 8-9).

Gerald Gaus made the point that political liberalism 'seeks to return liberalism to its founding insight that we must live together without sharing our deepest visions' (2011). For this reason, advocates of political liberalism usually propose it as an alternative to the ideological sectarianisms within political philosophy (Gaus 2011). Political liberalism therefore shields itself by, and derives its legitimacy from, the method-based process of justification that aims at a superior normative status, since it refers to some common ground (e.g. rationality, reasonableness, intelligibility, reasons all can accept etc) that can be objectively determined through its methods. The elimination of metaphysics from the sphere of political theorising is therefore one of the shared standpoints of political liberalism and analytical political philosophy. This can be attributed to the heritage of positivist thinking on verifiability. In the context of political philosophy this implies that the statements are being tested upon some shared norms and beliefs, which in this process play similar role as empirical data in empirical research. The metaphysical propositions that are subject of the deepest political disagreements cannot however serve this way since there is no conclusive way of determining their correctness. The deeper indeterminacy between the elimination of metaphysics and the methodological basis of analytical political philosophy and political liberalism will be examined in the following section.

3. THE METHOD OF REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AND ITS EPISTEMIC IMPACT ON THE DISCIPLINE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The urge to have an epistemic and method-based source of justification for normative political theories leads analytical political philosophy to the development of various methodological frameworks (partially by emulating the methods of empirical sciences – for example, by pursuing thought experiments). One of the most influential methods in contemporary analytical political philosophy (and political philosophy as a whole) is reflective equilibrium[8] (McPherson 2015, 652; Cath 2016, 2014; Sinnott and Armstrong et al. 2010, 246; MacMahan 2013, 110), mostly known from the Rawlsian tradition.[9] Reflective equilibrium is considered an epistemic methodological tool, that is a tool that aspires to formulate epistemically correct theories, therefore true theories,

---

8] One can doubt how much this method is actually used, since most political philosophers do not explicitly indicate their use of it (or any other method, in fact). However, as many theorists point out, recent moral theorising has a salient and implicit imperative for using this method (Kappel 2006, 133, Kagan 1998, 16).

9] We need to take into consideration that the method itself was already present in philosophy before Rawls; the method itself – without being called reflective equilibrium – was 'invented' by Nelson Goodman.

theories that are likely to be true or theories that we have good reason to regard as true or likely to be true (Kappel 2006, 134).

The epistemic capacity of the reflective equilibrium is linked to the assessment of the external and internal validity of normative political theories. Owing to this fact, it has basically the same form as scientific inference (Peregrin and Svoboda 2017, 94) and it reflects the theory-testing methods of science (Dowding 2016, 240). Although logical consistency and internal validity are necessary criteria for the epistemic correctness and intelligibility (see Gaus 1996: 102) it cannot be considered as a sufficient criterion since it represents only internal relation of propositions. As G. Gaus points out: 'If one begins with a body of belief without any initial credibility, making it all fit together could not introduce credibility' (1996, 102). The external validity therefore relates to the initial credibility in terms of correspondence between the representing and the represented. As Valentini and List claim: 'Any theory is intended to represent, summarize, or capture something *"outside the theory" itself* [...] *Thus, it may capture this correctly, in which case the theory is true, correct, or externally valid, or it may fail to do so, in which case it is false, incorrect, or externally invalid'* (2016, 14-15). Therefore, the external validity determines the epistemic correctness of normative political theory.

The method of reflective equilibrium is based on harmonising our considered judgments with the general principles we recognise as right. This process aims to achieve an acceptable coherence among them that requires these judgements to provide support or the best explanation of each other (Daniels 2018). Reflective equilibrium can be, thus, attributed to the mentalist approach to moral and political theorising. According to mentalism, political philosophers should aim at discovering and applying principles that are already implicit in our normative thoughts (see Floyd 2017, 16). This tendency, according to Floyd, leads to the persisting disagreements since these principles contradict each other and there is no clear justified requirement of how this should be sorted out (Floyd, contrary to this, holds a view that political philosophy should take into account actual behaviour and actions of real citizens). For this reason, there is no consensus about the proper employment of the method of reflective equilibrium, which can be considered as both a cause and the consequence of the lack of transparency in the community of political philosophers over the question of its methods and methodology. Regarding the existing fussiness over the proper use of the method, we need to differentiate between two aspects that are subject to criticism, each for different reasons. The first aspect concerns the inputs of the whole process, the second concerns operations that are performed with them (McPherson 2015, 657). Through these two dimensions, we can examine the possible distortions that are linked to the use of the method of reflective equilibrium.

3.1. The ontological basis of the initial inputs

When employing the method, we need to address the epistemic status of our initial inputs (e.g. considered judgements, beliefs or moral intuitions) and their relation

to objective reality, so we can subsequently asses the external validity and epistemic correctness of the reflected normative theory. In this regard, the method faces a paradox because its epistemic capacity can be justified only with reference to the nature of these initial inputs, which have to be considered as epistemically self-justificatory (see e.g. McPherson 2015). This implies that using reflective equilibrium as a methodological tool providing epistemically correct theories is burdened with the following presuppositions: (1) There is some objectively existing subject of inquiry, (2) this subject is epistemically attainable.

This problem is subsequently reflected in the two different ways of conducting reflective equilibrium, as proposed by T. M. Scanlon, who distinguished between a descriptive and a deliberative account of reflective equilibrium. While the former aims to characterise the conception of justice (justice serves as an example here; in general, it can be substituted by any moral theory or thesis on which we are reflecting) held by a certain person or group, the latter should help us figure out what to believe about justice (Scanlon 2003, 142-43). These two different accounts have different implications for the role of 'considered judgements' or initial inputs in general. While, in the deliberative account, considered judgements are our beliefs about some question or problem (morality or justice), the descriptive account presupposes that these judgements somehow represent our moral intuitions, our moral sensibility or moral truths in general (Scanlon 2003, 142-43). In the case of the descriptive account of the method, the outcome theory is not normative or justificatory in the sense that it would include some deontic operator or imperative. Rather, it is descriptive or explanatory in relation to moral truths, which as such do not imply any particular normative proposition. That being said, this implies that reflective equilibrium can be used in both senses as two subsequent phases. In the first – descriptive – phase we aim to reveal moral truths, while in the second – deliberative – phase we aim to formulate a normative theory based on those truths. These two accounts of equilibrium are worthy of note, since they mirror the differences between empirical and normative theory and the Humean 'is-ought' problem, represented by the question of the extent to which the "ought" can be defined based on an "is" and accordingly what the relation between facts and norms is. Despite the fact that some authors stress (see e.g. G. A. Cohen 2008, 257) that the normative principles may have the status of ontological truths as well, the ontological status of normative propositions is itself a metaphysical question on which there is deep disagreement (Nussbaum 2001, 890).

3.2. Epistemic desiderata of reflective equilibrium

In regard to the epistemic desiderata of the method, we arrive at the problem of the meta-justification of reflective equilibrium that can provide a convincing explanation as to why the mechanism and operations performed through the method lead to epistemically correct outcomes. For this, we need to identify the general epistemic desiderata of the method. Drawing on McPherson (2015, 652), we can define plausibility, vindication and adjudication as the most general desiderata of any philosophical (methodological)

theory. However, there are also desiderata that depend on the meta-justification of the particular method itself. With regard to reflective equilibrium we can, according to Kappel (2007, 132), define the following desiderata: consistency; systematicity (a belief set should contain explanatory relations); generality (a belief set should cover a larger area rather than a smaller one); simplicity (general explanatory beliefs should be few and simple rather than many and complex); intuitive acceptability (a moral belief set or moral theories should fit our considered moral judgements); and the last desideratum is linked to the trade-offs between previous desiderata in order to maximize their overall effect.

The first four desiderata are linked to the previously mentioned internal validity and general logical consistency and as such can be more or less assessed objectively by all agents in the same way, according to the rules of logic. Yet the assessment of the fifth and sixth desiderata is not connected to the reflected theory itself, but rather to the individual agents and their sets of beliefs. Therefore, the assessment of whether these desiderata have been met can be interpreted differently by the individual agents and analogically can be prone to subjective distortion. Naturally, due to the inclusion of these desiderata, reflective equilibrium can be prone to confirmation biases of our prior beliefs or hypotheses, as we tend naturally to prefer those principles and those outcomes of equilibrium that are convenient to our individual interests, values or cultural background.

A more implicit normative distortion, linked to the method itself and its epistemic desiderata, is the tendency to favour arguments and theories that are separated from the domains linked to the deep disagreement. This is one of the main intrinsic methodological problems of reflective equilibrium: even though the process through which we are reassessing our judgments and principles might end with persisting incoherence – so we will not be sure which one of the reflected variants is correct – in general, we aim to find a conclusion and decide which of the reflected variants is correct or how we should define our moral conception towards some particular problem. As Jaroslav Peregrin emphasises, reflective equilibrium makes sense only when the theory or thesis is very well confirmed and the contradictory cases are few and not crucial (Peregrin and Svoboda 2017, 92). Therefore, if we have a well-confirmed general theory that is already consistent at many levels, yet we still have some counterexamples that disprove or falsify the theory, we may consider either excluding counterexamples or adjust the theory so it grasps these counterexamples (usually at the expense of its generality). This, however, might be a moment where the implicit distortion of reflective equilibrium emerges. This issue is linked with our aspiration to achieve a final and definite statement. As Wayne Norman noted (1998), to do this, we have to avoid inherently problematic questions and judgements on which there is likely to be disagreement – those linked to the 'metaphysics, meta-ethics, religion and "speculative" theories of the human sciences and linguistics' (Norman 1998, 284).

This inherent feature of reflective equilibrium is paradoxical, in that the method was developed to provide a basis for the formulation of general rules on how society should be organised in the context of pluralist, heterodox states divided by the deep disagreements

of their citizens. Nevertheless, it appears that the way to solve this disagreement is to exclude it by narrowing the scope of reflected domains and issues to the less problematic ones. This tendency can be subsequently attributed to the heritage of positivist thinking that treated questions linked with metaphysics and meta-ethics as illegitimate, since they could not be conclusively falsified or verified. For a similar reason, political liberalism also requires separation from metaphysics, as that is (from the perspective of political liberals) the only way to evade deep disagreement. We can conclude that reflective equilibrium serves affirmatively towards the normative requirements of political liberalism as it basically reproduces its normative propositions. As such, it cannot provide a freestanding justification because the epistemic desiderata of the method are not epistemically justified themselves and lead to various normative distortions.

3.3. How to incite epistemic capacity of reflective equilibrium?

One possible way of dealing with the distortions inherent in the method is to challenge its individualistic account. Alice Baderin argues that reflective equilibrium should be used as a public method of inquiry, in the modest sense (2017, 3) because of the superiority of public opinion over philosophical opinion. Furthermore, there might also be epistemic reasons for using reflective equilibrium on the public account. We can relate to the arguments proposed by proponents of epistemic democracy usually linked to Condorcet's jury theorem[10] and the importance of dispersing knowledge which should magnify the epistemic diversity of the initial inputs of reflective equilibrium.[11] As David Estlund puts it:

> It is natural to suppose that there would be even more epistemic value if each, incorporating his or her special self-regarding information into an overall view, were to apply intelligence directly to the question 'What ought we to do?' Not only might each come to a more accurate view on that question but also now they are in a position to reason with each other about a common topic. (2007, 177-78)

The use of reflective equilibrium on the public account can therefore not only increase its epistemic correctness by including diverse inputs at the initial phase, but also tackle the problem of confirmation biases linked to the strictly individualistic and subjectivist use of the method and the tendency of agents to affirm the arguments and norms that favour their own interests. Furthermore, the public use of the method is the only justifiable way of determining whether the questions linked to the deep comprehensive views (that is, the previously mentioned metaphysical, meta-ethical or religious questions) of individual

---

10] 'If each member of a jury has an equal and independent chance, better than random but worse than perfect, of making a correct judgment on whether a defendant is guilty (or on some other factual proposition), the majority of jurors is more likely to be correct than each individual juror, and the probability of a correct majority judgment approaches 1 as the jury size increases. Thus, under certain conditions, majority rule is good at "tracking the truth" (List 2013).

11] This idea was originally proposed by F. A. Hayek with respect to the free-market mechanism, however nowadays it is also one of the main arguments of the advocates of deliberative models of democracy.

agents are truly unresolvable or whether we can find some overlapping consensus and minimal agreement on some basic norms, principles and reasons. In other words: in order to be able to conclude whether there really are some shared reasons or reasons that 'all can accept', we need to actually include and ask 'all', rather than theorise about this matter from a strictly individualistic perspective.

4. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS: WHY WE NEED MORE PROFOUND DISCUSSION ON METHODS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In this paper, I argued that the discussion concerning the methods of political philosophy should not be separated from the discussion about the position and role of political philosophy within political science (and science in general). The current discussion on the methodology of political philosophy indicating a general shift to the method-based process of inference within political-philosophical theorising can be a sign of ongoing 'positivisation' and the efforts of political philosophers to adjust political philosophy to the domain of science. This process had already begun as the analytical political philosophy incorporated premises from logical positivism about the unity of method of science and philosophy. The heritage of logical positivism that is visible in contemporary analytical political philosophy can be attributed to the insistence on the verification and assessment of external validity of normative political theories in order to provide a scientific type of knowledge.

This tendency, however, affects the overall topical scope of the discipline and results in its 'de-metaphysication', since metaphysical statements cannot be conclusively verified or falsified. I have outlined the limitations of the method of reflective equilibrium, which, due to its epistemic desiderata, results in evading issues producing deep disagreement – typically those linked to metaphysical questions. For this reason, the uncritical use of reflective equilibrium can undermine the critical role of political philosophy, as it leads to an implicit affirmation of the normative stance of political liberalism, which is to eliminate metaphysical sources of justification from the political.

I have argued that the epistemic capacity of reflective equilibrium is not separable from the presupposition about the ontological basis of the initial inputs as well as from its overall epistemic desiderata. For this reason, it is questionable to what extent reflective equilibrium produces epistemically correct outcomes solely on the grounds of its own mechanism since epistemic correctness derives from the presupposition about the initial inputs and epistemic desiderata of the whole process. For this reason, it also seems indefensible to use reflective equilibrium as a justificatory basis providing the 'freestandingness' of a political justification within political liberalism (or elsewhere).

Nonetheless, the criticism of reflective equilibrium and the analytical branch should by no means serve as an argument for refuting this branch and its methods (or discussion on methods in political philosophy) *en bloc*. Rather, a further rethinking of the proper employment of the method is necessary. Regarding the epistemic aims of the

method, it is important to recognise the impossibility of a conclusion as one of the possible epistemic outcomes. For the discipline of political philosophy, this means accepting deep disagreements and essential pluralism not just as the initial problems that should be solved through the method-based process of inquiry but also as the possible and legitimate outcome of it. As McPherson states, one of the reasons we need a methodology of political philosophy is to determine whether the central substantive disagreements can be attributed to the methods as such or to the disagreeing parties (see McPherson 2015, 654).

Nevertheless, the establishment of the criteria for the assessment of the reliability and epistemic capacity of the methods of political philosophy is a task still to be done. Largely, it is dependent on the habits, practices and standards of the community of political philosophers, which would, indeed, benefit from greater transparency and methodological clarity not only for the sake of those who want to engage with the discipline themselves (the political philosophers to be) but also for anyone (whether they are academics, politicians or members of the general public) who would like to establish their knowledge of politics on philosophical foundations. To systematically and explicitly reflect how we formulate our normative propositions is the first step towards regaining and securing the credibility of the discipline of political philosophy and consequently also towards restoring its epistemic authority and relevance in the system of science.

krepelova@mail.muni.cz

REFERENCES

Baderin, Alice. 2017. Reflective equilibrium: Individual or Public? *Social Theory and Practice*, 43 (1), 1-28.

Barry, Brian. 1970. *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy*. London: Collier-Macmillan.

Berg-Schlosser, Dirk a Theo Stammen. 2000. Úvod do politické vědy. Praha: Institut pro středoevropskou kulturu a politiku.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1962. Does Political Theory Still Exist? By Isaiah Berlin. In *Philosophy, Politics and Society (second series)*. Oxford. Basil Blackwell.

Blau, Adrian. 2017. Introduction: A How-to Approach. In *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Brown, Wendi. 2010. Political Theory Is Not a Luxury: A Response to Timothy Kaufman Osborn's "Political Theory as a Profession. *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3.

Cohen, Gerald A. 2008. Rescuing Justice and Equality. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Creath, Richard. 2017. Logical Empiricism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* edited by Edward N. Zalta.

Daniels, Norman. 2018. Reflective Equilibrium. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* edited by Edward N. Zalta.

Dowding, Keith. 2016. *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Education, Political Analysis.

Dryzek, John S., Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips. 2006. Introduction. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dummet, Michale. 2014. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy.* London. Bloomsbury Academic Publishing.

Easton, David. 1951. The Decline of Modern Political Theory. *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 36–58.

Estlund, David. 2008. *Democratic authority: a philosophical framework.* Princeton, n. J.: Princeton University Press.

Fay, Brian. 2002. *Současná filosofie sociálních věd: multikulturní přístup.* Praha. Sociologické nakladatelství.

Floyd, Jonathan. 2017. *Is Political Philosophy Impossible?: Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative Political Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gaus, Gerald, Chad Van Schoelandt. 2017. Consensus on what? Convergence for what? Four Models of Political Liberalism. *Ethics.* 128:1, 145-72.

Gaus, Gerald. 2011. The Range of Justice (or, How to Retrieve Liberal Sectual Tolerance). Cato Unbound a Journal of Debate.

Gerring, John, Joshua Yesnowitz. 2006. A Normative Turn in Political Science? *Polity.* Vol. 38, Issue 1, 101–133.

Gunell, John. 2010. Value-free Social Science. In *Encyclopedia of Political Theory,* edited by Mark Bevir, vol. 1-3. Thousand Oaks, ca: Sage publications.

———. 2011. *Political Theory and Social Science Cutting Against the Grain.* Palgrave Macmillan. New York. St. Martin's Press.

Hacking, Ian. 1975. *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* Cambridge University Press.

Hasan, Ali, Richard Fumerton. 2018. Foundationalist theories of epistemic justification. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.

Hawkesworth, Mary. 2010. From Constitutive Outside to the Politics of Extinction: Critical Race theory, Feminist Theory, and Political Theory. *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (3). University of Utah, Sage Publications.

Heywood, Andrew. 2005. *Politická teorie.* Praha: Eurolex Bohemia.

Kappel, Klemens. 2006. The Meta-justification of Reflective Equilibrium. *Ethical theory and Moral practice*, 9 (2), 131-47.

Kasza, Gregory J. 2010. The Marginalization of Political Philosophy and its Effects on the Rest of the Discipline. *Political research quarterly* 63 (3). University of Utah, Sage Publications, inc.

Kaufman-Osbourne, Timothy. 2006. Dividing the domain of political science: on the fetishism of subfields. *Polity*, 38 (1), 41-71.

———. Timothy. 2010. Political theory as a profession and as subfield? *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 655-73, published by sage publications, inc.

Knight, Karl. 2017. Reflective equilibrium. In *Methods in Analytical Political Theory,* edited by Adrian Blau. *Cambridge University Press.*

Larmore, Charles. 1996. *The Morals of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press.

Laslett, Peter. 1956. *Philosophy, politics and Society.* 1st Series Oxford, UK: Basil.

Leca, Jean. 2010. Political Philosophy in Political Science: Sixty Years on. *International Political Science Review* 31 (5), 525–38.

Leopold, David, and Marc Stears. 2008. *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

List, Christian, Social Choice Theory, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, URL = https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/social-choice/ (accessed 21.11. 2019).

List, Christian, and Laura Valentini. 2016. Methodology of political theory. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*, edited by Herman Cappelen, Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDermott, Daniel. 2008. Analytical political philosophy. In *Political theory: methods and approaches*, edited by Leopold, David and Marc Stears. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Mcpherson, Tristram. 2015. The Methodological Irrelevance of Reflective Equilibrium. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods* edited by Chris Daly. Palgrave Macmillan. 652-74.

Miller, David, and Richard Dagger. 2003. Analytical Political Philosophy. In *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-century Political Thought*, edited by Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moore, J. Matthew. 2010. Political Theory Today: Results of a National Survey. *Political Science and Politics*, vol. 43, no. 2.

———. 2011. How (and what) Political Theorists Teach: Results of a National Survey. *Journal of Political Science Education*, vol. 7, no. 1: 95-128.

Norman, Wayne. 1998. Inevitable and Unacceptable? Methodological Rawlsianism in Anglo-american Political Philosophy. *Political studies.* xlvi, 27. 294.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 2001. Political Objectivity. *New literary history.* 32: 883–906.

———. 2011. Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism. *Philosophy & public affairs*, vol. 39, no. 1: 3–45.

Peregrin, Jaroslav. 1992. *Historický úvod do analytické filosofie.* Praha: Herrmann a synové.

Peter, Fabienne. 2013. Epistemic Foundations of Political Liberalism. *Journal of Moral Philosophy.* 10 (5): 598-620.

Pincock, Christopher. 2016. Logical Empiricism. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology, edited by* Herman Cappelen, Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rawls, John. 1995. *Political Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press. John Dewey Essays in Philosophy.

Russell, Berthrand. 1945. *A History of Western Philosophy.* New York. Simon & Schuster.

Scanlon, Thomas Michael. 2002. Rawls on Justification. In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 139-67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schwartz, Stephen. 2012. *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy from Russell to Rawls.* Sussex. John Wiley & Sons.

Shapiro, Ian. 2005. *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences.* Princeton University Press.

Simons, Peter. 2013. Metaphysics in Analytic Philosophy. In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Michael Beaney. Oxford University Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1988. *What is Political Philosophy?* University Chicago Press.

Talisse, B. Robert. 2009. *Democracy and Moral Conflict.* Cambridge University Press.

Wall, Steven. 2015. The *Cambridge Companion to Liberalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy.

Wolff, Jonathan. 2013. Analytic Political Philosophy. In T*he Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Michael Beaney. Oxford University Press.