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Understanding in Political Science: A Primary, Complementary or Supplementary Task?

Abstract: This paper is a contribution to the discussion concerning the methodological and theoretical orientation of the Polish political science community. It aims to answer the question posed in the title by analysing representative texts by Polish political theorists. The scholarly output of four well-known political scientists – Filip Pierzchalski, Kamil Minkner, Artur Laska and Łukasz Młyńczyk – was examined. The interpretation of selected texts by these authors made it possible to show the applications of the category of "understanding" in the concepts of interpretationism, narrativism, understanding naturalism and integral approach. The conducted study indicates that understanding is perceived as the main, albeit multi-variant, task of political science, determined by ontological and axiological perspectives. The analysis proper is preceded by a presentation of the main problems of the subject under discussion, including the meaning of the key terms such as understanding, interpretation, communication, and knowledge.

Keywords: understanding, communication, interpretationism, narrativism, integral theory, naturalism

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Introduction

Formulated in the form of a question, the title of the paper obliges the authors to prudently analyse the role of understanding in the theory and methodology of political science. Understanding is an ambiguous concept, as evidenced by dictionary and encyclopaedic definitions. The analysis of the main theoretical and methodological aspects of this concept is performed in the six sections of this paper.

The first section introduces the tradition of philosophical thought on the nature of understanding. It mentions the pioneering contributions to this matter by Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Max Weber. The last of the aforementioned philosophers recognised and demonstrated the complex nature of explaining the actions of social actors, laying the foundations of what is known as understanding sociology. Max Weber can be considered a classic of integral explanation, which is the focus of attention of many political theorists nowadays.

The second section comprises an analysis of understanding in the linguistic dimension. Understanding has a communicative aspect, which means the ability to decode information transmitted in a linguistic or symbolic form. The processes of understanding take place primarily, although not exclusively, in continuous communicative interactions among people. This section points out the complexity of the interpersonal communication process, draws attention to the problem of interpretation in linguistic communication and shows examples of the complexity of understanding the intention of the sender of messages. The communicative approach to understanding combines strictly linguistic, cultural, and psychological phenomena.

The third section examines understanding from the interpretative aspect. The themes of this section relate to the question included in the title of the paper. Attention is drawn to the fact that the understanding of political phenomena and processes is subject to cognitive constraints. Much space is devoted to the interpretative approach in political sciences, pointing out its research potential as well as its weaknesses.

The fourth section develops the cognitive aspect of understanding, directing attention to the relationships that occur between the knowledge of facts and their understanding. Understanding always has a cognitive aspect; it is underpinned by some form of knowledge. It would be difficult to understand something about which one knows nothing. The problem of the difficulty for researchers to understand unexpected political events that have no explanation in the paradigms accepted in political sciences is signalled. Understanding unique political facts requires political scientists to make creative interpretations.

The fifth section presents the colloquial aspect of the understanding of politics. It cites data indicating young people's low level of interest in political affairs,

fatigue with information overload, difficulty in understanding political events and lack of trust in the media. A new phenomenon of young people's selective avoidance of political news is indicated.

The last section presents an analysis of the concept of understanding in the texts of leading Polish political scientists whose scientific output enriches the body of political theory and methodology on issues of understanding. The analysis of these representative texts leads to the conclusion that understanding should be regarded as a primary goal of research projects in political sciences, especially in political theory.

Traditions of reflection on understanding

The tradition of intellectual reflection on the meaning of the term "understanding" dates back to the philosophy of the Stoics and Aristotle. They regarded reason as the primary tool for getting to know and understanding the world. In the German philosophy of science at the turn of the 19th century, "understanding" became the focus of attention for the representatives of the interpretative current. One of the pioneers of this current, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) explained the term understanding as "going through and reproducing the experiences of others; the feeling of being with others and participating in their emotions; the unity of what one knows and what one wants to know" (Benton, Craib, 2003, p. 92). Dilthey argued that understanding is a method of research appropriate to the humanities, whose aim is to understand human beings rather than to discover the laws of nature. In his view, natural sciences, as opposed to the humanities, aim to explain phenomena occurring in nature, using empirical methods (Benton, Craib, 2003, p. 123). Another contributor to the hermeneutic current in German philosophy was Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). For him, understanding meant a sense of meaning and significance that is present in all forms of human existence, regardless of the existence of linguistic forms. Heidegger argued that every human being has the natural ability to understand, i.e. to attribute meanings to observed or heard signs or sounds such as crying, even if he misunderstands or misinterprets these extra-linguistic forms of expression (Teichert, 2020, p. 132).

The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), who is highly distinguished for the development of the theory of hermeneutic understanding, argued that understanding is an inherent element in the everyday life of every human being. The scholar developed the theory of understanding by introducing the famous concept of the "hermeneutic circle". Its essence is the thesis that one cannot understand the parts without understanding the whole and, conversely, the understanding of the whole requires the understanding of the parts

contained in it. This proposition became the inspiration for the subsequent development of functionalism in the methodology of social sciences. Gadamer also recognised the linguistic, social, and historical nature of understanding, including the role of superstition, which in his view inevitably accompanies the process of understanding (Teichert, 2022, p. 133; Benton, Craib, 2003, pp. 122–123). Max Weber (1864–1920), the founder of "understanding" sociology, as part of his broad scientific interests was concerned with the methodology of research into the properties of the individual as a social actor. He regarded understanding as the objective to be pursued in sociological research. "Sociology seeks to understand the meaning of action or social action and thereby to explain causally its course and effects" (Weber, 2002, p. 9). In order to understand the meaning of an individual's action, one must understand the subjective motives that determine their behaviour. Weber distinguished between two types of understanding: direct and explanatory. The former arises from the observation of actions whose motives are obvious, clear to the observer and require no further thinking. The latter concerns irrational actions or actions rational with respect to values, driven by values and emotions such as honour, ambition, anger, jealousy, or hatred. Their understanding requires a proper interpretation of the structure of meaning that individuals attribute to their actions. The aim of "understanding" sociology was to be explanation based on interpretation that offers the possibility to discover the meaning of the actions of social actors. Weber developed a methodology of social sciences based on the concept of ideal type. Among other things, he studied the behaviours of officials, using a model of the ideal bureaucracy. His imagined type of rational bureaucrat did not exist in practice, but it was a tool that allowed the researcher to better understand how real administrative institutions functioned. The tradition of understanding sociology initiated by Weber finds contemporary expression in the critical current of sociological theory. Its representatives argue that the aim of sociology, like that of other social sciences, is still to gain a new and better understanding of the personalities of social actors, their actions, political and economic institutions, as well as relations among them (Burns, 1995, p. 174).

Understanding and the process of communication

Communicating with others is an intrinsic feature of human social nature, an indispensable condition for individuals to adapt to life in society. The importance of communication in a political system cannot be overstated (Paszkiewicz, 2009, p. 175). The functioning of any society is based on the constant exchange and processing of information. Information reaches members of a community from all sides, in interpersonal contacts, through traditional and electronic media, the

press, radio, television, internet portals, electronic mail, advertisements visible in urban space. Without understanding the information being sent and received, regardless of its source and form, communication between people would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The primary means of communication is language used in its various varieties: colloquial, expert, scientific, legal, etc. The degree to which the content of information is understood depends on the degree of assimilation of a given national language in its various regional varieties which are used by the senders and receivers of information. In times of cultural transformation, national languages are subject to change across generations.[3]

Dieter Teichert writes that understanding is "the correct interpretation of a message communicated by one person to another person" (Teichert, 2020, p. 123). Understanding in the context of the communication process refers to the exchange of information. Information that is misunderstood will not elicit the reaction expected by the sender, and so-called information noise may occur.[4] Depending on the sender's intention, the message may be formulated in an explicit, unambiguous or coded manner. Understanding a coded message requires the addressee to read (decode) the message according to the sender's intention. A verbal message containing the following information: "the window in the room is not shut completely", may imply a statement of fact or a suggestion for action: "the window should be shut so that the flat does not lose heat". The sentence: "The clerk spoke rudely to the boss" can be understood as a statement of fact, but also as an expression of disapproval of the person's behaviour. If someone says: "The clerk spoke rudely to the boss, but I can understand her behaviour", the phrase "I understand" can be interpreted as a statement of fact, but also as a coded approval of the behaviour.

Interpersonal communication among political leaders plays a special role in shaping relations between states. Presidents view bilateral meetings as a tool for mutual understanding and trust-building.

The issue of understanding is not only about communication between individuals, but also about the perception of the natural and social world, including science, culture, politics, and economy. Communication in the public sphere is much more complex than communication in private life. Communication between a public office and a citizen is the basis of public trust in the state and its administration. Political theorists agree that a well-functioning democracy cannot exist without well informed citizens. Information management is nowadays

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[3]   Jan Miodek, the eminent linguist, admits that he found it difficult to understand a conversation of his grandson's schoolmates. "[…] I can say that they certainly spoke Polish, but what they were talking about, I was no longer able to **understand**" (Nogaj, 2022).

[4]   Semantic noise is a variety of interference occurring in the communication process. One of the causes of this phenomenon is the improper encoding of the sender's intentions in the form of a symbol or graphic sign that is difficult to read.

a key task of the central and local administration. In order to fulfil its role as a factor of integration at the national level or the level of a local self-governing community, public information should meet general qualitative criteria such as truthfulness, usefulness, timeliness, comprehensibility, reliability and verifiability (Ociepka, 1999, p. 151).

Interpretive understanding of politics

Leslie P. Thiele indicates that the main task of political theory is to understand how people understand themselves and their own world (Thiele, 2003, p. 13). Many political scientists are of the opinion that political science should base its research on qualitative methodology, in particular interpretive methodology (Blok, 2011, p. 8). The justification for this thesis points to the subjective, narrative, and axiological properties of politics as an object of research (Laska, 2020b). Interpretation is an analytical process aimed at explaining and understanding political phenomena and concepts, or the final result of this process. According to the PWN *Polish Language Dictionary*, the term "interpretation" means: "1. an explanation of the sense or meaning of something, 2. a way of performing a musical, literary, or theatrical work" (SJP, 2008, p. 279). Władysław Kopaliński's *Dictionary of Words and Phrases* explains the term "interpretation" as "explaining, clarifying, commenting on something; a way of playing or performing a piece of music, playing a role by an actor" (Kopaliński, 1968, pp. 169–178).

Interpretation is a useful tool for describing, explaining, and understanding political phenomena. The subject of interpretation may be any element of political life. Most often, these are events, decisions, actions, institutions, political narrations of participants in events, documents of public life, biographies of leaders, provisions of constitutional law. These issues are not easily subjected to the methodological rigours of quantitative research. The result of interpretation (preceded by analysis and discussion) turns out to be indispensable for understanding research findings. This is particularly true of research based on data production and analysis. The researcher's quest to understand specific political actions directs attention to the constellations of ideological and psychological factors that motivate people to behave in a certain way. These can be subjective opinions, beliefs, feelings or experiences whose analysis helps to explain and understand the behaviours of participants in political life. With the help of tools such as in-depth interviews, study of biographies, reconstruction of historical facts, the researcher aims to know and understand the internal motives of political actors' actions shaped in different historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. The interpretive understanding of the actions of political actors may reflect the subjective sympathies, antipathies, or prejudices of the researcher towards

certain groups of respondents, which constitutes the risk of achieving subjective results and drawing subjective conclusions from conducted research. It is difficult, or impossible, for other researchers to verify the methods and procedure of a research project within the framework of interpretive methodology. Individually collected data and methods of interpretation do not qualify for verification by other researchers. The results of interpretation are partly subjective, "original" in nature, but this does not undermine their scientific value if interpretation was conducted with competence, honesty, and integrity (Andrews, 2007). In the community of any scientific discipline, the basis for mutual understanding is language and the accepted conceptual grid enables comparison of research procedures and methods. Unlike in legal sciences, there is no binding interpretation of terms in political science. As in other social science disciplines, researchers encounter ambiguity and vagueness in many definitions, which makes it difficult for different authors and schools of thought to reach agreement on various issues. To assess the value of the results of research based on interpretation, the question of criteria for the reliability of the research process must be answered. The main element of evaluation is the source base and methodological competence of the interpreter. The scope of such evaluation includes mainly qualitative data acquisition and analysis methods specific to the interpretive approach (Klementewicz, 2022). Qualitative research plays a particularly important role in political science. The goal of the political scientist in the interpretive tradition is obtaining a "deep" (instead of "broad") understanding of a political problem by means of "academic interpretation". The researcher focuses on a problem that cannot be solved by means of quantitative methods (Silbergh, 2001, pp. 23–24). Conducting qualitative research requires a high level of skills in conducting individual interviews and a good knowledge of the human psyche. The researcher should be guided by the principles of honesty, authenticity, and empathy towards those who have agreed to participate in a research project. Particularly important is the ability to listen actively and to ask questions about the respondent's personal experiences. Researchers do not declare an attitude of complete objectivity in their approach to the subject of the research; they more often adopt an attitude of personal involvement in the research process (Andrews, 2007, p. 27).

In interpretive research on political actors, a particular aim is to understand the motives for action in a cultural, institutional, and historical context. Understanding requires competent interpretation of interview transcripts, as well as careful examination of narrations, autobiographies, and public speeches. Interpretive analysis seeks to understand political life through case studies in which an important role is played by inductive grounded theories based on deep analysis of empirical data. The explanatory scope of this type of theories is limited to selected cases, but their findings can trigger the formation of new scientific hypotheses.

Understanding versus knowledge of facts

The path to the understanding of natural phenomena leads through the examination of hypotheses, the provision and verification of the knowledge of facts. "Knowledge" is 1. information, understanding, or skill that can be acquired through experience or education 2. awareness of the existence of something, the state of being aware of something (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). It is important to note that knowledge itself as a body of information about facts is not equivalent to understanding them. For example, medical knowledge of the symptoms of certain diseases is not equivalent to understanding their causes. The same is true in other scientific disciplines, even as distant from medicine as history or political science. Historians accumulate huge numbers of facts from the distant or more recent past, but few of them attempt to understand their causes. "The better one gets to know a given historical period, the more difficult it becomes to explain why it is characterised by this particular and not any other development of events", writes a well-known Israeli historian (Harrari, 2014, p. 288).

It is human nature to seek answers to questions that have not been answered yet. Empirical sciences aim to discover new facts and explain them, using existing or new theories. The aim of empirical research is to verify hypotheses about the accuracy of a relationship between variables. Quite often, the result of a research project is incomprehensible to its authors, thus requiring interpretation and further research.

Social facts, including political ones, constitute an element and a result of actions whose subjects are living people (social actors). Unlike facts occurring in nature or in the cosmos, political behaviours can only be understood through a careful analysis of the motivational structure of the political actor in the social context in which their thinking and actions take place (Sobkowiak, 2009, pp. 14–17). The observation, empirical investigation and explanation of social facts is carried out with the aid of scientific hypotheses and theories. In doing so, the influence of predispositions, prejudices, ideologies or values cannot be avoided. As Zbigniew Blok aptly notes, "Axiology cannot be separated from either politics or political science" (2017, p. 31). Social facts, including political ones, are actions, concepts and conflicts that are provided by the actor with a subjective meaning. The researcher's discovery of this subjective meaning is the key to understanding the behaviour of individuals under study (Moses, Knutsen, 2007, p. 153). Quantitative research does not produce knowledge on this subject.

From time to time, political scientists are challenged to understand unexpected facts that do not fit the standards of Western democracies. The physical attack on the building of the US Congress on the 6 of January 2021 was a shocking event. It was the radical opposition's reaction to Joe Biden's legally uncontested victory in the 2020 presidential election. The event remains incomprehensible

to not only the general public but also experts specialising in American democracy and political culture. Besides the difficulty of understanding unique events signalling a new turnabout in history (*Zeitenwende*) such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, political science faces the challenge posed to political communication and participation by the internet and social media. The democratic potential for revitalising political participation that was attributed to these media at their birth has given way to sceptical assessments of their impact on the present and future state of liberal democracy. As a British political scientist writes, understanding and assessing the effects of digital media on political processes is now a key challenge for political science studies (Finlayson, 2022).

Understanding of politics in public opinion

Politics is a highly complex sphere of human activity. It contains rational, emotional, and institutional elements. It is well known that the primary goal of political actors is to gain or maintain power, but this does not exhaust the motives of political participation. The objectives of political actors are often hidden, unclear, difficult to understand by an external observer. Politicians and candidates for politicians are driven by various motives, such as lust for power, a sense of public service, a desire to influence public affairs, personal ambitions, career dreams, patriotism, environmental pressures, and others (Sobkowiak, 2009). The understanding of politics includes knowledge of institutions, decision-making processes, political conflicts, processes, and factors determining changes in political systems. One could risk advancing the thesis, supported by research, that colloquial knowledge of politics is superficial, far from the understanding of the mechanisms of power and the dynamics of social and political life (Młyńczyk, 2015c). For a significant part of the population, politics is associated with a crisis of governance, polarisation of the political scene, particular interests of parties and leaders, corruption, and manipulation. The most important contemporary source of knowledge about politics is television and social media. The public receives media information framed by journalistic commentaries that differ in their political assessment of events. Television news and internet media do not provide objective knowledge about the condition of the state and public affairs; they show political reality from the perspective of sensationalism and scandals, as well as party interests. Empirical research shows that people's interest in political information and trust in the media in Western democracies is steadily declining. Voters and supporters of political parties do not expect objective information, but such news that confirms their own views and knowledge of politics. The expansion of misinformation in the public sphere further complicates the problem of understanding the world of politics. Besides professional analysts and feature writers, few people find the time and inclination to delve into

the torrent of information flowing round the clock from television and internet media. Understanding political phenomena and processes requires intellectual effort, knowledge of political science, but also of sociology, economics, law, and history. Professional researchers and analysts encounter difficulties in interpreting sources of information depicting changes in public opinion. Sociological studies conducted in Western democracies indicate a growing phenomenon among the younger generation of avoiding current news in the media, or more often – selectively avoiding political news. This phenomenon has also emerged in Poland. Among the reasons for selective news avoidance, young Europeans (aged up to 35 years old) indicate in surveys the negative, depressive impact of political information on their mental state, worsening mood, lack of individual influence on the course of everyday events, difficulty in understanding political events and making practical use of them, a mass of information and scepticism about its objectivity (the example of one respondent's comment given in the footnote illustrates this phenomenon). These trends are linked to an increasingly weakened trust in the media.

The more complex and unique a political issue or event is, the greater the difficulty of understanding it. The level of understanding of political events is determined by a number of factors, such as motivation and acquired knowledge, following information provided by the media, the ability to see relations among facts, to critically evaluate media information, to distinguish between what is true and what is false, between facts and comments or opinions. What occurs in this context with respect to the general public in Poland is the cultural phenomenon of the gradual lowering of the intellectual requirements and the intensifying difficulties with understanding metaphorical narration. In times of crisis, young people who appreciate the usefulness of possessing knowledge of public affairs face legitimate difficulties in understanding events that contradict hitherto accepted political science theories and paradigms.

The significance of understanding in the works of Polish political theorists

For Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, understanding is the basis for distinguishing the humanities as a separate type of science and the source of defining their methodological peculiarity (Kleszcz, 2013, pp. 496–497). John R. Lucas's proposed interpretation of Gödel's mathematical theorem,[5] which disqualifies mechanism

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[5]   Gödel's theorem concerns the incompleteness of arithmetic, which means that it is not possible to prove all true sentences of arithmetic of natural numbers because there is no non-contradictory system of axioms and no formalised system of correct deduction that serve this purpose.

understood as the thesis that the mind is equivalent to a finite machine (Krajewski, 2003) and the emphasis of the unique human trait of producing mental reality from the perceptual imaginings of a given individual and then making them real through creation (Saja, 2019, pp. 191–192), orients one towards the subjectivity of the human world. However, already emphasised on numerous occasions, the importance of the psychological element of situational "experience", on the ground of Polish political science, is not a unified paradigm, but a dynamic research area. This is the result of diverse ontological and axiological approaches, which, as a result, allow one to distinguish three approaches to the category of understanding. The first of them is interpretationism, which is represented by Filip Pierzchalski. In Kamil Minkner's research, it is oriented towards narrativism. The second category expresses itself in the integral theory developed by Artur Laska, whose foundations in the form of integral explanation are also the source for the third identified approach, namely understanding naturalism proposed by Łukasz Młyńczyk. Thus, it can be seen that, depending on how a research project is constructed, it is focused on the features of operations at an abstract level or/and operations resulting from the biological construction of human beings (Rosicki, Szewczak, 2012). Interpretationists try to solve the problem of subjectivity, which often leads to solipsism, through analyses of linguistic and narrative structures (Jabłoński, 2020). On the other hand, authors relying on the integral perspective draw attention to both the importance of interpretation and the enduring, invariably recurring aspects resulting from human biologism. According to Janusz Węgrzecki, in political science, researchers are therefore doomed to interpretationism, which manifests itself in every stage of the research process (2020, p. 111).

Addressing the problem of solipsism, Filip Pierzchalski, in his article entitled "'Zewnętrzność' interpretacji. Badanie polityki w ujęciu eksternalistycznym" ["Externality" of Interpretation. Studying Politics from an Externalist Perspective], critically analyses its methodological character. He draws attention to two issues in particular: (1) mental representations, despite their subjectivity, are causally or informatively linked to the external world, which undermines the assumption of the total isolation of thinking; (2) the intersubjectivity of political science knowledge is based on language, as an element constituting "the primary factor in the functioning of the sociolinguistic community of political science, where one faces divergence and/or similarity regarding the emergence of interpretations among scholars" (Pierzchalski, 2020, p. 75). He thus refers to the interpretive schema of political theory: "Explanations of phenomena from a given perspective may be partial, one-sided and incomplete, however, the perspective itself is coherent and consistent if it has been based on a distinctive system of descriptive-modelling and definitional assumptions" (Karwat, 2011, pp. 78–79).

The importance of linguistic issues for the development of political theory is also underlined by Pierzchalski's introduction of the term "creative imagination".

This is because its construction stems from both mental processes, involving thinking, and the use of language, which consequently "implies a coupling of the indirectness with the directness of sensory perception". He stresses that "theorising in political science by means of spoken or written judgements about the world is intrinsically linked to the mind of the subject conducting research, whose inner thoughts or imaginings are closely linked to the natural language used" (Pierzchalski, 2017, p. 33). The creative imagination, a fundamental source of the development of science, expresses itself in the ability to "suspend" the components constituting the basis of the researcher's self-knowledge and the search for creative, often interdisciplinary solutions to a problem under analysis. Magdalena Ozimek has developed this concept and its significance in the field of political theory, giving it the hallmarks of a cognitive directive characterised by the reflexification of existing procedures on the basis of extra-procedural principles. Their essence is expressed in the guidelines derived from the following four nodal points: (1) the historical aspect of cognition; (2) the criticality of cognition; (3) the non-neutrality of cognition, and (4) the adequacy of the instrumentation of cognition (Ozimek, 2018).

Kamil Minkner also draws attention to the importance of linguistic structure. He notes the simultaneity of the functioning of diverse theories and conceptual systems that, in relation to laws, differ only in terms of their understanding of particular terms. It is up to the researcher to decide which construction they choose to use, and this choice is influenced by a variety of factors (Minkner, 2015). What is crucial, however, is the choice of an adequate system in terms of the objectives of conducted research. Following Jacques Derrida and the postmodernists, he assumes that deconstruction, resulting from the absence of universal meanings, signifies not the binarity, but the ambiguity of every existence (Minkner, 2018, p. 49). Thus, understanding takes place in narrative structures (Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2016, pp. 43–44), which, for Minkner, constitute "all cause-and-effect processing and organising of facts in a particular place and time. In this view, narrations also commonly occur outside of art and turn out to be ways in which people understand the world. Artistic narrations allow us to understand these ways" (2018, pp. 43–44). For political science, this approach becomes relevant when analysing the relationship between ideology and political action (Minkner, 2018, p. 53), and "the political status of any phenomenon should be linked to meanings, or more precisely to the variability of their understanding depending on the entity making the interpretation in communicative circulation" (Minkner, 2019, p. 101). Thus, referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the researcher does not aim to achieve the best explanation, but to create an explanation that is the most adequate in the context of the one who explains. A narration allows the analysis of communicative practice, taking into account the diverse arrangements existing in the socio-political areas that form "the complex

receiving context of a given work, resulting in the ideological openness of the narration and the potentiality of its various readings" (Minkner, 2018, p. 65).

The strategic importance of narrations for understanding is also found in the research of Artur Laska, who defines them explicitly as the basic material of the political sphere. The interpretations of ideas contained within them are crucial for the formation of political agency, which is the result of the influence of dominant narrations. He thus indicates that the criterion of truth and falsity does not apply to objective entities, being a consensual outcome of aspects related to adequacy and validity. This researcher also explicitly states that "the aim of the political scientist can at best be an attempt at understanding, consisting in grasping the essence or meaning of what is observed. This is a task far removed from the concrete findings of statistics and causal laws, but rather closer to the field of language and narration" (Laska, 2020a, p. 41). Interpretationism is thus applicable to all types of in-depth political science analysis, however, politics as an area that combines both subjective-narrational and objective aspects cannot be negated. Consequently, although interpretation is the dominant research perspective, from the analytical point of view, politics is a sphere subject to integral explanation (Laska, 2020b), expanded by Laska in the form of an integral theory of politics. Within its framework, politics is regarded globally and indivisibly, so that it becomes possible to isolate what is enduring and reproducible, while simultaneously framing these elements in the context of historical change, dynamics of transformational processes, as well as the diversity of research traditions and paradigms (Laska, 2017, p. 15). The author calls for the adoption of an ontological perspective according to which "society is not just an empirically verifiable phenomenon and process or merely a product of a conceptually constructed narration, but both one and the other simultaneously" (Laska, 2017, p. 36). This is a reference to the premises formulated by Tadeusz Klementewicz, who, as a condition for integral explanation in political science, points to the dual structure of social reality, which consists of both causal factors (nomological-deductive explanation) and the consciousness of active actors that realises them (the subjective motivational structure of individuals). This couples understanding with functional explanation, which makes it possible to analyse the persistence of cultural norms and specific social structures (Klementewicz, 2010, pp. 114–115). In Laska's concept, however, the dominant direction in the study and cognition of reality is the narrativist strategy.

The works by Klementewicz, and consequently those by Jerzy Topolski, are also referred to by Łukasz Młyńczyk, who, using the premises of both authors and the compilation of Karl Popper's (Grobler, 2006, pp. 230–231) second and third worlds proposed by Adam Grobler, introduces the concept of understanding naturalism. Like Artur Laska, he regards the dichotomy between naturalism and anti-naturalism as a reductionist approach, since human action is determined by the causes analysed within the framework of explanation, as well as the

purpose, which is subject to intentional explanation. In his concept, however, the aspect related to the possibilities that naturalism introduces for social sciences is considered to a much greater extent. Pure empiricism, due to its dependence on place and time, makes it impossible to create universal laws, for "we are not able to isolate the object of study in such a way as to return to the initial situation after the experiment is over. This is because it no longer exists in its assumed form" (Młyńczyk, 2017, p. 17). The author links the problem of the existence of a lack of symmetry, which on interpretive grounds is resolved at the level of linguistic structures, to the fusion that occurs within the scope of human behaviours: "We are able to predict many of our behaviours observed in social actions, regardless of the existence of free will, because they have become a part and quality of behaviours themselves and therefore close to the term 'laws'" (Młyńczyk, 2017, p. 18). The solution he proposes is based on a naturalistic premise referring to action as the result of a recursive law, and a mimetic experience derived from understanding sociology, which implies action as the result of the recognition of a situation. Therefore, the strategy of understanding naturalism consists in an analysis of the motivation of human action as an effect of not the laws in force, but of understanding them (Młyńczyk, 2018, p. 65). It thus boils down to the reproduction of those states and forms of action which, given certain analogous conditions, have proved effective, leading to the achievement of a particular goal. For Młyńczyk, the chronology of actions results first of all from primal instincts, which manifest themselves in remembered reactions to specific situations, and is then subject to directed rationalisation that leads to an awareness of the political of an individual. Thus, it becomes possible to analyse the dynamics of change in a political system and politics itself as a constant evolution towards alignment with the goals of their participants (Młyńczyk, 2015b).

It is worth noting the difference in the presence of biologism in both Laska's and Młyńczyk's concepts, which is determined by different theoretical foundations. The former researcher views the issue of evolution through the prism of the development of cooperative abilities, assuming that the physical-biological construction of human beings motivates them to cooperate in order to obtain the goods they desire (Laska, 2017, pp. 43–47). Młyńczyk, on the other hand, referring to Thorstein Veblen's premises, outlines the evolutionary nature of political theory stemming from the desire to sustain the social structure by establishing patterns of behaviour resulting from adaptive functions, where survival and reproduction are the goal. As he emphasises, "human nature does not imply a constant struggle between aggression and altruism, their mutual balancing in man, as the result of phylogenetic adaptation" (Młyńczyk, 2017, p. 21).

Conclusion

Understanding is a fundamental feature of all human, interpersonal and social relationships. Understanding problems and phenomena in the environment is the main objective of scientific research. Social sciences essentially pursue the same objective of understanding the phenomena and processes under examination, but the object of research requires the use of other theories and methods. In political science, understanding is largely, but not exclusively, the result of qualitative research based on interpretive methods. Such research provides an understanding of political action in its institutional, historical and social context. This does not imply neglecting quantitative research, through which the nature of relationships between facts can be measured and understood more precisely.

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the concept itself and its relevance for political science research, this paper creates a basis for showing the significant contribution of Polish theorists to the analytical potential of political science. The concepts of the four renowned political scientists presented herein are not only an example of a lively discussion on the possibilities of cognition of political reality, but also an expression of the constant internal development of the Polish scientific community. The emergence of original proposals and solutions originating from different research paradigms not only enriches the achievements of the discipline, but also inspires creative discourse within it. The legitimacy of the diversity discussed, taking into account – in a differentiated way – the combination of abstract creations and human biologism, is confirmed by Michał Heller's statement: "Man's existential problems cannot be reduced to either the laws of biology or the laws of physics; the whole cannot be divided into parts: here is physics, biology starts here, and this nucleus, isolated from the rest, constitutes the seat of man's metaphysical experience. If we want to understand man, we must face the whole in its complexity and in its interconnectedness of everything with everything" (2018, p. 116). In the approach presented here, understanding constitutes the main, though multi-variant in itself, task of political science. Referring, among other things, to the premises of the Poznań School of Methodology (Młyńczyk, 2015a), Polish theorists do not renounce elements derived from naturalism, pursuing the possibility of understanding politics and the political as the connection mentioned by Heller. Nevertheless, they seem to give priority to interpretive methodology.

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