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How to do realistic political theory (and why you might want to)

Abstract

In recent years a number of realist thinkers have charged much contemporary political theory with being idealistic and moralistic. While the basic features of the realist counter-movement are reasonably well understood, realism is still considered a critical, primarily negative creed which fails to offer a positive, alternative way of thinking normatively about politics. Aiming to counteract this general perception, in this article I draw on Bernard Williams's claims about how to construct a politically coherent conception of liberty from the non-political value of freedom. I do this because Williams's argument provides an illuminating example of the distinctive nature of realist political thinking and its attractions. I argue that Williams's account of realist political thinking challenges the orthodox moralist claim that normative political arguments must be guided by an ideal ethical theory. I then spell out the repercussions Williams's claims about the significance of political opposition and non-moralised accounts of motivation have for our understanding of the role and purpose of political theory. I conclude by defending the realist claim that action-guiding political theory should accordingly take certain features of our politics as given, most centrally the reality of political opposition and the passions and experiences that motivate them. On this reading political realism offers a viable way of thinking about political values which cannot be understood in terms of the categories of intellectual separation – ideal/nonideal or factinsensitive/fact-sensitive – that have marked political theory in recent years.

The jumble, the mayhem, the mess proved itself more subtle than this one's ideology and that one's morality.¹

Although the broad contours of the realist turn in political theory are now reasonably well understood, thus far most commentators have focused on the critical nature of the movement by examining realists' opposition to the 'applied-ethics' program that has dominated political philosophy/theory in recent decades.² This focus has obscured the more constructive elements of realist political thinking, a neglect which perhaps explains why some scholars continue to mistakenly elide realism with nonideal theory (Stemplowska and Swift 2012, Valentini 2012; for a reply see Sleat forthcoming). In this article I aim to rectify this lacuna in the literature by drawing on Bernard Williams's account of how to construct a political conception of liberty from the non-political value of freedom. This is because it provides an illuminating example of the distinctive nature of realist political thinking and its attractions.³

¹ Roth 2000, 3.

² For discussions of realism in these terms see Baderin 2014, Galston 2010, Philp 2012, Rossi and Sleat 2014, and Stears 2007.

³ The following abbreviations are used for selected works by Bernard Williams (full citations are listed in the bibliography): *IBWD*: *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*; *ML*: *Moral Luck*; *MSH*: *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*; *PS*: *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956 – 1972*; *PHD*: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*; *SP*: *The Sense of the Past*; *SN*: *Shame and Necessity*. I mainly focus on 'From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value' (*IBWD*, 75 – 96). As this paper was originally published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* it is more polished than many of the other essays in *IBWD* which are

In Section 1 I characterise the nature of the anti-moralist commitments that motivate much contemporary realist theorising. In section 2 I present Williams's account of political construction as it is an exemplary example of the third commitment outlined in Section 1. In Section 3 I focus on the 'realism constraint' Williams advocates, and note how it challenges the orthodoxies of contemporary political theory. In Section 4 I spell out the repercussions Williams's claims about the significance of political opposition and non-moralised accounts of motivation have for our understanding of the role and purpose of political theory. I conclude by arguing that Williams offers a viable way of thinking about political values which cannot be understood in terms of the categories of intellectual separation – ideal/nonideal or fact-insensitive/fact-sensitive – that have marked political theory in recent years.

1. Realism as anti-moralism

There are three principal, albeit purposefully underdetermined, correctives to the moralistic character of contemporary political theory that realists typically endorse. First, realists are committed to the idea that we should not reduce political philosophy (or politics) to moral philosophy (or morality) because they stress the 'distinctiveness and autonomy of the political from other spheres' (Sleat 2011, 471). This is often a consequence of the fact that they endorse the Hobbesian claim that political order 'is the *sine qua non* for every other political good' (Galston 2010, 408). However the insistence that politics must not be reduced to morality can also follow from the weaker claim that moral philosophy cannot be the authoritative source for settling questions of politics because 'the demands of politics are seen as distinctive and as compromising of ordinary morality' (Philp 2012, 631). Seeing politics as a form of applied ethics not only misunderstands the nature of distinctively political goods – like order and security – but also blinds us to the fact political recommendations cannot be exhaustively determined by moral

unpublished manuscripts and *pièces d'occasion*. Moreover, the fact that Williams chose to publish this paper rather than his work on legitimacy before his death is significant, yet the paper tends to be overlooked by those who discuss Williams's political thought.

considerations from outside politics, even though within politics some of these considerations obviously might have force (Philp 2007).

Second, realists stress that much contemporary political theory operates with an idealised conception of moral psychology. This has led many realists to bemoan ‘high-liberalism’s’ pursuit of moralised consensus on principles of justice because ‘contemporary society is far too deeply divided for any form of significant social agreement to be obtained, either through “rational” reflection or through deliberative exchange’ (Stears 2007, 541). Questions about the accuracy of this critique abound (Sangiovanni 2008). But such concerns need not concern us too deeply here, as the idealised moral psychology aspect of the realist critique has significant repercussions for realists’ constructive account of how we ought to approach the study of politics, and that is what I wish to focus on here. For example, in contrast to Rawls’s realistic utopianism (Rawls 2002, 5-6), Williams endorses a Nietzschean minimalism which is motivated by the sense that ‘sophisticated and reflective observers have always had good reason to think that stories human beings tell themselves about the ethical tend to be optimistic, self-serving, superstitious, vengeful or otherwise not what they seem to be’ (Williams 1995, 204). This approach proceeds by identifying ‘an excess of moral content in psychology by appealing first to what an experienced, honest, subtle and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behaviour elsewhere’, where such an interpretation is said to be ‘using an unashamedly evaluative expression – realistic’ (*SP*, 302). In this light, realist thinkers like Williams and Geuss are best read as endorsing a ‘Thucydidean realism’ which diagnoses much of the philosophical tradition – and by extension contemporary normative political theorising – as being ‘deeply optimistic’.

This optimism had several related aspects. First of all, traditional philosophers assumed that the world could be made cognitively accessible to us without remainder ... Second, they assumed that when the world was correctly understood, it would make moral sense to us. Third, the kind of ‘moral sense’ which the world made to us would be one that would show it to have *some* orientation toward the satisfaction of some basic, rational human desires or interests, that is, the world was not sheerly indifferent to or perversely frustrating of human happiness. Fourth, the world is set up so that for us to accumulate knowledge and use our reason as vigorously as possible will be good for us, and will contribute to making us happy. Finally, it was assumed that there was a natural fit between the exercise of reason, the conditions of healthy individual human development, the demands of individuals for satisfaction of their needs, interests, and basic desires, and human sociability. Nature, reason, and all human goods, including human virtues, formed a potentially harmonious whole (Geuss 2005, 223).

On this reading, realism is best seen as a kind of sensibility which expresses disquiet about the character of contemporary moral and political philosophy given its proclivity toward wishful thinking of one kind or another. Hence, ‘to be a realist ... is to assume a certain attitude towards the world, to focus on the most salient dimensions of a given situation, whether or not they confirm to our preferences or desires’ (Bell 2009, 1). While it is not obvious how this *ethical* commitment should inform political theory, this is the central question that guides the most interesting realist work of the present.⁴ One of its key resulting commitments, however, is that political philosophers must ‘locate the levels of moral ambition which they espouse within their best causal understanding of the human world as this is’ as this prevents them ‘from subordinating their understanding of how it really is to the importunities of their own projective desires’ (Dunn 1990, 196). This does not lead realists to deny that the possible is not given by the actual (Rawls 2002, 12). However, instead of prioritising a conception of Kantian faith (Rawls 1996, lx) which assumes an idealized and tractable human nature by postulating an hopeful account of how morally motivated democratic citizens *might* act in a favourable situations, realists insist that our beliefs about achievability should be grounded in a resolutely historical and sociological understanding drawing on the concrete lessons we have learned about how human beings are in fact *likely* to act in various institutional settings.

Third, rather than articulating (purportedly) general and abstract moral theories and seeking to apply them, realists hold that political arguments must begin ‘from where a given political community is’ (Galston 2010, 396) because we cannot illuminatingly answer the political question – ‘What should we do?’ – by elaborating our favoured utopian ideals, values or virtues and imagining an empowered agent who can enact whatever we please (*IBWD*, 58). To this end, although realists do not deny that political arguments will express normative commitments they

⁴ That is, the commitment to unmasking the ways in which our hopes and aspirations – our ways of reconciling ourselves to the ‘sheer indifference’ of the world – are often modes of a kind of wishful thinking or self-deception.

reject the insistence that these must be set out as an ‘ideal theory’. It is this under-examined aspect of political realism which I seek to make explicit in this article, beginning by examining Bernard Williams’s work on liberty and then generalising from this as an instructive example of realist theorising.⁵

2. Thinking realistically about liberty

The starting point of Williams’s essay is that what puzzles and concerns us about ethical and political ideas ‘is the understanding of those ideas ... as a value for us in our world’, and that we will not understand them unless ‘we understand what we want the value to do for us – what we, now, need it to be in shaping our own institutions and practices’ (*IBWD*, 75). As answers to that question must move beyond the domain of first-order moral argument, political philosophy must be *impure* in the sense that ‘materials from non-philosophical sources – an involvement with history or the social sciences, for instance – are likely to play a more than illustrative part in the argument’ (*PHD*, 155).⁶

Political values such as liberty and justice have a thin universal element as they relate to universally shared human experiences. To wit, the core of liberty is *primitive freedom* (*IBWD*, 79), the ‘simple idea of being unobstructed in doing what you want by some form of humanly imposed coercion’, while the core of justice lies ‘in such things as a loss that demands recompense, or a good that needs to be shared’ (*MSH*, 138). Yet at this primitive level these values are highly indeterminate. More determinate conceptions ‘involve a complex historical

⁵ Hence on my reading the most celebrated contemporary arguments in favour of realism in political theory should be seen as deeply suggestive musings on how we can philosophically investigate politics once we adopt the kind of attitude described. This does not mean that we cannot speak meaningfully of the realist critique of political moralism but it does mean that we should not expect to construct a fully-fledged alternative realist theory of politics in the sense of a set of discrete methodological premises and conclusions that we can apply to the same set of questions that animate much political moralism and which can be affirmed on doctrinal grounds (on this point see also Sagar forthcoming, 14). Yet while this is not a grand system – as these anti-moralist commitments can be distinguished and one can endorse different strands without committing to the others – there are affinities between them and aspects of the first and second commitments will play a role in the arguments that follow. I make no apology for this.

⁶ Given that Williams sees philosophy as a ‘humanistic discipline’ (*PHD*, 180 – 199) when he adopts the pure vs. impure designation he is not signalling approval or claiming that it is only by eschewing engagement with ‘non-philosophical sources’ that one can attain pure philosophical understanding. If philosophy is a humanistic discipline impure materials from ‘non-philosophical sources’ are essential aids to philosophical understanding rather than malignant sources of contamination.

deposit, and we will not understand them unless we grasp something of that deposit', because what liberty or justice 'has variously become, and what we now need it to be, must be a function of actual history' (*IBWD*, 75–6). This is why political philosophers must not attempt to define, but to construct, a political conception of liberty from the non-political conception of freedom.

Primitive freedom points us in the direction of politics because when we are restricted from doing something by the intentional activities of others this often causes resentment and if this is 'not to express itself in more conflict, non-cooperation, and dissolution of social relations, an authoritative determination is needed of whose activities should have priority' (*IBWD*, 82). When such an authoritative source deploys coercion, questions of its legitimacy arise.⁷ However, primitive freedom is not a political value, but rather a *proto-political concept*, because 'no one can intelligibly make a claim against others simply on the ground that the activities of others restrict his primitive freedom': this is 'the start of the quarrel, not a claim to its solution' (*IBWD*, 83). If claims to a loss of liberty are to be taken seriously then they must be socially presentable, where this means that they are consistent with accepting a legitimate political order. Complaining that your liberty has been restricted if you are outlawed from stealing your neighbour's property is not a socially presentable claim. By contrast 'an objection to the operations of Franco or James II was a socially presentable claim: one could, and most objectors did, accept that these rulers should be replaced by some other rulers, and more generally they accepted a state system' (*IBWD*, 120). Social presentability does not ensure that we agree from an impartial perspective that the activity complained about should desist – but it is a precondition of us taking complaints about a loss of liberty seriously.

So how can we responsibly claim that our liberty has been restricted? Williams does not think that utopian discourses about liberty are *analytically* or *definitionally* incoherent, but holds that

⁷ For Williams's account of the nature of political legitimacy see *IBWD*, 1 – 17. Critical discussions include Hall (forthcoming), Jubb (forthcoming) and Sleat (2010). For a conceptual defence of the realist claim that legitimacy is more important than, or prior to, justice see Rossi (2012). For discussions of how Williams's politics relates to his thought as a whole see Hall (2014) and Sagar (forthcoming).

they are ‘obliquely related to arguments about liberty we find in our world’ because ‘the comparisons they invite with the actual, do not do much for the more specific construction of liberty as a value for us’ (*IBWD*, 90).⁸ We must consider what someone ‘now and around here’ could reasonably resent as a loss of liberty, and when we do this

The question of the form of society that is possible for us becomes relevant. From this perspective, a practice is not a limitation of liberty if it is necessary for there to be any state at all. But it is also not a loss of liberty if it is necessary for the functioning of society as we can reasonably imagine it working and still being ‘our’ society. Thus, while some force and threats of force, and some institutional structures which impose disadvantage on people will count as limiting people’s liberty, being prevented from getting what I want through economic competition will not, except in exceptional cases. That is because competition is central to modern, commercial society’s functioning (Williams 2009, 200).

We should accordingly accept that ‘modernity is a basic category of social and hence political understanding, and so a politically useful construction of liberty for us should take the most general conditions of modernity as given’ (*IBWD*, 90). Reasonable disagreement about the forms that modern society can take is possible, but this does not problematize the idea that socially presentable constructions of liberty must be curtailed by such considerations. Therefore, although one can complain of a cost in freedom if one is obstructed from doing what one wants by any form of human coercion, it does not always follow that such claims deserve to be taken seriously in politics. Utopian complaints may aim to show up the prejudices of conventional opinion but the key question we need to ask *of* such claims is whether they rely on a conception of politics which is (*IBWD*, 93) ‘a fantasy, either in general or in relation to [our] historical circumstances’ and because liberty is a political value ‘the distance of that possible world from the actual world must be measured in terms of political considerations of relevance and practical intelligibility’ (*IBWD*, 92).

Williams expresses this thought in terms of *realism* because ‘a form of liberty that could not be offered by the state is an entirely unrealistic basis of objection, and the limitation to the conditions of modernity implies a further step towards a realistic political position or claim’

⁸ Here it is worth noting the similarity of Williams’s claim that while imagining oneself as Kant at the Court of King Arthur and informing past societies about their failings is not ‘meaningless’ it does not help us to understand the politically significant issues of the present (*IBWD*, 10).

(*IBWD*, 92). The basic thought, then, is that we cannot clarify the nature of various political values in any meaningful manner before we consider the historical and political question of what their elaboration requires ‘now and around here’.⁹ Henceforth, I will refer to this idea as the ‘realism constraint’. For Williams, it functions as an arbiter of arguments that deserve to be taken seriously both by those to whom they are addressed, and by the agent making the argument if they are being honest about what they can sincerely expect others to see as making some recognizable claim upon them.

3. Making Sense of the Realism Constraint

Williams’s endorsement of the ‘realism constraint’ is controversial as many scholars hold that because political theory is a normative enterprise it must not be constrained by considerations about how the world currently *is*, because doing so comes at the unacceptable cost of failing to rigorously consider how it *ought* to be. His realist account of political construction therefore goes against the mainstream, or orthodoxy, of contemporary political theory by rejecting the idea that political theory must begin with the articulation of an ideal ethical theory, because if it does not then the practical advice it offers will ‘necessarily’ lack the right kind of aim (Rawls 1996, 285, see also Rawls 1971, 8). Ideal theory is considered necessary, because without it we cannot adequately evaluate existing states of affairs by noting how they fall short of the morally ideal, and as a result cannot engage in rightly guided political reform.

Contemporary defences of this broad position concerning where political theorising must begin and what it ought to take into account when so doing come in a number of forms, and

⁹ Because the preconditions of political freedom ‘vary with different social formations’, Williams insists that ‘the social requirements in terms of which an expression is viable in one set of historical conditions may make it a disaster in another’ (*MSH*, 137). To this end he is sceptical about attempting to resurrect public-spirited conceptions of republicanism to make sense of political liberty in modernity, in part because here and now participatory democracy ‘can only speciously be represented in Kantian and Rousseauian terms as either expressions of autonomy or of self-government’ (*IBWD*, 16). Of course, this diagnosis of the prospects of elaborating a suitably realistic conception of republican liberty can be challenged and I take no stand on its accuracy here. However, Williams’s scepticism illustrates the sorts of ‘impure’ considerations such an account would have to incorporate if it were to flesh out a conception of liberty in a suitably realistic way.

there are important distinctions between them. On the one hand a group of thinkers influenced by the work of G.A. Cohen refuse to accept the significance of the sorts of facts Williams draws to our attention when we think about the nature of political values *tout court*, because they insist that truths about any value are insensitive to factual claims about how the world is (Cohen 2008; Swift and Stemplowska 2012, 384; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012, 55). If we incorporate something like the ‘realism constraint’ we will sully our normative inquiries with a set of morally nonideal facts and therefore risk coming to accept the world as it is. Thus, where Williams sees economic ‘competition as integral to our social system’ (*IBWD*, 91) and insists that our political construction should hold that economic competition in something like a Zero-sum game will not limit a person’s liberty, advocates of the Cohenite position are likely to claim that while the integral role of economic competition may influence the rules-of-regulation we should adopt to best approximate the mix of ‘fundamental’ values we want to achieve, it does not itself have any bearing on the correct conception of any value. To uncover the correct conception we must instead engage in ‘abstract, pure, context-free philosophy’ (Swift 2008, 382).¹⁰

David Miller objects to the Cohenite position because he claims that such a focus on the logically possible at the expense of the politically realistic leaves us in the position of having nothing to do but *lament* ‘the size of the gap that unavoidably exists between the ideals it defends and the actual conditions of human life’, with the result that ‘the ideas are drained of their practical force’ (Miller 2013, 213, 237). Realists are likely to share Miller’s reluctance about mistaking such lamentation with worthwhile political argument, but judging the philosophical force of this aversion is difficult. John Dunn, who shares many of the same central concerns as Williams, and which elucidate realist the background of thought at work, claims that ‘political theory is the theory of what to do about what is there, not the theory of what, were we God, we would have brought about or merely what we, while not being God, would greatly prefer’ (Dunn

¹⁰ For this reason Cohenities are likely to contend that theorising in this way engenders adaptive preference formation, a ‘process in which a person comes to prefer A to B just because A is available and B is not’ (Cohen 1995, 253).

1980, 291). Yet it is hard to conceive of any argument that could judiciously prove that political theory really has *this* purpose. As a result, realists should perhaps give up on arguing their opponents *into* realism on pain of rational consistency or the fundamental incoherence of political moralism and/or ideal theory, at least from starting premises both sides accept.¹¹

It is, however, worth stressing that there is no reason why realists must grant the moralist claim that theirs is the default position. As we have seen, Williams denies that the sort of abstract, pure and context-free philosophy Cohen and Swift endorse leads to a determinate conception of any political value except the ‘primitive’ concern they speak to; beyond this the sorts of practical concerns I discussed the Section 2 come into play, including when we think about political values like liberty, the practical concerns of politics. If the content that primitive values come to hold when they are elaborated in history does not divert us from their true nature but instead gives them any determinate meaning, the idea that our political values should track the real world is not best understood as a species of adaptive preference formation but merely of intellectual seriousness.¹² Consider the value of privacy: Williams’s position gives credence to the very plausible suggestion that rather than seeing the digital revolution of the last few decades as confronting us with a new set of contingent facts (Instagram, selfies, a propensity toward narcissistic exhibitionism etc.) which our commitment to an abstract conception of privacy must surmount, we should instead recognise that such technological, social, and psychological developments are transforming our very understanding of the value of privacy and what such a commitment entails personally and politically. Continuing to make sense of privacy as a value

¹¹ The dispute between realists and moralists about how to do political theory has its basis in a mix of metaethical disagreement and opposing conceptions of the relation between value judgement and collective action which generate basic dispositional disagreement about what kinds of intellectual inquiries are worth taking seriously. For instance, Williams’s endorsement of realism in political theory expresses his higher-order commitments about which kind of intellectual enquiries matter, which is significantly at odds with most moralist political philosophy given his rejection of the philosophical presuppositions of the ‘morality system’ (*ELP*, 174 – 196). If one continues to endorse such presuppositions, or something close to them, as many political moralists appear to do, this will necessarily affect one’s views about how to do political theory.

¹² Pippin helpfully describes the underlying idea in the following terms: ‘the issue of the ‘actual’ content of any principle, when it is applied and asserted in the public domain, when it is opposed by others and directed towards the use of coercive restraint on others, is not a secondary or supplementary issue, does not involve a mere unfortunate compromise with an imperfect world. It is in such contestations and in the midst of historical change that the concept can be said to have any determinate content at all’ (Pippin 2007, 538).

therefore requires an on-going process of renegotiation and reflection on the developments that continue to shape our world.

Williams is not advocating the replacement of ethics with history, as Ronald Dworkin has claimed (see the ‘discussion’ in Dworkin, Lilla and Silvers ed. 2001, 124). Although realistically possible states of affairs are an arbiter of serious political argument, we still have to argue about how the world should be and various ethical considerations will play a role in these debates. The point is that while political moralists may insist that they are uninterested in such ‘political’ considerations as they claim to focus on the unsullied moral principles that ought to underwrite politics, Williams insists that we must embrace the *impurity* of political theory by asking if it is interesting or purposeful to imagine a social world where a constitutive feature of our lives – like economic competition – is not central, instead of simply interrogating our (idiosyncratic) moral intuitions about a range of real and imaginary cases. While some (especially Cohen 2008, Estlund 2011 and Swift 2008) may find this acceptance of certain ‘givens’ morally compromising they appear to hold on to a worldview which is ‘not yet thoroughly disenchanting’ (*PHD*, 138) by the failure of the search for an absolute perspective from which we can ultimately justify how we should go on; a point *outside* our politics and history from which we can legislate how we should live.¹³ If we agree with Williams that the prospect of such a vindication is doomed – that we are, as it were, always working from *within* – we are less likely to be concerned by the idea that incorporating various historical and political constraints runs the risk of causing us to conservatively accept the world as it is. Rather, we might defensibly think that it is the first step towards responsibly thinking about how it should be, especially if we grant that we can secure confidence in our values and commitments without such an external foundation (*ELP*, 170-71 and Hall 2014).

¹³ Williams and Geuss are adamant that such an external foundation cannot be had. See Sagar 2014 for an excellent discussion of this aspect of Williams’s thought.

At this point Rawlsian theorists may point out that they also take issue with the Cohenite suggestion that political theory can proceed without adopting a determinate historical starting point¹⁴ and that they insist that political theory must be *realistically utopian* by concerning itself with the ‘limits of practical political possibility’ (Rawls 2001, 4). Although this muddies the realism vs. moralism story somewhat, significant differences between Rawls’s and Williams’s approaches exist because Rawls insists that as justice is the first virtue of social institutions ‘the political philosopher’s first job...is to refine and argue for an ideal of justice’ (Simmons 2010, 36). Such an overarching ideal is needed to ensure that our more concrete political arguments are directed toward the right end and, as an ideal, is not constrained by the sorts of considerations the realism constraint draws our attention to. Rawls accordingly holds that political theory’s most fundamental task is to articulate a theory of justice as full-compliance, because if we lack such a regulative idea – which models perfection by envisaging a situation in which all the obligations citizens owe to one another are discharged (Jubb 2012, 231)¹⁵ – we will not be able to understand the extent to which our politics is tragic, and ‘in not understanding that tragedy, we will tend to make mistakes about what is actually desirable in the circumstances of tragedy ... [because] unless we know how people are being mistreated, then we are likely to continue to mistreat them’ (Jubb 2012, 238-9).

However, there are at least two objections realists can make against the Rawlsian view here.¹⁶ First, they can challenge Rawls’s epistemological commitments. For example, given his belief in value pluralism, Williams holds that we can only pursue our values and commitments by intuitively balancing their respective claims. If we understand pluralism as Williams does and

¹⁴ Rawls’s talk of reconciliation is indicative of this (2001, 3). Such contextualism is especially evident in Rawls-inspired practice-dependent approaches such as those developed by Sangiovanni 2008 and Jubb 2014.

¹⁵ Because justice is a matter of rightly ordering the basic structure of society, non-compliance merely signals that some people are violating their natural duty to support and comply with just institutions (Rawls 1971, 115). Such facts should not contaminate the attempt to construct an ideal theory of justice as they merely concede ground to our moral imperfection.

¹⁶ Rawls also claims that such an approach is realistically utopian because given favourable circumstances, our understanding of moral psychology and democratic politics does not rule out the idea that a just basic structure could achieve stability for the right reasons. (For a useful discussion of favourable circumstances see Swift and Stemplowska 2012, 376). Realists are likely to object to this for the kinds of reasons I canvassed when discussing the second aspect of the realist critique in Section 1. However, I leave aside this dispute here.

concurrently hold that ‘moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without reminder’ (*PS*, 179) there is little reason to think that we could, even in theory, imagine a world in which all the moral obligations citizens have toward each other were met, in part because pluralists deny that key values can be lexically ordered and justice given priority (Galston 2010, 407). If we therefore follow Williams and refuse to buy into the simplifying assumptions of the ‘morality system’, there is little reason to continue to endorse the ‘ideal that human existence can be ultimately just’ (*ELP*, 195). To this end, if realists are pluralists in Williams’s sense they can reject Rawls’s argument for the priority of ideal theory of justice on epistemic grounds.¹⁷

Secondly, realists deny that we *need* such a regulative idea to guide us here and now: just because we cannot have certainty about what perfection demands, it does not follow that we cannot pick out injustices that ought to be remedied (Sen 2010). There is no reason to believe that such an anti-theoretical approach must engender a worrying complacency toward the status quo (contra Nussbaum 2000). If we recall that our ways of life and our ethical and political concepts have a history, there is little temptation to assume that our political world ‘is a satisfactorily functioning whole’ as ‘some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in the light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts’ (*IBWD*, 36–7). Working from *within*, we can therefore reinterpret ‘what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers’ (*IBWD*, 37).¹⁸ Conflict between our moral sentiments is a ‘historically, socially, and probably psychologically conditioned phenomenon’ – a result of the pluralistic nature of modernity and the cultural changes that have accompanied it – and it is not a rational requirement that it be avoided (*PHD*, 162).¹⁹ Rather than attempting

¹⁷ While I am not in a position to vindicate Williams’s conception of value pluralism here, it is worth acknowledging that this is a plausible base on which to criticise Rawls from a realist perspective, as Jubb appears to accept in more recent work: Jubb forthcoming, 7.

¹⁸ Williams accordingly rejects the communitarian label because it suggests a preference for homogeneity and unreflective confidence which runs ‘the risk of being not merely intellectually empty and unrealistic, but pathetic, pretentious, evasive, or deceitful as well’ (*IBWD*, 44 see also *SN*, 162, 166).

¹⁹ Williams constantly argued that the authority of *theory* must be questioned because it cannot explain by what right it legislates the moral sentiments (*ML*, x). While a theorist may say that his or her account is ‘much more elegant, or

(unsuccessfully) to resolve such conflicts theoretically, the most useful thing philosophical reflection may do is to explain why they have a basis in various sentiments we hold dear (*PHD*, 164).

The preceding analysis enables us to see that realism is not the same thing as nonideal theory on either the Cohenite or Rawlsian sense of what that entails, even though realists and nonideal theorists both insist that political theorising must be constrained by factual claims. For Williams the formulation of a political value is context-bound, which means that various realist concerns about the nature of our politics and historical context are relevant to the theoretical task of constructing our political values. However, it does not follow that realistic political theory is merely an exercise in applying feasibility constraints to an abstract moral ideal to make it achievable here and now. This cannot be what Williams is urging precisely because he denies that ‘abstract, context-free philosophy’ can provide a serviceable account of such ideals in the first place.²⁰ Of course, our political arguments will be expressive of our basic normative commitments but there is no reason to endorse the orthodox claim that they *have* to be set out in an ‘ideal theory’. We all have pre-volitional or pre-reflective concerns; commitments to actual states of affairs and courses of action among actual people which will give our prescriptive political arguments their purpose.²¹ While philosophical enquiry can help us to understand them better, there is not a great deal it can do to either systematise them or justify them in the ways political moralists typically desire.²² If we take seriously the idea that we must *make sense* to those whom we speak, there is little reason to assume this activity cannot guide political action. As a result, realists ‘should not concede to abstract ethical theory its claim to provide the only intellectual surroundings for such ideas’ (*ELP*, 198).

it’s simpler, or with fewer principles or it has a certain rational structure. I say: so what? I’m not living my life in order to exemplify a mathematical theory’ (Williams 1999b, 245).

²⁰ For further discussion of the relationship between realism and nonideal theory see Rossi and Sleat 2014, 690-91 and Sleat, forthcoming.

²¹ For more on these internal reasons or pre-volitional commitments see Williams 1981, 101 -114 and Pippin 2010, 27–29.

²² This is the central message of Williams’s thesis regarding the inability of philosophical enquiry to conclusively answer Socrates’ question ‘how should I live?’ (*ELP*, passim).

4. Allies and Opponents

Williams also states that a realistic conception of liberty must take the character and nature of political opposition seriously. He criticises Dworkin's view that liberty and equality cannot conflict (because liberty is a matter of having a rightful claim) as 'it is one datum of experience that people can even recognize a restriction as rightful under some political value such as equality or justice, and nevertheless regard it as a restriction on liberty' (*IBWD*, 84). If we think about what we need our construction of liberty to do for us we should recognise that people reasonably disagree about the rightful ends of political action and this problematizes Dworkin's 'Rousseauian view' that many citizens are simply wrong to complain that various coercive actions (e.g. the outlawing of private education) inhibit their liberty, even if such actions are justified. Hence, while we need to move beyond the notion of primitive freedom if we are to construct liberty as a political value, Williams insists that certain resentments should be taken seriously as genuine representations of losses in liberty because '*the proposed interpretation of liberty is what we need in order to live in society with others who have different interpretations of equality*' (*IBWD*, 125–6, italics in original). Dworkin forgets this because his image of contestation is not appropriately political:

The on-going political framework that contains all this conflict is not given to us, as for instance, the institutional protocols of the Supreme Court supply an on-going framework for its decisions. We have to constantly reinvent the political framework – in part, through our attitudes to our fellow citizens ... our relation to them is not that of offering them instruction in reading a text which we believe we can read better than they can (*IBWD*, 126).

Political arguments cannot be modelled on the interpretation of a shared moral text because this fails to capture both the character of political opposition and the way in which people actually argue for their political convictions and favoured policies the overwhelming majority of the time (*IBWD*, 12).²³ Thus, instead of directing our arguments at utopian magistrates, we ought to view the readers of our work as the 'audience of a pamphlet'. Appropriately realistic conceptions of political argument must acknowledge the necessarily partisan nature of our beliefs and

²³ While the activity of interpreting a moral text plays an important role the United States, Williams insists that even in this case it is a 'mistake to equate political thought about matters of principle with thought about actual or ideal constitutional interpretation' for the reasons canvassed above (*IBWD*, 78).

convictions; they are not ‘autonomous products of moral reason’ but ‘of previous historical conditions, and an obscure mixture of beliefs...passions, interests, and so forth’ (*IBWD*, 12-13). This should lead us to adopt a more realistic view of our allies and opponents. While moral disagreement is characterized ‘by the kinds of reasons that are brought to bear on a decision’, political disagreement ‘is identified by a field of application – eventually, about what should be done under political authority, in particular through the deployment of state power’. We ought, therefore, to acknowledge that ‘the reasons that go into political decisions and arguments that bear on them may be of various kinds’ (*IBWD*, 77). As a result, realistic conceptions of political disagreement help us to recognise that a political decision does not ‘announce that the other party was morally wrong, or indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that they have lost’ (*IBWD*, 13). Williams concludes that rather than treating our fellow citizens as moral interlocutors whose objections we can discount because they are intellectually mistaken, we should see them as losers of a political contest who may have genuine complaints (*IBWD*, 13). A realistic political theory will acknowledge that politics is shot-through with moral remainders of this sort (*ML*, 61).

The implication for our construction of liberty is clear: we ought to think that objections – or at least ones which are socially presentable and satisfy the realism constraint – should be treated as constraints on our theorising of liberty as a form of democratic respect because this ‘is a condition not only of taking seriously the idea of political opposition, but of taking our political opponents themselves seriously’ (*IBWD*, 85).²⁴ We can generalise from these claims to a set of more general observations about how to do realistic political theory which are not entailed by Williams’s arguments about how to theorise liberty realistically, but which have an elective

²⁴ This enables us to recognise that legislation such as the United Kingdom’s Hunting Act of 2004 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunting_Act_2004), which banned the hunting of wild mammals (including foxes), or the Health Act of 2006 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoking_ban_in_England), which outlawed smoking in enclosed places of work, limited people’s liberty by outlawing activities their opponents sincerely thought they ought to be free to pursue. This conceptual claim does not imply that these Acts should not have been passed because Williams, unlike Dworkin, does not insist that liberty is a matter of having a rightful claim. However, democratic respect requires us to see them as infringing people’s liberty which, in turn, is likely to make the justificatory burden applied to such legislation more stringent.

affinity with them. Firstly, rather than merely lecturing our political opponents about their intellectual errors, we must instead engage in the difficult task of reconciling the necessarily partisan nature of our contributions to political debate with the democratic reasons we have for respecting our fellow citizens.²⁵ For Williams the question of the attitude we should adopt toward our allies and opponents, and the question of when their complaints should be heeded and when they should not, is ultimately a matter of judgement, which cannot be determined in the seminar room (*IBWD*, 19). But the fact that it is impossible to theoretically determine precisely what this attitude should entail in advance of the political debates to which it applies does not make it any less real.

We can get a clearer sense of how taking political opposition and support seriously matters by examining Williams's reasons for holding that others' reactions and sentiments are important philosophical considerations when we think about the character of our political values and concepts. This comes out in his debate with G.A. Cohen concerning the reports that were published as part of the British Labour Party's 1992-1994 Commission on Social Justice, on which Williams served.²⁶ In his critique of the Commission, Cohen claims the Labour Party's traditional values of community – 'the antimarket principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get out of doing so but because you need my service' (Cohen 2011, 217) –

²⁵ Rawls is more sensitive to such concerns, which again complicates the realists vs. moralists narrative. However, Rawls's public reason based solution to the problem of how to respect citizens' reasonable disagreements can be criticised because it is incapable of giving us any direct guidance on how we should treat our political opponents here and now given its own idealizing assumptions (Stears and Humprey 2012, 305). More generally realists also deny that we need the kind of a moralised consensus Rawls seeks because they reject his understanding of stability. For example, Williams claims that we merely need the kind of agreement required for citizens to acquiesce with a set of constitutional or conventional rules that entail the avoidance of the problems of widespread social disorder (See Williams 1999a, 158 and *IBWD*, 2 fn. 2). This repudiation of Rawls has been charged with ignoring the ways in which stable political orders may require explicitly moralised sources of agreement (Jubb forthcoming, 11 –14). However, Jubb's substantive points about the kinds of judgements and complaints that affect the stability of modern states strike me as being perfectly compatible with Williams's account, given that solving the first political question is a necessary but not sufficient condition of political legitimation, because legitimate regimes must *make sense* to their subjects as examples of 'authoritative order' (*IBWD*, 10). I accordingly fail to see why realists will 'struggle to account' (Jubb forthcoming, 11) for the ways in which modern political orders command, or fail to command, people's allegiance. Either way, the relevant point is that realists can reasonably ask for credible evidence to vindicate Rawls's claim that political stability can only be achieved by resolving disputes about political authority via moralised agreement on constitutional essentials. Such evidence cannot be provided by the internal workings of the theory, however elegant it may be.

²⁶ See <http://www.ippr.org.uk/ipprcommissions/index.asp?id=2378>.

and equality – the idea that ‘the amount of amenity and burden in one person’s life should be roughly comparable to that in any other’s’ (Cohen 2011, 220) – had been compromised in the hope of greater electoral success. According to Cohen, a proper understanding of these values points ‘to a form of society a hundred miles from the horizon of present possibility’ and such utopianism is ‘needed to defend every half-mile of territory gained and to mount an attempt to regain each bit that has been lost’ (Cohen 2011, 213). It is consequently a mistake to think that the failure of the socialist movement to foster a widespread acceptance of its values should affect the question of whether or not they should be endorsed, ‘even if it is indeed a reason, politics being what it is, not to thrust them forward publicly in their unvarnished form’ (Cohen 2011, 217). Similarly, in his camping trip thought experiment in *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen claims that (2009, 57) ‘the principal problem that faces the socialist ideal is that we do not know how to design the machinery that would make it run’, rather than the problem of the value status of socialism now and around here, because the salient obstacle facing socialism is the feasibility issue of design.²⁷

As Jubb notes, realists like Williams are hostile to Cohen’s argument because there is good reason to hold that the socialist principle of community appeals to a ‘communality of purpose’ which eradicates the very set of conflicts about our ends and interests which frame our politics, with the result that socialist ‘community’ is not a coherent political value here and now (Jubb forthcoming, 8). The problem is not, as Cohen encourages us to think, merely one of ‘feasibility’. As I have argued elsewhere, the refusal to incorporate certain factual considerations about the nature of the conflicts we experience in politics is more akin to a category error. Once we acknowledge that our politics is, in large part, a matter of managing large-scale collective action problems, and ‘agree that in such scenarios different psychological traits must exist than in imagined situations like Cohen’s camping trip, there is reason to believe that employing such

²⁷ The question, that is, of working out how to make an economic system run by ‘exploiting human generosity’ (2009, 58).

thought experiments as a proxy to uncover political principles is a mistake' (Hall 2013, 180). The insistence that our normative political arguments should begin with the acceptance of various factual considerations about how our world is, is not best understood as a 'feasibility' concern but as expressing the more fundamental requirement that we actually address the political practices we claim to be concerned with.²⁸

Williams makes two further points in his response to Cohen which are significant. First, that the historical tradition that supported the value of community involved a 'peculiar' set of alliances forged in special ethos of post-war Britain, some of which were admirable but others – 'xenophobia, brutality and sexism' – were not (Williams, 1997, 55). The problem Cohen accordingly faces is that wanting to simply resurrect this earlier outlook makes little sense because 'it would mean giving up on the liberalisation of what was then the past fifty years and returning to a situation, the removal of which that very outlook demanded' (Jubb forthcoming, 9). Second, and more significantly, Williams insists that Cohen cannot understand which values are politically appropriate to our modern circumstances precisely because he insists that the reactions and sentiments of one's fellow citizens are of no philosophical relevance to the task of outlining coherent conceptions of our political values. Often disappointed political philosophers offer 'not much more than moralising disappointment with the electors, to the effect that they are too greedy and self-centred to accept one's principles' and when this kind of moral posturing takes place 'the time has come to ask whether one's principles are principles for these people – whether indeed, they are *political* principles at all' (Williams 1997, 49). Hence, rather than merely lamenting the moral deficiencies of those who supported the rise of the New Right, British Labour Party theoreticians must accept that 'one of the less encouraging explanations of why these ideas have had an effect is that they are in a certain sense psychologically and historically realistic, [as] they may be seen as appealing to motives that people have and are not ashamed to have, rather than to motives the moralists would prefer them to have' (Williams 1997, 50). To

²⁸ For further realist criticism of Cohen's approach see Rossi 2014.

this end, Williams urges political theorists to think about motivation realistically, especially if they want to creditably claim that people's motivations could be transformed under a set of different institutions. This does not require us to take motives as fixed; no realist should think that for the very obvious reason that they are not. However, it counsels us to avoid the temptation of merely imputing to the imaginary agents who populate our models motives that will best secure the political goals we want to achieve. Such argumentation lies somewhere between the vices of wishful thinking and self-deception. Because Cohen's methodological commitments preclude him from taking the realism constraint, as well as considerations about the real motivations of his fellow citizens, seriously, Williams insists that there is little reason to avoid the conclusion that he is simply offering us 'a trip down Memory Lane' (1997, 56).

This is not a fully worked-out account of precisely how the sentiments and motivations of our fellow citizens ought to affect the activity of political theorising, but it is suggestive. For one thing, it exorcises the suggestion that taking our fellow citizens motivations seriously is an issue of secondary philosophical importance. Considering the real motives people have, rather than the ones we wish that they had, is relevant because it can stop us from mistaking nostalgic lamentation, utopian imagining, or the ecstasy of sanctimony²⁹ with coherent political argument. Politics necessarily exhibits a diverse range of psychological dispositions, attitudes and real motivations and the academic investigation of politics (both descriptive and normative) requires us take them into account. Consequently, it is not clear that imagining what we would do if we were organising a camping-trip, or in the position of a maximally empowered Utopian magistrate, even warrants the name political theory/philosophy because it not only requires us to wish away the fact of political opposition (itself a basic constitutive feature of our politics) but also contains within it the (at the very least suspect, and quite possibly indecent) desire to configure the psychology of every person on the planet so that they would act as we please. As Raymond Geuss notes, 'politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in

²⁹ To use a wonderfully evocative phrase of Philip Roth's: 2000, 2.

institutional contexts that change over time, and the study of politics must reflect this fact' (2008, 13). For this reason, political theorists should be more comfortable than many moralists appear to be with the idea that their prescriptions will necessarily be contingent on the character of modern social formations and people's sentiments and motivations. For 'Thucydidean realists' this is simply a matter of taking the disenchantment of the world seriously.

This realistic account of political construction also counsels us to view the people we address as agents with concrete identities and disparate projects who need to be convinced and motivated to act *as they are* rather than as recalcitrant impediments toward the achievement of our favoured philosophical theory, or a particular set of distributive principles. The motivations, goals and commitments of our fellow citizens matter because 'whether our thoughts even make political sense depends to an indefinite degree on other people's actions' (*IBWD*, 25). If we genuinely want to move people to act in a particular way we must take seriously the need to speak to them in terms that they can embrace, a reminder which ties in with Williams's view that ethical and political arguments will fail to guide action if they offer the sort of conventional philosophical theory which systematises ethical thought and reduces it to some basic principles. Realist political theory requires an imaginative grasp on what might actually make sense to people here and now. As such, this requires its practitioners to avoid the temptation of merely preaching to their audience.³⁰

These thoughts come together to buttress the claim that the sort of moral imagining many political moralists favour is, if not guilty on the category error front, is at best nothing more than politically defeasible moral imagining that has not yet 'cross[ed] the threshold of offering a serious political consideration' (*IBWD*, 92). This is because political values must be constructed in such a way that they have purchase in the unique historical and political situation in which we actually find ourselves, alongside other morally imperfect people. Once we grant the coherent

³⁰ Archetypal cases of moralism involve 'the insistence that a given person is wrong, disconnected from any possible understanding of how it comes about that he is wrong' as this 'tends to leave the commentator entirely outside that person, preaching at him' (*ELP*, 241 endnote 16).

basis of this methodological claim about how we should do political theory, there is little reason to hold that taking the facts of political opposition or support seriously mistakenly elevates an issue of opportunistic politics to one of philosophical or theoretical importance. Political institutions claim authority over all subject to their power, and our political values, as such, are meant to help us to think about how they could be better ordered in the light of that claim. As a result, when we do political theory we cannot be solipsists³¹ and the issues Williams argues we should incorporate into our construction of political values matter deeply when we think about how this aspiration might be made good, even if they are not the final answer. But the message is clear: if political theory is to live up to the first part of its billing, it had better avoid the temptation to separate questions of ‘pure principle’ from such considerations.

5. Conclusion

I have drawn on Williams’s work on liberty to argue that realists can offer a more constructive account of how we should think normatively about politics than much of the current debate acknowledges. Williams’s endorsement of what I have called the ‘realism constraint’, alongside his claims about the significance and character of political opposition and real motivation, suggest that the elaboration of a political value *must not* be conceived in terms of the application of a pre-political moral value to the political sphere. There is not, as it were, a domain of value alongside a separate domain of politics, where the nonideal principles, or rules-of-regulation, that we adopt endeavour to be the best application of our ideal theory, or fundamental fact-insensitive principles, given the facts we must negotiate – facts which, conceived as such, merely either impede or assist the political activity of moral realisation. Political thinking about ideals is rather an attempt to make sense of what a value can mean for us ‘now and around here’ and because there is no clean split between principle and politics in the way the moralists claim, we

³¹ I borrow this way of framing such a complaint from an unpublished paper of David Schmidtz’s.

constantly have to judge how facts of politics affect our political values and vice versa. Therefore, unlike nonideal theorists, realists like Williams are not merely working around the edges of what Hamlin and Stemplowska have called the ‘feasibility frontier’ (2012, 55) or telling us to lower our normative aims (Swift and Stemplowska 2012, 382 and Valentini 2012, 660). They are rather challenging the received wisdom about relationship between morally ‘purified’ regulative ideas and political practice inherent in most contemporary normative political theory. If this position is plausible, and in this paper I hope to have articulated reasons for thinking that it is, we ought to acknowledge that political theory requires a different sort of judgement to that assumed in most moralist worldviews: one that is much more historically and politically sensitive.³²

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³² My thanks to Paul Sagar for helping me to articulate this point more clearly than I’d managed.

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