Truth versus Democratic Pluralism

Tim Heysse
RIPPLE – Research in Political Philosophy Leuven
Institute of Philosophy –KU Leuven
Kard. Mercierplein 2
B-3000 Leuven
Belgium
Tim.Heysse@hiw.kuleuven.be

Abstract: The liberal conception of public reason assumes that there is a opposition between the values of truth and pluralism. On the one hand, truth is single and therefore in searching for a true answer we are hoping for a position about which, in David Wiggins’ phrase, “there is nothing else to think”. On the other hand, the pluralism of philosophical, ethical and moral views present in our democracies requires of us not only to recognize but also to appreciate the fact that something else is being thought or may always be thought in the future. For conflicting with the value of pluralism, liberal philosophers urge us the abandon the allegedly apolitical notion of ‘truth’ and to substitute ‘reasonable acceptance’ for it, at least on the political forum.

This paper argues that appearances of incompatibility between truth and pluralism derives not from the singularity of truth, but rather from an certain interpretation of truth’s role in democracy and political deliberation, which in turn inspires a specific but equally unwarranted historical interpretation of democratic politics. I will show that an approach that clarifies truth’s actual role in our political practices together with its correct temporal dimensions, reduces the tension between truth and pluralism.

One of John Rawls’s more contentious recommendations is to replace the concept of ‘truth’ by ‘reasonable acceptability’ when trying to establish a public basis of justification for the exercise of coercive power. Political liberalism recognizes that our political culture is permanently marked by pluralism and aims at impartiality between the incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines in society. As part of this impartiality “political liberalism rather than referring to its political conception of justice as true, refers to it as reasonable instead”. Political liberalism, “does not use (or deny) the concept of truth […]. Rather, [it] does without the concept of truth”. Equally famously, Thomas Nagel argued that “liberalism requires that a limit somehow be drawn to appeals to the truth in political argument”2. In the non-public sphere we can without any problems argue and invoke the truth of our beliefs and even appeal to specific conceptions of truth. But the political reasonableness demanded of citizens deliberating about what principles or structures of social cooperation to impose on each other “is not an epistemological idea (though it has epistemological elements)”. It is “part of a political idea of democratic citizenship” that subordinates citizens’ concern for truth to a desire for “a social world in which they […] can cooperate with others on terms all can accept”3.
There recommendations are not inspired by a general position with regard to moral or religious truth, such as moral scepticism or semantic reservations about moral truths. Nor does liberalism eliminate moral principles or concerns from politics, of course. The claim is that there is something to the concept of truth itself that may result in it being part of our idea of democratic citizenship that we subordinate our concern for truth to the aim of reasonable acceptability in public deliberation.

More specifically, the main conceptual reason liberals such as Rawls and Nagel have for avoiding ‘truth’ in justifying coercive power can be summarily labeled the ‘singularity’ of truth; it is a platitude, if not a fundamental principle of thought, that there is only one true answer to an unambiguously framed question. In searching for a true answer to the question what to impose on society or in claiming to have one, we are hoping for or claiming to have an answer about which about which, in David Wiggins’ felicitous phrase, “there is nothing else to think”. Yet pluralism confronts us with the fact that something else is being thought. More importantly, we do not see this fact as a problem. Pluralism is an integral part of what makes our societies democratic and of what we value in them “as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions”. For conflicting with the value of pluralism, liberal philosophers urge us to replace ‘truth’ with ‘reasonable acceptance’ and to remove the search for truth from the political forum and into the nonpublic realm.

This paper argues that the appearance of incompatibility between truth and pluralism (as explained more fully in section 1) derives not from the singularity of truth, but rather from a misunderstanding of truth’s role in democratic politics and political deliberation, which in turn inspires an unwarranted historical picture of that role (section 2). Clarifying truth’s actual role in political deliberation together with its temporal implications (section 3) reduces the tension between truth and pluralism and thereby decreases the force of at least one argument for restricting the use of truth on the public forum.

1. The values of truth and pluralism

One obvious way to bring out the opposition between truth and pluralism is to call to mind the ominous connotations Wiggins’ phrase ‘there is nothing else to think’ cannot avoid in politics. As the historical record proves, there is reason to fear that political power might be used to eradicate pluralism, to impose what those in power believe to be true on dissenting subjects in morally unacceptable ways, thereby stirring up conflict and destabilizing society. An important aspect of an appreciation for pluralism is, liberals argue, a proper deference for the autonomy and equality
of citizens supporting doctrines we reject as untrue. It requires a specific interpretation of the *legitimacy* of political power based, in one representative version, on this “moral idea”:

“no person can legitimately be coerced […] unless sufficient reasons can be given that do not violate that person’s reasonable philosophical convictions, true or false, right or wrong.”

A conviction’s truth is explicitly or implicitly “held to be neither necessary nor sufficient” for being admitted to the circle of convictions the violation of which would undermine legitimacy. Democratic deliberation may well provide the reasons politically justifying the exercise of power, but this does not entail that it be viewed as a search for truth. On the contrary, the search for true principles or (morally) correct legal rules and arrangements may interfere with finding reasons and decisions that are acceptable and thereby legitimize power. Put more generally, truth is argued to be an apolitical notion, in the sense that an aspiration for truth may interfere with concerns of an unmistakably political nature; it is therefore inconvenient, if not dangerous, to introduce it into the political domain.

In recent years this part of the liberal orthodoxy has been crumbling; prominent supporters of liberalism (such as Joshua Cohen and David Estlund) are now following earlier critics like Joseph Raz (and, to be fair, Nagel himself) in insisting on the inevitability of truth in expounding liberalism: if “no doctrine is available in [political] justification unless it is acceptable […] not even this doctrine itself”, this is the case, “because such an acceptability criterion is true or correct independently of such acceptability”. If the liberal principle of legitimacy holds that doctrines are no less authorized as appropriate contributions to political deliberation for their falsity, “what it claims must be true, namely that the […] doctrines in question […] do genuinely morally warrant, say, coercive enforcement and/or duties to comply”. Even a liberalism such that of Rawls, the utmost respect for freedom and equality as expressed in the liberal principle of legitimacy cannot enjoin that citizens entirely “do without the concept of truth”. And this suggest at least that the singularity of truth can accommodate pluralism and respect for supporters of doctrines different from our own better than originally thought.

Of course, this ‘rehabilitation’ of truth on the public forum does not answer all the questions. There remain pressing moral and political issues of how to reconcile in actual practice a concern for truth with due respect for supporters of doctrines different from our own and to assuage fears that pluralism be suppressed. Other important issues concern the beliefs underlying objectionable uses of what is supposedly the truth – not all of which are obviously silly; such as the belief that those in power may or even ought to act (politically) on what they believe to be
true\textsuperscript{15} or that epistemic competence varies significantly and is a relevant qualification for holding political power\textsuperscript{16}.

In this paper, to repeat, I set these issues of the uses of truth to one side in order to reexamine the conceptual opposition between the singularity of truth and pluralism. Explaining the status of the liberal principle of legitimacy as a principle that claims to be true does not result in adequate understanding of this opposition. For it has not altered the principle’s content nor its conception of public reasonableness and deliberation as demanded by democratic citizenship. On the contrary, the truth of the liberal principle entails precisely that political deliberation on more specific and lower level issues should still give priority to the aim of reaching conclusions that are merely acceptable and therefore politically useful in establishing a stable democracy. Only on a very general and higher order level of political-philosophical principles of legitimacy, has ‘truth’ proven to be not entirely eliminable from our political vocabulary.

This partial ‘rehabilitation’ of truth may therefore lead to what I will call ‘a mixed approach’, an approach that maintains the distinction between political and epistemic dimensions of democracy and therefore preserves, at least conceptually, the separation of democratic politics from the concern for truth. In section 2, I shall argue that such a mixed approach rests on a twofold underestimation: it cannot do justice to the pervasive role of truth in democratic politics nor to these aspects of our appreciation for pluralism that cannot be understood in terms of respect for people holding views different from our own.

As a matter of fact there are valuable aspects to pluralism in addition to respect for dissenters. One of these regards the fundamentally provisional or open nature of democratic decisions, principles and arrangements. Although most democratic decision-making is concerned with fleeing issues of administration, as a society we sometimes intend our decisions to have more lasting effects and we justify them by general considerations – fundamental decisions on basic structure and principles, about the kind of society and democracy that we want to form. (In this paper, I will mainly be concerned with such principled decisions). Their intended permanence and generality notwithstanding, these fundamental decisions are characterized by the peculiar provisionality that I have in mind here. This provisionality does not just follow from the undeniable fact that political and social reality does not always correspond to our moral or political principles or that democracy must continually adapt to new conditions. It derives from the acknowledgment that, in a democracy, a decision, however basic or general, can never be the end of the matter; “the right of minority dissent after a law is passed is constitutive of democracy and essential to its proper functioning”\textsuperscript{17}? An approval of this provisional nature of democracy is
not merely essential to democracy but follows directly from our appreciation for pluralism, but now applied to beliefs, attitudes and practices adopted in the future.

Yet again the introduction of truth into our understanding of democracy appears to be incompatible with a recognition of this provisionality as a value. For another platitude of truth proclaims its “stability”: if a belief or an assertion is true, it always is. Accordingly, the search for true beliefs seems to entail looking forward to the moment in history when we will have arrived at beliefs that are stably true – beliefs that we will have no good reason to deviate from. In insisting that democratic deliberation is at least sometimes aimed at discovering true answers to fundamental political questions, we seem to envisage, by our use of the very concept of truth, a moment in time when stably true answers will have been discovered. At that moment we will possess a framework for living together constituted of stably true beliefs or principles; variety in history will be reduced, if not to error, to different adaptations of that framework. To be sure, aiming at truth is compatible with an essential fallibilism, with a recognition that we are still far removed from the truth. Particularly valuable in democracy is precisely its “fallibilism and the institutional capacity for experimentation”\(^{18}\). But fallibilism does not help us in reconciling truth with a true appreciation of provisionality which refuses to see that provisionality as a defect. For does it not suggest that this provisionality derives from the fact that we are still deprived of the true principles that we hope to discover in the future?

The notion of a stable truth seems incompatible with a true appreciation of the fundamental nature of this provisionality of democracy; provisionality is looked upon as being either a administrative matter of adapting the permanent framework of stably true principles to changing circumstances or as a condition of ignorance that we hope to overcome.

A third dimension of our appreciation of pluralism concerns pluralism itself, the very fact of diversity. Appreciation of diversity is in some measure independent of our respect for the persons supporting dissenting views. It is expressed, for example, by the thought that a monocultural situation where all agree and the matter of respecting dissidents does not even arise, is perhaps less than desirable. Valuing this aspect of pluralism seems, yet again, difficult to reconcile with the singularity of truth. Again, an interest in truth (even if singular) is compatible with appreciating that reasonable people may disagree (as a result of what Rawls has called “the burdens of judgment”, for example). Disagreement might be welcomed as fostering the search for truth, promoting criticism and moral and political creativity (as Mill, Popper or Dewey would have insisted)\(^{19}\). Nevertheless, the concept of truth does entail “an intolerance of disagreement”\(^{20}\). Disagreement is “simply on the basis that we are prepared to make a contrary assertion an indication of culpable error, on one side or other\(^{20}\). Conversely, an aspiration for truth seems to
make “what would otherwise be no-fault disagreements into unstable social situations, whose instability is only resolved by argument and consequent agreement”\textsuperscript{21}. Disagreements, even if welcomed, are seen as points of departure for a consecutive elimination of divergence and a progressive conquest of truth. This intolerance of disagreement entailed by truth seems incompatible with full appreciation of pluralism and diversity.

These aspects of pluralism, additional to our respects for dissenters, need not be as valuable as suggested here, nor need there be anything wrong in entertaining visions of overcoming them. Yet an interpretation of truth’s role in democratic politics less incompatible with pluralism in its various dimensions will be at an advantage; it will avoid prejudging the controversies about these aspects of pluralism on the basis of a certain view of truth. In the third section of this paper, I will attempt a reconciliation between the values of truth and pluralism in all its dimensions.

Interestingly, moreover, these additional aspects of pluralism introduce an historical dimension into our inquiry. Truth seems to introduce an historical picture of our pluralistic society that dilutes our appreciation for pluralism. For we seem compelled, at least conceptually, to look upon the current situation of doctrinal diversity and provisional decisions as a deficiency that, ultimately and in ideal circumstances that perhaps never actually pertain, should be overcome by pursuing stable truth. This attitude towards diversity and provisionality remains, even if we acknowledge that we will never (definitely know that we have) reach(ed) the truth.

As this is not the place to discuss the nature of truth, I will follow such authors on political reasonableness as Cohen and Estlund in adopting certain platitudes that according to Crispin Wright govern the attribution of the predicate to beliefs or assertions (including normative or moral ones)\textsuperscript{22}. Especially noteworthy here are the following commonplaces (some of which have already been alluded to): 1) “Truth is the norm governing beliefs and assertions”: believing or asserting that p is believing or asserting that p is true; 2) Truth and justification are distinct: a belief or an assertion may be warranted without being true and therefore truth is important in a way different from the way that warrant is important; 3) Truth is stable: if a belief or an assertion, is ever true, it always is\textsuperscript{23}.

2. Combining truth and acceptance

The liberal principle stipulates that nothing more than reasonable acceptance is required for political legitimacy, but its very authority presupposes that we accept it as true. As pointed out, this acknowledgment of the principle’s claim to truth leaves unaltered its content, its conception
of the reasonableness demanded of democratic citizens in public deliberation. Whatever the specific content various supporters of the liberal principle give to ‘reasonableness’, it will be, as with Rawls, different from an epistemic form of reasonableness.24

This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that, subsequently, citizens may receive reassurances about the epistemic merits of public deliberation. For instance, central to Estlund’s explicitly epistemic proceduralism is the following affirmation: in addition to having the political merit of discovering acceptable propositions and thereby assuring legitimacy, democratic deliberation possesses a measure of epistemic value; it has “a tendency to produce outcomes that are correct by independent standards”25. Discussion about the precise extent and nature of deliberation’s epistemic merits notwithstanding, all defenders of an epistemic interpretation of democracy will agree that, at the very least, “democracy is better than random and is epistemically the best among those that are generally acceptable in the way that political legitimacy requires”26.

Nevertheless, this does not alter the main point: the assessment of the epistemic merits of deliberation is merely deployed “as a selection device”27. It serves to justify a preference for deliberation within the set of procedures that create results that are reasonably acceptable in the non-epistemic sense specified above:

“Whereas it might be, from an epistemic point of view, more effective and more accurate to settle a political issue by looking directly at the independent standards themselves, rather than wait for the outcome of political debate, deliberation is valuable for its political merits in creating acceptance among the various doctrines for a conclusion”28.

From a strictly political point of view, the fact that deliberation is better than random in arriving at the truth is an additional bonus. It may be used, in second instance, as an argument to strengthen our adherence to a proposition that we have accepted already anyway for other reasons than the epistemic merits of deliberation. Truth is still viewed as an apolitical concept that has only secondarily and indirectly a role to play in our understanding of democratic politics; we can point to the epistemic merits of deliberation in order to strengthen the justification of deliberative decisions that have already been accepted for political reasons (their acceptability).

All of this may tempt us to what we may call a “non-monistic”29 or mixed approach. As I cannot discuss in detail all the available views about the precise relation between ‘truth’ and ‘political reasonableness’, I will use the general label ‘mixed approach’ in order to refer to an interpretation of democracy and democratic deliberation that attempts to yoke and thereby also distinguishes ‘reasonable acceptance’ in a political sense on the one hand and ‘truth’ or
‘correctness’ on the other hand, where ‘correctness’ is defined by independent standards. The expression ‘independent standards’ does not mean “that the standards are independent of any possible or conceivable procedure, but only that they are independent (logically) of the actual procedure that gave rise to the outcome in question”31. Admittedly, under the label ‘mixed approach’ I lump together very different views. However, my concern is less with the details of these views as with the non-epistemic notion of reasonableness, the general idea of independent standards of truth and with the very attempt at combining these notions in making sense of democracy and pluralism.

Partly elaborating on objections that have been made before, I will marshal three objections against the mixed approach. In doing so, I am primarily interested in detecting indications of an alternative understanding of the relations between truth and pluralism, to be developed in the next section. For that reason I will not question whether a deliberative process where participants set greater store by the reasonable acceptability of arguments and outcomes than by their truth and hold a conviction’s truth “to be neither necessary nor sufficient” for being admitted to discussions of legitimacy, does indeed have the epistemic merits attributed to it.

My first objection develops the remark at the beginning of this section; on a “mixed” approach, the liberal principle is recognized as a general principle claiming to be true, yet truth still has no significant role to play in our understanding of democratic politics. For deliberation about what is to be imposed on society serves the entirely political aim of generating legitimacy by identifying positions that are reasonably acceptable; the probability of these positions being true is only relevant in strengthening our already existing adherence to the outcomes of that deliberation. My objection is that this underestimates truth’s role in politics – even on its own (revised) liberal view of politics. The intrusion of the notion of truth and of appeals to truth cannot be restricted to its attribution to the liberal principle of legitimacy.

Let us grant that a version of the principle is effective as a legitimating and authorizing principle provided it is considered to be true. Consequently, a supporter of the liberal principle (as the true principle of legitimacy) cannot any longer distinguish between the success of a proposition in gaining reasonable acceptance and its being the morally correct or true basis for legitimately imposed decisions32. Certainly, the decisions actually reached may not completely satisfy all of her relevant (ethical or religious) beliefs, but as she know that those beliefs are not reasonably acceptable she knows that they cannot form the basis for legitimate political decisions. As a supporter of liberal legitimacy, she accepts that political decisions are justified by political propositions about what is to be imposed given the actual state of society (the beliefs actually
held in society); they cannot be based on (ethical or other) propositions – even if believed by her to be true – about what would be the best state for society to be in.

More generally, if a proposition has gained acceptance, it is, according to the liberal principle, legitimate to impose it. In other words, it is true that the proposition can be legitimately imposed. The truth value of such statements depends on the liberal principle, and, as assumed, this principle’s truth does not itself depend on acceptance. This is not merely the trivial point that every decision about which citizens deliberate, is based on truths, such as truths about the success of propositions in gaining acceptance. It shows that what is at stake, for a supporter of the liberal principle of legitimacy as well, is not merely to discover what proposals are acceptable (or to discover truths about acceptability); it is to discover the truth value of political statements about what it is legitimate to impose. Such propositions cannot be reduced to mere truths about success in gaining acceptance.

All of this applies to any decision that is claimed to be legitimately imposed, not just decisions about constitutional essentials or principles of basic justice but everyday political decisions as well. In this sense, issues of truth pervade politics. Accordingly, the reasonableness required in political deliberation inevitably includes an epistemic dimension. The aim of public deliberation – for the supporter of the liberal principle as much as anyone – is to discover the true answer to the question what is to be done in society, what decisions should be enforced. The political use of the notion of truth cannot be not limited to some very general and higher order level of political-philosophical principles. Even a supporter of the liberal principle cannot maintain a mixed approach that understand the epistemic merits of deliberation or politics only as secondarily underwriting the legitimacy of decisions that have already proven to be reasonably acceptable.

On a mixed approach the aim of political deliberation is still argued to be the discovery of reasonably acceptable propositions. I will therefore, secondly, elaborate on objections that have been made against the very notion of (reasonable) acceptability in the original, non-epistemic sense that was not dislodged, as I contend at the beginning of this section, by the recent ‘rehabilitation’ of truth in liberalism. Reasonable acceptance in this non-epistemic sense may not always be a politically estimable goal and simply clarifying that the liberal principle itself cannot avoid claiming to be true, does not dispose of the problem. For one thing, it may be asked why is it morally preferable to require one person to live in a society that she regards as fundamentally inadequate over imposing on another terms of social cooperation that he does not accept. For another, positing reasonable acceptance as the primary criterion of legitimacy arguably overlooks
important facts of political life. One such fact is that coercion may be necessary for the provision of important public goods, such as public security. In such cases coercion is not wrong even if there is no justification that is acceptable to all.\(^{34}\)

More relevant to the issue of pluralism, however, is another such fact: in the past allegiance to democratic or moral ideals have demanded that the deep commitments and overriding obligations that others in society reasonably believed themselves to be under be questioned.\(^{35}\) By refraining us from introducing considerations that we believe to be true but have no immediate chance of being reasonably acceptable to all, the liberal principle may therefore have as a consequence that the present arrangements, at least in their fundamentals, “are reasonably taken as fixed, as settled once and for all”\(^{36}\). In this sense, the liberal principle seems to conceal (if not to undercut) the essentially provisional nature of democratic decisions and arrangements that, as I explained above, is not only essential to democracy, but also an aspect of our appreciation for pluralism, but now applied to the future.

Explaining political legitimacy in terms of a non-epistemic conception of reasonable acceptability, hampers the recognition of the provisionality of democracy. It seems sensible therefore to introduce a notion that is independent of acceptability. Perhaps a similar dissatisfaction with reasonable acceptability inspired the attempt, carried out in various ways, to prove that democratic deliberation has, over and above its political merits in securing legitimacy, the capacity to produce outcomes “that are correct by independent standards”. Unfortunately, however, there is no denying the epistemological and truth-theoretical problems raised by the idea of substantial standards of truth waiting to be identified by (social) epistemology. Rather than to review these problems, my third objection argues that independent standards of truth do not help in making sense of the provisionality of democratic arrangements. To elucidate truth’s role in democracy and its relation with pluralism, we will focus in the next section not on (standards for) ‘knowledge’ but rather on ‘belief’.

The idea of independent standards of truth makes bringing together the values of truth and pluralism even more difficult as is illustrated by one of the examples of independent standards Estlund provides; the ideals of communication in Habermas’ discourse theory of democracy and morality.\(^{37}\) Even though the exact status of these ideals are debatable,\(^{38}\) there is no doubt that for Habermas the correctness of moral norms depends on their chances of being agreed upon in ideal undistorted deliberation. And one aspect of the idealized character of such deliberation lies in its “orientation toward an ever more extensive inclusion of other claims and persons”\(^{39}\), including, as Habermas himself affirms, “claims and persons” of the future. Let us
assume that the “conditions of justification” in which we at present arrive at our “moral insights” are sufficiently ideal so as not to jeopardize their correctness. Even then we can learn at some time in the future “that we failed to anticipate relevant circumstances”. To the extent that “our moral convictions […] can be proven wrong by history”, persons interested in correct moral insights, are committed to a process of “interlocking […] perspectives approach[ing] the limit of complete inclusion”\textsuperscript{40}. As many critics such as Richard Rorty have remarked, Habermas’ ideals of communication can be interpreted as entailing the “counterfactual” vision of an “end-of-history convergence”: “Habermas wants to preserve the traditional story (common to Hegel and Peirce) of asymptotic approach to foci imaginarii”\textsuperscript{41}. For Habermas political deliberation is not merely a means of overcoming diversity, but ideally it is also seen as advancing towards a definitive opinion about which everyone will be stably agreed.

This vision of (ideally) overcoming both pluralism and provisionality does not result from the idiosyncrasies of discourse theory: it is created by the very notion of independent standards. Rorty argues that “‘truth’ only sounds like the name of a goal if is thought to name a fixed goal”\textsuperscript{42}. And truth names a fixed goal only provided we have some determinate way of identifying the end-point or giving substance to that idea of an end-point. In the discussions about realism and irrealism Rorty is concerned with, the idea of the goal or end-point commonly gains substance from “a metaphysical picture, that of getting closer to what Bernard Williams calls ‘what there is anyway’”; but substance can be given by means of standards identifying the conditions of being true as well. However we think of independent standards, if the expression ‘a search for truth’ refers to a deliberative process approaching towards a view, still unknown but ideally capable of being identified as the true view on the basis of our standards, the same conclusion follows.

If we want to interpret truth’s role in democracy in terms of independent standards we need to explain how we can avoid thinking of diversity and provisionality as circumstances that themselves are ideally provisional, unsatisfactory conditions that we have to put up with pending progress towards beliefs, certifiably part of the true and final view. Perhaps such an explanation is possible, but it may also be unnecessary. For in the following section I will provide, among other things, an account of the historicity of democratic societies that does not require the problematical idea of independent standards of truth at all.

To conclude, in trying to combine but keeping separate ‘reasonable acceptance’ in a merely political sense and ‘truth’ or ‘correctness’ as defined by independent standards, a mixed approach fails to do justice to the pervasive role of truth in democratic politics as well as to important aspects of the pluralism constitutive of our democratic societies.
3. Truth in deliberation

Our ideas on democracy and truth reveal a tension. On the one hand, we cannot understand what is at stake in democratic politics if we do not recognize that even everyday political decisions presuppose truth-apt propositions about what it is legitimate to impose. Nor can we account for the essentially provisional nature of democratic decisions, if we limit public deliberation to finding out what is reasonably acceptable. Political deliberation is a search for true answers to the political question what is to be imposed on society. On the other hand, picturing democratic deliberation as a collective search for truth about how to organize society, that is to say as a process in which we replace divergent beliefs by a singular and stable truth which, once reached, need only to be adapted to the varying circumstances, seems difficult to harmonize with unqualified appreciation for the diversity and provisionality of democratic societies.

What is the origin of this tension? Does it really ensue from the singularity and stability of truth? The last objection of the previous section discussing the notion of independent epistemological standards suggests that the tension originates rather from a notion of a search for truth. Or, more exactly, from an implicit teleological interpretation of that notion and of the singularity of truth. Such a teleological understanding consists of three components: 1) We see truth as a ultimate goal – the idea of which is given substance by independent standards. 2) We picture ongoing political deliberation and society’s fundamental political decisions not just as attempts at resolving topical problems and issues, but as consecutive steps towards that ultimate goal; political deliberation, at least partly, is aimed at and acquires significance and continuity by being aimed at the gradual discovery of true answers to our more important political questions. 3) As the ultimate goal truth transcends current deliberation and current politics: since current politics may at least partly be understood as a search for truth, once in possession of the true answers, it will be replaced by something else, by merely deciding how to adapt those answers to varying circumstances.

In what follows I will argue that if we resist the temptation to understand the role of truth in politics teleologically in terms of an approach towards an endpoint, we will find a way of resolving or at least diminishing the tension between truth and pluralism. One way of resisting this temptation would be to detail the vast differences in the political issues that have engaged people through history and the terms in which these issues have been put. Here I want to keep the analysis at the present abstract and conceptual level. For the last objection also indicates a way to proceed; criticizing the idea of standards for ascribing the property of being true, it calls attention not just to the idea of standards but also to the fact that we have been concerned mostly with truth as a property. This seems natural; after all, truth is a property. In politics, as elsewhere, we are
interested in beliefs and assertions with the right properties. Yet this almost exclusive interest in truth as a property restricts our attention to the intended *product* of the deliberative search for truth (beliefs and assertions with the desired property); we are apt to ignore the *process* itself and the pragmatically connections between truth and assertion or belief in deliberation.

To correct this somewhat skewed view, it is sufficient to elaborate platitudinously upon Wright’s commonplaces. (I will, for ease of exposition, assume that we always have explicit reasons for our beliefs and ignore other ways, in addition to deliberation, of revising our beliefs.)

1) According to the first platitude, truth is the norm governing beliefs; a belief that p “carries a claim that p is true.”\(^{44}\) When the listener takes an utterance of the speaker to reveal one of her beliefs, he attributes a commitment to that belief and therefore to the truth of that belief.

2) If the listener thinks that an assertion was justified when the speaker uttered it, he may attribute an *entitlement* to the stated belief. The listener may attribute this entitlement even if aware of reasons faulting the speaker’s assertion (or her reasons for the assertion) that she could not know at the time. In the traditional epistemological parlance of Wright’s second commonplace: the assertion was justified but not true.

3) If, however, the listener decides that the speaker’s warrant for her assertion is indeed sufficiently good and undefeated, it is no longer “a matter of attributing a commitment but rather of undertaking one – endorsing the claim oneself.”\(^{45}\) He takes the speaker to have expressed a justified *true* belief.

These various attributions and undertakings of commitments and entitlements constitutes the structure of what Robert Brandom has called the “the social articulation of the space of reasons.”\(^{46}\) It is central to his wide-ranging account of the use of concepts, which is fascinating but not our concern here. However, independently of Brandom’s theory of the conceptual and without adding, I submit, anything controversial to Wright’s platitudes, this social articulation of the space of reasons helps to clarify how truth is used in democratic deliberation. This in turn will show that we may avoid a teleological interpretation of the conceptual relations between the values of truth and pluralism. (It will be obvious that ‘deliberation’ is understood here merely in terms of Brandom’s analysis as “the game of giving and asking for reasons”\(^{47}\); it does not refer, as it often does in the at present very influential deliberative interpretations of democracy, to an interaction requiring intersubjective scrutiny and reciprocal criticism according to certain philosophically justified standards of rationality.)
A first point is that the notions of justification or warranted assertibility and truth are used to attribute and undertake commitments and entitlements to assertions of others. As such, these notions (and their antonyms) are virtually inevitable whenever we are confronted with beliefs put forward by others. I belabour this point in order to remind us of the fact that deliberation, even political deliberation, is always intrinsically epistemic in character (pace the liberal interpretations discussed in the previous sections).

This does not simply repeat the claim that truth is pervasive in politics (the first objection against a mixed approach); it serves to underscore again, maybe superfluously, that beliefs and statements need not be called ‘justified’ or ‘true’ by virtue of meeting certain epistemological standards or resulting from a deliberative process that conforms to such standards; they owe their rational status merely to the attributions and undertakings of entitlements and commitments in deliberation:

“There is no bird’s eye-view above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified, nor from which even necessary and sufficient conditions for such deserts can be formulated”48.

An expression such as ‘that is true’ is used by a particular participant to the deliberation to affirm what has been asserted by another participant. It signals one position in the deliberation among many such positions – a position that may affected by various known and unknown influences.

Furthermore, although truth is attributed to a speaker’s belief, no assumption is made that the speaker’s assertions reflect (only) what she believes. Drawing attention to the inevitability of truth in our understanding of democratic politics and insisting on an epistemic conception of public deliberation as a search for truth does not imply that we imagine all political actors to be concerned with discovering the truth. We need not forget that politics consists of a struggle for control over the state’s coercive power during which conflicts of interest are being fought out49. The predicate ‘is true’ crops up the moment this struggle and these conflicts are fought out by offering arguments that political actors expect to be successful in changing beliefs.

Together with the idea of independent epistemological standards, we have renounced the venerable philosophical tradition picturing the aspiration for truth as a lofty ideal lifting us far above the political scuffle. If we insist on the apolitical nature of truth, this cannot mean that truth is a concept that is alien to politics, perhaps presupposing “a bird’s eye-view above the fray”, and for that very reason risks wreaking political havoc.

More importantly, ‘truth’ does not bring into political deliberation or the political struggle any point of departure for relating deliberation and struggle to something (a goal or a point of view) that exceeds them. At no point do we need to refer to the idea of truth an ultimate goal or
an endpoint in clarifying our commitments in political deliberation. In order to introduce such ideas we need to add to Wright’s platitudes, perhaps by developing a plausible epistemological account of standards of true belief.

As announced, I suspend judgement on the feasibility or fruitfulness of the epistemological project. Accordingly, we will analyse the commitments undertaken by our use of ‘is true’ without referring to such an external position. We understand them exclusively within the context of the deliberative interaction. Such a deliberation-internal analysis of these commitments will dispel or at least reduce considerably the appearance that the singularity and the stability of truth are incompatible with an appreciation of diversity and provisionality.

As a matter of fact, second, Wright’s platitudes of truth, by insisting on the distinction between truth and justification, provide the materials to see that introducing ‘truth’ in our conception of democracy actually promotes rather than hinders a full recognition of the provisional nature of democratic societies

For truth and justification “coincide in normative force”, but “diverge in extension”; truth and justification are “registering distinct norms – distinct in the precise sense that although aiming at one is, necessarily, aiming at the other, success in the one aim need not be success in the other”50. Every reason for endorsing a sentence as justified, warrantedly assertible or reasonably acceptable is a reason to endorse it as true. Yet predicates such as ‘justified’, ‘warranted assertible’ or ‘reasonably acceptable’ are conditional; a belief is justified, if we have arrived at it in the most accurate and sincere way feasible or if it was based on the best warrant available in the circumstances. By contrast, ‘truth’ introduces an unconditional dimension; a belief is true whatever the circumstances51. For instance, once information falsifying a belief but inaccessible when we formed the belief, becomes available, we may still uphold our way of arriving at it, judging that it was based on the best evidence available but we can no longer maintain it as true52.

Setting aside possible exceptions such as simple observational and formal truths, we cannot rule out the possibility that a belief, however well justified, might turn out to be false. There is therefore a fundamental sense in which a search for truth is impossible to terminate. The distinction between truth and justification as stipulated by the platitudes therefore underwrites the fundamental provisionality of any conclusion reached in deliberation that we claim to be true.

Accordingly, we must not understand the expression ‘the stability of truth’ as conjuring up the vision of truth as a definitive goal that we ultimately hope to reach. The platitude that a statement or a belief, if true, is always true characterizes the nature of the commitments
undertaken by calling a belief true; when a listener endorses a speaker’s belief as true, he expressly disregards the situation in which the speaker formed the belief (as he does when he calls it ‘justified’) and undertakes a commitment intended to be valid independently of any circumstances.

Rather than introducing the idea of a goal, the stability of truth means that the belief must be defended in every future deliberation in which it is challenged and that this commitment can only be revoked by denying the belief’s truth. We do not commit ourselves to any goal, but to a belief. Moreover, by introducing a commitment that must be upheld when the belief is challenged, the stability of truth alerts us to a future in which at any moment our beliefs may be challenged and deliberation erupt all over again. Whoever correctly and completely understands this commitment becomes therefore acutely aware of the fact that people may in future think differently from ourselves (whatever sincere agreement exists at the moment). In that sense, it highlights the essential provisionality of any conclusion now reached in deliberation.

To return to politics, understanding public deliberation as a search for stable truth need not entail a vision of arriving at stably true beliefs about how to structure society after which history is reduced to applying those beliefs in changing circumstances – a vision that is incompatible with a full recognition of democracy’s essentially provisional nature.

Third, this analysis of the stability of truth also explains why the intolerance of disagreement implied by our use of the predicate ‘is true’ does not inspire a view of doctrinal diversity as a deficiency that we should overcome. For one thing, since the notion of truth does not by itself introduce the idea of a final goal, we need not conceive of the present diversity or disagreement in a way suggesting that we are falling short of this goal.

For another, it is useful to remember the pragmatic dimension of the predicate ‘it is true’. The differences between calling a belief ‘justified as opposed to calling it true arise from the fact that participants have distinct roles to play in deliberation and are able to take up a different position with respect to the assertions of others than they are able to do with respect to assertions of their own. The predicate is used to signal our agreement with an assertion made by somebody else. Certainly, we can always reassert one of our undisputed beliefs by sincerely but vacuously asserting ‘p is true’, or ‘it is true that p is true’ or ‘it is true that p is true is true’, etc.. Yet truth (and falsity) are primarily used to signal our position relative to the assertions of others. Once deliberation has ended in a shared conclusion, the notion of truth, in this pragmatically important usage, therefore evaporates. From a political point of view, it is these pragmatic aspects of the predicates that are of special importance.
Yet, undeniably, a commitment to the truth of a belief implies an intolerance of disagreement. If I intend my (commitment to the truth of a) belief to be justified by sufficiently good reasons, I will expect others to agree. For if I claim to have good reasons for my belief, they must be good enough for others. I must rationally expect that others will ultimately come to agree provided their judgment is sound and their (evidential) circumstances allow them access to my reasons for the belief. Worse, what the the listener will expect others to agree to is not merely that he was, in the circumstances, entitled to commit himself to the speaker’s belief; in defending the belief he will want those ‘further’ listeners to actually agree with the belief, also committing themselves to the belief by calling it true. This seems a quite strong form of intolerance of disagreement.

However, in the light of the two previous points in this section, that truth as understood does not by itself introduce the idea of an ultimate goal and that the ‘stability of truth’ does not refer to a final goal after which history will be reduced to applying the truth, we see how we should understand this intolerance of disagreement. Understanding deliberation as a search for truth demands of participants that they decide now what to believe. In other words, they must decide now which beliefs they undertake to defend and with which they are aiming to obtain consent in on-going or future deliberation. Moreover, this commitment to obtain agreement with a belief can be revoked at any time by denying the belief’s truth. In this sense, intolerance of disagreement does not imply that we picture ourselves as engaged in a search for an ultimate agreement of truths. More importantly, recalling how the distinction between truth and justification ensures the fundamental provisionality of what we claim to be true, however, we understand that this is only half the story. Agreement arising under particular circumstances will not be the end of the matter. Claiming truth not only implies an intolerance of disagreement but also makes us aware of the insufficiency of agreement. If intolerance of disagreement renders disagreement into an unstable social situation, a claim to truth entails that the stability of agreement may be shattered at any moment as well.

This seems to suggest that truth demands that we balance an intolerance of disagreement with an awareness of the insufficiency of agreement. Perhaps this is correct on a pure conceptual level. But when we adopt a political point of view and focus on truth’s role in democratic deliberation, we see that it is the insufficiency of agreement that is especially crucial. For, politically, there is a premium on reaching agreement, if only to establish or foster social unity. For that reason, truth’s effect on politics is especially telling where it shatters such a political beneficiary consensus. Put differently, as there may be good political reasons independent of a
concern for truth to promote agreement, it is by challenging the reigning consensus that we show our attachment to truth most clearly.

Accordingly, our use of the predicate ‘is true’ in our understanding of democratic politics cannot inspire a conception of diversity as a deficiency that we should overcome. On the contrary, awareness of truth’s role in democratic politics ensures that we understand that any absence of diversity cannot but be provisional.

To conclude, truth and pluralism in all its dimensions (distinguished in the first section) need not be incompatible values. What is incompatible with pluralism is a teleological understanding of the claim that public deliberation may be viewed as a search for truth. Such a teleological interpretation intimates that the more important our political discussions are part of a continuous search for final answers to fundamental political questions – answers that we hope to reach in the future. Such a teleological picture pictures the present situation of pluralism and provisionality as a shortcoming we hope to overcome.

A correct analysis of truth’s pragmatical dimensions, however, shows that such an teleological interpretation is unwarranted by the mere use of the notions of ‘truth’ or ‘a search for truth’. Quite the reverse, rather than introducing a perspective of a future state or a goal, the notion of ‘truth’ introduces into the ongoing deliberation an unconditional commitment to our beliefs which condemns any actual agreement as insufficient and provisional. A conception of democratic politics “that does without the concept of truth”, eradicates this unconditional dimension from politics and thereby deprives us of an important conceptual means of explaining why convergence cannot be the end of the matter and why the outcomes of a democratic decision-process cannot but be provisional.

Perhaps this does not amount to an appreciation for the diversity and provisionality of democratic societies. Nor will it stop those with the power to do so from imposing what they believe to be true, of course. But at the very least, it shows that citizens appreciative of pluralism must not, for that reason, relinquish ‘truth’ in their thinking about democratic politics.
Notes

1 Contentious at any rate by the number and the stature of the critics that have commented on it.


3 (Rawls 1996), 50; cf. Nagel, 1987 #952, 218

4 Indeed, there may be a real problem whether it is advisable to refer publicly to certain empirical, historical or scientific claims as truths.

5 See for instance, (Rawls 1996), 61. The label is Cohen’s, (Cohen 2009). This paper focuses on only one of the “three arguments for dropping truth while keeping reasonableness” discussed by Cohen, but the further problems for democratic politics identified by Cohen arise from Rawls’ specific interpretation of public reason.

6 See for instance, (Wiggins 1995), 244.

7 (Rawls 1996), 136, cf. XXVI-XXVII; (Cohen 2009), 7.

8 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 43. See also, for instance, (Nagel 1987), 220: “liberal theory […] bases […] legitimacy […] principles [that …] are right because they are acceptable – not generally acceptable because they are by independent standards morally right”, (Cohen 1997), 413-414; (Rawls 1996), 137; (Gaus 1999), 274, (Gaus 1986), 255-257. I will refer to this principle as the ‘liberal principle of legitimacy’, without committing myself to the label’s historical or doctrinal correctness.

9 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 43, cf. 60.

10 Cf. (Nagel 1987), 222: “If I believe something, I believe it to be true, yet here I am asked to refrain from acting on that belief in deference to beliefs I think are false”; cf. (Freeman 2000), 397.

11 According to Nagel the justification of power presupposes an appeal to impartial truths which “depends on a higher standard of objectivity” than is needed to justify belief, (Nagel 1987) 230.

12 For immediate purposes, differences in details between their positions are unimportant.

13 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 57.

14 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 60; cf. (Christiano 2009), 25.

15 Cf. (Nagel 1987), 230-231.

16 (D. Estlund 1993), (Christiano 2001).

17 (Anderson 2008), 130.

18 (Anderson 2006), 16-17.

19 For a recent version, see (Anderson 2006).

20 (Price 2003), 176, 186; cf also (Cohen 2009), 30-31;

21 (Price 2003), 181.

22 (Wright 1992, 1995); cf. (Cohen 2009), 27 and (D. Estlund 2011), 72 . Adopting these platitudes is not to deny that they may not face some problems.

23 (Wright 1995), 215-216.

24 (Anderson 2008), 135.
25 (D. Estlund 1997), 174, 177, 178; (D. M. Estlund 2008), 7, 8; cf. also (Fuerstein 2008), 74; (Nelson 2008), (Goodin 2003).

26 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 8, cf. (D. Estlund 1997), 174; (Goodin 2003), 16-17

27 (Peter 2008), 41; cf. (Anderson 2008), 134-135

28 (Christiano 1997), 253.

29 (Peter 2008), 39.

30 (Gaus 1996), 292: “Liberal politics has both a moral and an epistemological basis”. To the extent that Cohen works for a rehabilitation of truth within the confines of Rawls’ notion of public reason, the label ‘mixed approach’ applies to the position in (Cohen 2009). For his part, (Talisse 2009), 135-137 explicitly presents his own folk epistemology interpretation of democracy as complementary to Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism.

31 (D. Estlund 1997), 180, 195; cf. (D. M. Estlund 2008), 2, 25, 49. Compare (Cohen 1986), 34. Fabienne Peter’s pure epistemic proceduralism draws “on a proceduralist social epistemology” and “dispenses with procedure-independent criteria”. Insofar as the expression ‘independent standards’ as used in the mixed approach, does not need to refer to standards independent of any procedure, Peter’s pure proceduralism is an instance of the mixed approach as well, compare, (Peter 2008), 47.

32 Cf. (Raz 1990), 16, 27. This applies all the more so to a proposal for a just society; if such a proposal is acceptable, it is for a supporter of the principle truly “just in the only sense of justice that can legitimately be brought to bear in the fixing of political obligations and state powers”, (D. M. Estlund 2008), 63. cf. (Cohen 2009), 42, cf. 13-15, 8, n. 10; cf. (Gaus 1999), 275. Although Estlund notes the problem, he does not seem to draw the appropriate consequences.

33 (Christiano 2009), 30.

34 (Copp 2011), 267.

35 Reference to author*. Unless of course we idealize the notion of ‘reasonableness’, so as to include perfect information, a perfect sense of justice, etc, cf. (Gaus 1997, 1999) and (D. Estlund 1997), 178.

36 (Rawls 1996), 151, n. 16, cf. 151-152, 157, 161. The same tension between the conservatism of acceptability and the ground-breaking effects of the notion of truth seems to be at work in this remark by (Cohen 2009), 35: “the response to [those who aim to win the world for the whole truth] is […] to explain the value of a shared ground of argument among equals […] and clarify the appropriate but limited role of judgments about truth on that shared ground”.

37 (D. M. Estlund 2008), 89.

38 (Rummens 2008)

39 (Habermas 1999), 296 = (Habermas 2003), 256.

40 (Habermas 1999), 298, 299, 300= (Habermas 2003), 258, 259, 260

41 (Rorty 1989), 67 and 68.

42 (Rorty 1995), 298.
43 Cf. (Lear 2000).
44 (Williams 1973), 137.
45 (R. Brandom 1995), 903.
46 (R. Brandom 1995), 902.
49 cf. Reference to author*.
50 (Wright 1992), 18-19.
51 (Wright 1995), 215-216.
52 (McDowell 1998), 397, n. 3 and 400, n. 7.
53 (Skorupski 1999), 440-441. Cf. (Skorupski 1996), 113.
References


Rawls, John (1996), *Political Liberalism. With a New Introduction and the "Reply to Habermas* 


