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Realism in Analytical Political Theory: A How-To Guide

1. Introduction

Contemporary normative analytical political theory tends to think of itself as continuous with or at least an application of moral philosophy. For example, in the Introduction to his *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians*, Adam Swift describes the discipline he is introducing as asking 'what the state should do', explaining that this means asking 'what moral principles should govern the way it treats its citizens' (Swift 2014: 5). Similarly, in the Introduction to his *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, Will Kymlicka says that 'there is a fundamental continuity between moral and political philosophy' (Kymlicka 2002: 5). This is because Robert Nozick was right to claim that moral philosophy sets the limits to what 'persons may and may not do to one another' including 'through the apparatus of a state' (Kymlicka 2002: 5). Nor is this only a feature of purportedly introductory texts. Cecile Fabre's *Cosmopolitan War* sees its attempt to articulate to integrate cosmopolitan principles of distributive justice and just war theory as uncomplicatedly an enquiry in 'applied ethics' (Fabre 2012: 3). Equally, the very first sentence of Thomas Christiano's *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and its Limits* introduces its investigation into democratic authority by asking what 'the moral foundations of democracy and liberal rights' are (Christiano 2008: 1).

Realism rejects this understanding of how normative political theory should operate. This "moralist" or "ethics first" approach to normative political theory is, realists claim, fundamentally mistaken. The precise description of moralism's sins varies from realist theorist to realist theorist, but as realism's reaction against moralism grows in strength, various themes have emerged. This chapter treats Bernard Williams' 'Realism and moralism in political theory' as an archetypical piece of realism, using it to suggest that realists share a common commitment to the idea that politics is the contextually specific management of conflicts generated by our inability to order our lives together around an agreed set of complete moral values. It then goes on to try to demonstrate how that understanding of politics constrains normative political theorising. Realists have not typically been very eager to move beyond critiques of moralism by engaging in first-order theorising themselves. Although I discuss some reasons why this may be, I nonetheless explore how realism might structure our thinking about egalitarian political commitments. In the course of doing so, I provide a series of guidelines a piece of political theorising should follow if it is to remain realist. Section 2, Bernard Williams' Exemplary Realism, discusses Williams and his realism. Section 3, Working through a Case, provides a set of guidelines for realist political theorising by considering a realist case for political egalitarianism. Section 4, A Summary and a Warning, summarises the guidelines from the previous section and includes a warning about the possibility of genuinely political theorising.

2. Bernard Williams' Exemplary Realism

The current realist movement in political theory seems to have begun to take off with the posthumous publication of a series of papers by the British philosopher, Bernard Williams. His collection, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, and particularly its first paper, 'Realism and moralism in political theory', gave new and powerful voice to an often long-held dissatisfaction with the dominant forms of political theory in the Anglophone world (Williams 2005a; Williams 2005b, hereafter *RMPT*). Although in many ways, Williams was there merely reiterating concerns he had previously publicly aired, often in more polished forms, *RMPT* served as a focus around which a range of complaints could coalesce. It has, for example, around five times the number of citations as his last major article which, although it does not use the terms 'realism' and 'moralism', is in effect an attempt to develop a realist theory of liberty by taking into account various political constraints (Williams 2005c; see https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?cites=10056158126568575885&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5&hl=en and https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?cites=3956932321022311105&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5&hl=en). According to William Galston's influential survey article, we even owe Williams the term 'realism' as a way of grouping together those dissatisfied with the way the 'high liberalism' of Rawls and Dworkin ignores the centrality of conflict and instability to political questions (Galston 2010: 386, 385). If we are to group together theorists as different as John Dunn and Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe and Mark Philp, then it is to Williams we must look. It is then with Williams and *RMPT* that I will start.

RMPT begins with a distinction between two different ways of thinking about the relation of 'morality to political practice' (RMPT: 1). While an enactment model of that relation surveys society 'to see how it may be made better' and so makes politics 'the instrument of the moral', a structural model is instead concerned with 'the moral conditions of co-existence under power' and so emphasizes 'constraints… on what politics can rightfully do' (RMPT: 1-2). While utilitarianism is a paradigmatic case of the former, Rawls' theory exemplifies the latter (RMPT: 1). Despite the important differences that Williams identifies between the enactment and the structural model, they share a commitment to 'the priority of the moral over the political' and so make political theory 'something like applied morality' (RMPT: 2). Williams goes on to contrast this 'political moralism' with 'political realism', 'which gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (RMPT: 2-3).

Giving greater autonomy to distinctively political thought involves focusing on what Williams calls 'the first political question' of 'securing of order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions

of cooperation' (RMPT: 3). This Hobbesian question is first not in the sense that it can be solved and then ignored, but instead in the sense that its being and remaining solved is a condition of posing, never mind solving, any other political questions (RMPT: 3). For Williams, groups which do not attempt to answer the first political question for themselves and their members do not have politics. If order is not being created out of division in a way that in some sense at least hopes to avert recognisably Hobbesian bads, politics is simply not going on. Similarly, an activity or system of thought is only political if it is circumscribed by a need to contain conflict among those at whom it is aimed. As Williams puts it in the context of a discussion of the relation between the Spartans and the Helots, the 'situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation; it is rather the situation which the existence of the political is in the first place supposed to alleviate' (RMPT: 5). However we want to characterize the undesirability of Hobbesian bads - and there will surely be a range of ways to describe what is wrong with them - politics is what goes on when we seek to avert them through coercive orders.

Williams goes on to draw various further consequences from this understanding of politics. He offers the idea of the basic legitimation demand, which requires that some justification of claims to political authority is offered to all those who are subject to it (RMPT: 4). After all, the situation of the Spartans and the Helots is just one of any number of examples which demonstrate that political power can contribute to the problem of our absolute vulnerability to violence rather than offer a solution to it. As Williams puts it, '*something* has to be said to explain… what the difference is between the solution and the problem', to explain why the exercise of political power should not be treated simply as an illegitimate attempt at domination (RMPT: 5). the basic legitimation demand is the demand for that something. If it is a moral demand, 'it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics' (RMPT: 5). Instead, the basic legitimation demand follows from 'there being such a thing as politics', from aiming to answer the first political question, from showing that attempted solutions are not in fact 'part of the problem' (RMPT: 5).

Williams further claims that under contemporary conditions, only liberalism can adequately answer the basic legitimation demand (RMPT: 7-8). This has not always been the case, but liberals have managed to raise 'expectations of what a state can do', adopted 'more demanding standards of what counts as a threat to people's vital interests', and expanded the range of ways in which supposed justifications can come to seem like mere rationalizations (RMPT: 7). Answers to the basic legitimation demand must always be historically variable in this sense: they must 'make sense' of what they legitimate as 'an intelligible order of authority' to those to whom it must be legitimated (RMPT: 10). The universalist tendencies of political moralism

which invite us imagine ourselves 'as Kant at the court of King Arthur' may offer us a genuine possibility, but it is not a productive one (RMPT: 10). Performing that thought experiment will not help us 'to understand anything' about societies distant from ours in time and space, except perhaps that they are distant not only in time and space (RMPT: 10). It is only when we think about our own society and those it interacts with that what makes sense as an intelligible order of authority becomes normative rather than a 'category of historical understanding' (RMPT: 11).

Political moralism fails in terms of this understanding of politics. By starting with a moralized and philosophical conception of the person, it puts itself in a position from which it is impossible to give adequate normative guidance about when Hobbes' first political question has been answered. A liberal conception of the person is the product and not the justificatory foundation of the liberal political institutions we live under now. Treating it as the foundation makes it impossible to provide an explanation of those institutions or why we have them now and others, elsewhere or at other times, do or did not (RMPT: 8-9). Further, because political moralism sees politics as the application of moral philosophy to political problems, it does not understand how to deal with political disagreement. It 'naturally construes conflictual political thought in society in terms of rival elaborations of a moral text' and so sees its opponents as 'simply mistaken' instead of fellow democratic political actors whose deeply held commitments are at stake in political decisions (RMPT: 12, 13).

Realism in general shares both *RMPT*'s hostility to much contemporary political philosophy and its diagnosis of its problems. Both Galston and Rossi and Sleat offer, in their survey articles, four features characteristic of realism's rejection of what it sees as the moralism dominant in contemporary political philosophy (Galston 2010: 408; Rossi and Sleat 2014: 691-694). Although their lists do not overlap perfectly, there is an understandable degree of similarity. For example, Galston begins his list by claiming that realism involves taking 'politics seriously as a particular field of human endeavour' and that this means holding that 'civil order is the *sine qua non* for every other political good' (Galston 2010: 408). In turn, Rossi and Sleat first stress the importance for realists of the 'broadly Hobbesian thought... that if ethics could effectively regulate behaviour in political communities as it does amongst (say) friends and acquaintances, we would not require politics' (Rossi and Sleat 2014: 691). In both cases, this mandates an attention to 'the specific conditions under which political decisions are taken and agents act' (Rossi and Sleat 2014: 694), whether that be in terms of a focus on institutions and a more developed moral psychology or on the history of our moral commitments and the tragic choices that political actors may find it impossible to avoid (Galston 2010: 408; Rossi and Sleat 2014: 691-694).

Many of the elements in terms of which Galston and Rossi and Sleat define realism are present in *RMPT*. *RMPT* is hostile to much contemporary political philosophy and theory on the grounds that it is not properly political in one sense or another. Williams' discussion understands politics in terms of the provision of order for agents whose interests and ideals conflict in a way that otherwise might well make it impossible for them to coexist. In stressing the importance of conflict to political thinking, Williams here also insists on the importance of context. The universalist tendencies of contemporary political philosophy and theory are part of what prevent it from addressing real political situations, which always involve actual political actors with particular disagreements. Those disagreements and the resources the situation makes available to resolve them need to be properly understood if anything helpful is going to be said about them. This will mean appreciating how we came to find ourselves here, with these conflicts and these means of defusing and controlling them. The history and specificity of our situation need to be understood so that we can grasp the limits on what we can do.

Although Williams expresses scepticism about what he sees as Habermas' project to show that 'the concept of modern law harbours the democratic ideal' in *RMPT* (16), he acknowledges that the discussion in *RMPT* occurs at 'a very high level of generality' and so does not contain any concrete positive claims of the sort he criticizes Habermas for making (15). In that sense, despite being the best-known of Williams' realist pieces, there is not really any firm advice about how to do realist political theory or philosophy in *RMPT*. Even elsewhere, when for example Williams is discussing the particular political value of liberty, although he is eager to tell us how not to judge whether someone really does have a complaint in liberty, there is little positive theorising. We are told that competition is not, for us here and now, the ground of a complaint that liberty has been lost but that one's position in a social structure can be, and that because of our disenchantment, liberty is more important to us than many of our forebears, all at roughly this level of generality (Williams 2005c: 91, 95). Nor is Williams unusual here. Self-identified realists have been much more interested in diagnosing problems with contemporary political philosophy than replacing the positive theorising they criticize.

Part of the reluctance to be more forthcoming here is undoubtedly the importance Williams and other realists give to political action. Even if the title were chosen by Williams' editor and widow, it is obviously no accident that the posthumous collection containing *RMPT* is called *In the Beginning Was the Deed*. Williams treats that dictum from Goethe's Faust as a reminder that politics is about action and so will often escape our attempts to model or predict it because of the way its participants' acts will transform it, including by creating the conditions of their own success. As well as quoting it in *RMPT*, Williams also uses Goethe's dictum as the title for another of the pieces in the posthumous collection (*RMPT*: 14; Williams 2005d). However,

unless realists think that political theory or philosophy is a necessarily impossible activity, it must be capable of at least sometimes meeting those conditions. Indeed, Williams' own career, which involved sitting on a number of Royal Commissions and contributing to the British Labour Party's Commission on Social Justice, suggests that he felt that political theory and philosophy could address concrete political questions without falling victim to the pathologies of moralism. By in part drawing on some of Williams' own work on equality, the remainder of this piece will try to illustrate how that might be done.

3. Working through a Case: Legitimacy and a Realistic Egalitarianism

Williams insisted that only a liberal state could be legitimate under the conditions of modernity (see for example *RMPT*: 7-8). It is this, and the arguments this might give us for commitments to relatively high levels of material equality, that will serve as examples to demonstrate how to do positive realist political theorizing. The first task here is to understand why Williams thought that liberalism was the only way of legitimating a state in modernity. Although political situations must involve the management of conflict between agents whose commitments and interests cannot all be satisfied, for realists they are never exhausted by that characterization. Responding to a political situation then will have to mean responding to its particularities. **Realists must rely on an interpretation of a political situation that captures its specificities**; otherwise, they will be guilty of the universalism and the associated failure to address real political agents for which they criticize moralists.

Williams believed that modernity required liberalism because it had raised expectations of what the state could do while undermining the ease with which hierarchies can be justified (see for example *RMPT*: 7). The idea that modernity involves the triumph of rationality over mystical and supernatural explanations is a persistent theme throughout Williams' work, from 'The idea of equality' in 1962 to *Truth and Truthfulness* in 2002 (Williams, 2005e, hereafter *IoE*: 105; Williams, 2002: 231). If hierarchies of rank of the sort liberals tend to reject are not to depend on brute coercion, they must rely on seeming 'foreordained and inevitable' and so are 'undermined' by growth of their members' 'reflective consciousness', especially about the way that such hierarchies tend to enculturate their members (*IoE*: 105). If a modern political order was to be justified then, for Williams, it had to be justified to Weberian disenchanted agents. **A realist theory of political good like legitimacy must be fitted to the particular political situation in which it is to be invoked**.[1]

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[1] There is in this sense a link between practice-dependence and realism. See Sangiovanni 2008 for a definition of practice-dependence and Jubb forthcoming a for discussion of the relation between the two.

Of course, Williams' interpretation of our situation now and around here is hardly uncontested. One might think of Alasdair MacIntyre's insistence that something roughly like the processes that undermined Williams' 'supposedly contented hierarchical societies of the past' were a disaster for reflective moral understanding analogous to the destruction of science as a practice of investigation and understanding (Williams 2011: 181; MacIntyre 1981: 1-2). If modernity has left us with 'fragments of a conceptual scheme' stripped of the 'contexts from which their significance derived' in the place where integrated notions of the good life ought to be, then Williams' support for liberalism will seem, at best, acquiescence in a cultural catastrophe of an unimaginably vast scale (MacIntyre 1981: 2, 3). MacIntyre's stance here is at least in tension with realism because of the way in which it refuses to deal with the agents with which it understands itself as being faced. For MacIntyre, we are doomed by the complete disintegration of the traditional authorities which made possible the Thomist virtues we need for decent lives. How does that diagnosis of our problems tell us to structure our lives together? It must absolutely reject not just those institutions and their associated historical and sociological forms but with them, us.

In this sense, **a realist political theory must be based on an interpretation of our political situation which refuses both the related consolations of utopian hope and unremitting despair**. MacIntyre believes that modernity makes it impossible for us to live decent lives. He combines utopianism with despair by claiming that unless we undo all the history of at least the last three centuries, we are doomed to live fractured, empty lives. The rejection of everything there is prompts the search for something beyond it. This is not to say that such interpretations or even the commitments for which they serve as foundations are incorrect or inappropriate. It is instead to point out that if any really achievable social order destroys all but the most minimal human values, then it is hard to understand the point or even the possibility of 'securing order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation' (*RMPT*: 3). There will be no political values for distinctively political thought to articulate. Whether they are conservative or radical, realists must be able to say something which can make sense of the value of politics as an activity. The temptation to slip into moralist condemnation needs to be resisted.

Emphasising this may cast some doubt on the credentials of some self-proclaimed realists, at least if they intend their realism to involve 'distinctively political thought' in Williams' sense (RMPT: 3). Raymond Geuss, for example, not only sees himself operating in the tradition of critical theory typified by Theodor Adorno; he criticizes Williams for 'paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J. S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin' rather than adopting Adorno's rejection of both the 'self-serving "liberalism" of the Anglo-American political world and the brutal practices of "really-existing socialism"' (Geuss 2012: 150). He also sees himself as

a realist; his *Philosophy and Real Politics* is a relentless attack on behalf of realism against what he calls 'ethics-first' political philosophy (see for example Geuss 2008: 9). However, anyone taking their lead from Adorno may find themselves too pessimistic about our historical and political situation to be able to do justice to what we can achieve through politics.

Adorno argued that while 'social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought', '[t]he only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: xiii, 4). If as a result our civilization is in fact a kind of 'barbarism', its social orders will presumably be little more than 'one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people' in more and less open ways (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: xi; RMPT, 3). That will make it difficult to understand how, for example, Williams' first political question could be answered satisfactorily. Geuss may then not be a realist, at least in the sense I am using here. Following Adorno, he insists both that living a decent life is impossible within the 'repressive, duplicitous and alienated' social forms of late capitalist modernity and that it is impossible for us realistically 'to envisage any fundamental change in our world we could bring about by our own efforts' (Geuss 2012: 154, 160). If our historical and political situation means that our lives cannot avoid being 'radically defective', an 'impossible situation', then we will struggle to find, let alone implement or grasp the value of, ways of living together that do not betray all our hopes (Geuss 2012: 154).

There are ways to reject Williams' account of modernity which do not see it as made up of ideas which are 'misshapen, brittle, riven with cracks… and very ill-suited to each other', and so under which it is impossible to live coherently (Geuss 2001: 9). We might, for example, question whether Williams can be right about liberalism being the only way that a modern political order can make sense to its members. One does not have to subscribe to claims about the superiority of alleged Asian values to see that various states in East Asia seem to be accepted by most of their citizens yet are neither liberal nor under-developed compared to the North Atlantic democracies Williams presumably had in mind when equating liberalism and modernity. There are problems too for Williams' claim even in Europe, where we might assume it would be most apt given its association with the Enlightenment and its supposedly demystifying aftermath. Many European states, most obviously those of the former Warsaw Pact, have been and in some cases remain modern and illiberal without obviously failing to give a broadly acceptable account of themselves to their citizens, even in the medium term. Even if modernity is disenchanted, it seems that there are a variety of ways of responding to that disenchantment. **The interpretation of the relevant political situation upon which a realist relies must not generate obviously implausible implications**, as Bernard Williams' does if he is taken to be discussing modernity in general.

Rawls is often the target of realists' attack on moralism. He exemplifies one of Williams' two forms of moralism, while Galston begins his survey of realism by rightly describing it as a 'countermovement' to the 'high liberalism' championed by Rawls and Dworkin. However, in his later works, Rawls drew a distinction between political and comprehensive theories and defended the political credentials of his own work (Rawls 2005). Part of this involved situating his theorising 'in the special nature of democratic political culture as marked by reasonable pluralism' (Rawls 2005: xxi). That culture has its roots in 'the doctrine of free faith' developed in the aftermath of the Reformation that rejects the idea that 'social unity and concord requires agreement on a general and comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine' that might otherwise have seemed natural in a world of 'salvationist, creedal, and expansionist religions' (Rawls 2005: xxv). These conditions do not characterize all twentieth century European societies, let alone all societies that might be described as modern, as for example Rawls' references to the Weimar Republic's loss of confidence in a 'decent liberal parliamentary regime' show he was well aware (Rawls 2005: lix). In that sense, not only do Rawls and realists share concerns about treating political philosophy as a branch of ethics, but Rawls is in fact clearer than Williams is about the relatively restricted scope of the interpretation of the political situation upon which his principles rely.

Realist disagreement with Rawls should not focus on his alleged failure to address properly political questions, since his later theory is in fact explicitly arranged around addressing a particular, historically situated form of disagreement, but on the tools with which he chooses to address them. The problem with Rawls' theory is not that it ignores Hobbes' question, but that it treats it as soluble through appeals to an ideal of free and equal citizenship (see for example Rawls 2005: xxv). Rawls is wrong to think that philosophical abstraction can by itself offer a way of dealing with 'deep political conflicts' like those between Lincoln and his opponents over slavery, because those conflicts are obviously not only philosophical disagreements (Rawls 2005: 44, 45). Rawls' understanding of the dilemmas of modern democratic life is inadequate because it ignores both the role of material interests in our political life and the cognitive and motivational limits of philosophical reasoning. When Rawls developed his theory, in the long period of Keynesian growth after World War 2, there were real political movements which officially had plausible hopes for something like what he prescribed. Although in that sense, his views are not pejoratively utopian, his inadequate understanding of the dilemmas of modern democratic life means they are not realist. Those political movements did not draw on philosophical ideals to draw together and motivate their supporters, but on shared experiences of hardship and solidarity built up in the course of struggles against it. **Realists must acknowledge the importance of material interests and ideological and charismatic**

appeals, especially compared to philosophical reasoning, when theorizing political goods to fit particular political situations.

Rawls' and Williams' interpretations of modernity illustrate two errors to which interpretations of a political situation may fall victim. Complacency about the generality of an interpretation or about the motivational and cognitive power of philosophy is not realistic. However, we can avoid both of those problems by marrying Rawls' cultural and geographical circumspection to Williams' emphasis on disenchantment. Such an interpretation of modernity will neither apply beyond the societies with which both theorists were familiar nor end up depending on the power of reason alone. This leaves us with a roughly liberal principle of transparency which, rather than requiring a system capable of being endorsed by all 'in light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason', builds on Williams' idea of the 'human point of view' (Rawls 2005: 137; *IoE*, 103).

The human point of view is a perspective which, when considering someone else's life, 'is concerned primarily with what it is *for that person* to live that life and do those actions' (*IoE*: 103). It will asks us to 'respect and try to understand other people's consciousness of their own activities', whether they manage to do what they hoped and how they feel about failures they suffer (IoE: 103). The human point of view can become a demand for transparency and rule out, Williams claims, markedly unequal societies because of the frustrations and resentments they will predictably generate. Once the idea that societies are human creations spreads, those frustrations and resentments can no longer be justified because they will no longer seem inevitable (*IoE*, 105). If relations between members of those societies are not to be conducted on the basis of brute force or systematic deception, neither of which can be acceptable from the human point of view, then hierarchies cannot be too steep or pervasive (*IoE*: 104-5). If the hierarchies are too steep or pervasive, then the social and political order which sustains them will seem too unsympathetic to the 'intentions and purposes' of those at the wrong end of those hierarchies (*IoE*: 103). The terms on which that sympathy operates will need to be thinner, to assume less about the commitments of those whom it is for, than the terms on which it operated in 'supposedly contented hierarchical societies of the past' (see for example Williams 2005f). It will be unable to take for granted the set of commitments which we all supposedly shared in those societies. Those are gone, along with metaphysical or supernatural explanations which sustained the idea that the associated hierarchies were unavoidable. Still, that sympathy will need to be there if the political order is to 'make sense' to its members, to avoid failing to meet the basic legitimation demand for at least those particularly disadvantaged by it.

In understanding what this account of legitimacy in North Atlantic democracies might judge acceptable, we should look to real political motivations. These need not be drawn directly from

reality, as long as it is clear that they have some real-world counterparts (see for example Jubb forthcoming b: 12-14). **Our accounts of political legitimacy or any other political good must be for actually-existing agents, and we can best check that there is a constituency that they address by showing that they can capture and give form to political demands that animate actual agents**. If we were to develop an account of a political good which could not be seen as an articulation of a hope or resentment that drives a stance towards a political order real people actually adopt, then that failure would count strongly against the account being genuinely realist. For example, connecting an interpretation of Williams' minimally egalitarian account of legitimacy to the resentments that seem to have motivated the most widespread civil unrest in the UK in recent decades strengthens that account by showing that it could well make sense of those real political demands (see Jubb forthcoming c: 23-4). A series of interviews conducted with hundreds of self-identified rioters found a 'pervasive sense of injustice' (Lewis et al 2011: 24). Barely half of the rioters felt British, compared to more than 90% of Britons on average, understandably given that they felt victimized by the police and excluded from a culture of consumption by their poverty (Lewis et al 2011: 28, 19). These interviews seem to show then that a realist egalitarianism focusing on the systematic frustration of the hopes and expectations of the least advantaged speaks to real political motivations.

Realism does not just demand that political goods are for actual agents. Actual agents may of course make demands which are not properly political and so which realists will have to temper and limit. Indeed, the intense moralism of much democratic political debate, which is for example often captivated both on the left and the right by nostalgia for supposedly lost forms of ethical community, may be a serious problem for realists. Even if that moralism can be contained with the boundaries of the properly political for now, there is presumably always a risk that dissatisfaction with the inevitable compromises of political life will break through those limits and put various political goods at risk. **Descriptions of political goods meant for moralistic publics will have to explain in terms they can understand why they must satisfy themselves with less moral unity than they would like**. In this sense, realist political theory needs to draw not just on an interpretation of a political situation but also on an interpretation that is capable of being publicly stated and accepted without, for example, undermining itself. If an account of legitimacy shows a population they share less than they thought, it may prevent them from sharing even that.

This is just one of a number of risks that realist pieces of theorising face as a result of the constraints imposed by the need to remain political. The most obvious of these is that the theorizing itself relies on controversial moral values. Realist political theorising would be moralistic in this sense if it relied on value claims that, if they were acceptable to the

constituency which the theory addresses, would eliminate its political problems. Politics is in part constituted by our disagreement on values around which to order our shared institutions. Consequently, **realist political theory must not appeal to values or interpretations of values whose controversy is, at least as far as its interpretation of the relevant political situation is concerned, a defining feature of that situation**.

For example, if we were to try to articulate an egalitarian theory of legitimacy along the lines suggested by Williams' idea of the human point of view, we would need to avoid basing its appeal on an ideal of the good of living as equals. While perhaps there have been some communities where such an ideal could exert enough power over most of its members to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate rule, our society is not one. It is too divided to demonstrate the acceptability of its massively coercive, structuring power by appealing to the idea that relations of equality are central to a good life. Even if that ideal seems attractive in the abstract, its acceptability in general will not decide how it should be weighed against other ideals when it inevitably conflicts with them. A solidaristic society may be all well and good for many citizens, but only as long as it does not suppress individuality, undermine individual responsibility, respect for one's traditions, or any number of other ideals.

Instead, an egalitarian theory of legitimacy must be based on a less demanding account of the value of equality. Rather than requiring citizens to accept not just a moral ideal but a particular ranking of that ideal against other competing ideals, some more minimal explanation of the value of equality and its connection to an entitlement to rule is needed. For Williams, one of the virtues of Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear was that it tried to address 'everybody' by drawing on 'the only certainly universal materials of politics ... power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty' (Williams 2005g: 59). As Shklar herself understood, the liberalism of fear's emphasis on minimizing our exposure to cruelty could be turned against hierarchy because of the way that abuses of power 'are apt to burden the poor and weak most heavily' (Shklar 1989: 28). Inequality often brings domination and humiliation in its wake, and so the importance of equality could be explained by trying to avoid those harms. Domination and humiliation count as harms in terms of many plausible ideals, and so understanding the value of equality through the value of avoiding them would minimize conflict between that value and others. Since generating and sustaining domination and humiliation seems to make power relations illegitimate, it would also connect answering the basic legitimacy demand with meeting various egalitarian requirements. **The values to which a realist political theory appeals must be minimal in the sense that they can expect to be accepted as playing whatever role is necessary by at least most members of the society to which they must 'make sense'**.

It is not enough to be able to say that, for example, inequality causes domination and humiliation. **Insofar as an explanation of what matters about a particular value depends on claims about how it links to other values, those claims have to be substantiated by an empirically-sensitive account of how social and political life actually operates**. For example, G. A. Cohen claims that market interactions are 'typically' motivated by 'some mixture of greed and fear' in that other participants in markets 'are predominantly seen as possible sources of enrichment, and threats to one's success' (Cohen 2009: 40). This is supposed to contrast with and so help explain the value of an alternative motivation of community, which values reciprocal service (Cohen 2009: 39-45). It is though straightforwardly false that market interactions are predominantly structured around greed and fear. The norms of basic honesty and respect for property rights on which a functioning market depends could not survive if we all saw each other primarily as ruthless exploiters desperately hiding our vulnerabilities from each other to avoid them being taken advantage of. Cohen's account of the value of community is discredited by the obviously inadequate picture of human interactions on which it partly depends. In contrast, linking equality with avoiding domination and humiliation seems to have some empirical support. Work in social epidemiology like that of Michael Marmot, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett suggests that inequalities tend to ossify into status hierarchies which dominate and humiliate those at the wrong end of them (Marmot 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

4. A Summary and a Warning

At this point, we can summarize the guidelines for which I have so far argued and which together seem to me define realism, at least when contrasted to moralism in something like Bernard Williams' sense.

1. A realist account of a political value must be based on an interpretation of the political situation in which the value is to be realized.

2. That interpretation of the situation must be plausible, not least in avoiding both relentless despair and utopian hope.

3. The value being theorized must be one which agents can be expected to respect as the theory requires without becoming moral saints.

4. Actual agents should also be able to see something of their expectations or aspirations in the theory that is being offered for their political situation, even if they may have more expansive hopes than it makes room for.

5. That theory should not rely on controversial interpretations or rankings of values, but try to make use of the evaluative and normative material the situation presents.

6. When connections are drawn between different normative or evaluative claims, as they will have to be, these connections must be based on plausible theories of and claims about how human life actually operates.

These guidelines distinguish realism from moralism. Moralism is universalist and uninterested in the details of particular situations. Swift, Kymlicka, Fabre and Christiano are all engaged in ahistorical projects of justification in the works from which I quoted in the Introduction to this chapter. Nor do they see it as problematic to criticize individuals or the world for failing to live up to ideals in which they or it obviously have little or no interest. Few actually existing states meet or look likely to meet Christiano's demanding criteria for democratic legitimacy, for example (see e.g. Christiano 2008: 260 -261). Certainly his own polity, the United States of America, is a very long way from meeting those criteria. Nor is it clear that those criteria, or those that Swift, Kymlicka and Fabre endorse in their books, relate to real political aspirations held by those outside the academy. Finally, the four do not seem to feel a need to show that the values they theorise can be integrated into a realistic picture of how human social and political life actually operates.

Following the directions I have given should make a realist theory of a particular political value adequate for a particular situation at a comparatively general level. There will be nothing about the theory itself which prevents it from making sense of the value of whichever political projects it favours to those for whom it favours them. Still, being in principle able to articulate a given political value to and for a particular group of people does not mean that the articulation will satisfy or be accepted by those people. Nor does it mean that they will actually be able to organize themselves into a collective capable of achieving whatever it demands or hopes. To move beyond generic and towards what we could call full realism, a theory should not just eliminate barriers to providing an account of a particular political value to those in a particular political situation. **A realist political theory should also show that its political projects can capture and hold the allegiance of people against the rival political projects that are bound to challenge them, and that the supporters who can be attracted can collectively put them into practice**.

This will mean understanding the political, social and economic dynamics operating in particular societies. For example, an egalitarian realist theory of legitimacy seems to face at least three related questions raised by the requirement that it show not only how it is generically, but also fully, concretely realist (see Jubb forthcoming c for more detail on these challenges for a realist egalitarianism). If a realist theory of legitimacy is to sensibly demand

that states restrict their levels of inequality or risk becoming illegitimate, it needs to show, first, that enforcing limits on inequality will not, as a matter of fact, undermine various other values. After all, for example, equality is often associated with societies and groups which tend to repress difference, and so we might find that however desirable equality is in theory, in practice there is no way of achieving it which does not compromise too many of our other commitments. Second, it must be politically possible to fulfil the demands of an egalitarian realist theory of legitimacy. If supporters of higher levels of equality cannot dominate the political scene, or if their dominance would inevitably bring about economic collapse caused by, say, capital flight, then we will have to change our attitudes. Either we will have to understand ourselves differently, as needing a different kind of explanation of what our states must do for us, or, alternatively, we will have to see our state as an alien, dominating force for at least some of its members. Third, we need to have a reasonable expectation that a constituency can be united around the indignities of inequality, and that they will not seek to deal with the frustrations associated with inequality in other ways. Otherwise, it would not be clear how the theory answered a real rather than imagined problem.

Political theorists are often unlikely to be able to meet these requirements. Indeed, even scholars with empirical expertise may not often be able to meet them given the unpredictability of political life. In this sense, political realism's emphasis on politics as a distinctive sphere of life limits the role of scholars, especially given the importance of action in that understanding of politics. The deliberately modest understanding of political theorists as 'democratic underlabourers' offered by Adam Swift and Stuart White, for example, seems in fact inappropriate and over-ambitious (Swift and White 2008: 54). The problem is not primarily, as Swift and White worry, that offering philosophical arguments will bypass the proper democratic process (Swift and White 2008: 55). It is instead that philosophical arguments are dangerously unsuited to political problems. Nor will positivist empirical theories of political processes often be any better off. Politics shapes the problems with which it has to deal by shaping the agents, both individual and collective, whose motivations and dispositions create its problems. A theory of politics capable of understanding all the processes relevant to its own applicability would be too complex for humans to understand, and of course itself a tool which, were it understood, it would have to include in its assessment of the relevant dynamics.

Political theories are in this sense necessarily incomplete. Politics is a sphere of judgment instead of scientific understanding, which will be vindicated by the acts it recommends having the intended effects and so after the fact, once the situation has been changed. No political theory can show completely that it captures and deals appropriately with a particular political situation, and so no political theory can be fully realistic. Like judgments though, political

theories can be better and worse. Realists believe that working with the guidelines they provide will at least make them more likely to avoid failing by not being about politics at all.

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