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## **Ethics, morality and the case for realist political theory**

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### **Abstract**

A common trait of all realistic political theories is the rejection of a conception of political theory as applied moral philosophy and an attempt to preserve some form of distinctively political thinking. Yet the reasons for favouring such an account of political theory can vary, a point that has often been overlooked in recent discussions by realism's friends and critics alike. While a picture of realism as first-and-foremost an attempt to develop a more practical political theory which does not reduce morality to politics is often cited, in this paper we present an alternative understanding in which the motivation to embrace realism is grounded in a set of critiques of or attitudes towards moral philosophy which then feed into a series of political positions. Political realism, in this account, is driven by a set of philosophical concerns about the nature of ethics and the place of ethical thinking in our lives. We argue that this impulse is precisely what motivated Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss to their versions of distinctively realist political thought. This is important to emphasise, we argue, as it demonstrates that realism does not set politics against ethics (a misunderstanding typically endorsed by realism's critics) but is rather an attempt to philosophise about politics without relying on understandings of morality which we have little reason to endorse.

Key words: Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, realism, moralism, ethics

It is by now something of a platitude to remark that political realists resist the thought that political theory can be a form of applied moral philosophy and in so doing have the general ambition of preserving some autonomy for distinctively political thinking. However, while all those who have recently been involved in the renewed interest in some kind of realist political theorising share this commitment, their reasons for doing so vary. And the fact that realists have come to political realism via different intellectual routes is frequently overlooked by some of realism's defenders but also by its many critics. While the different impulses that motivate the 'realist turn' in political theory ought not to be thought of as mutually exclusive, it is important to set them out independently from one another in order to adequately grasp the multifaceted nature of the contemporary realist current. Indeed, it is only when one truly understands what the different contemporary realist thinkers are trying to do that one can then begin to understand the distinctive contribution realism seeks to make to contemporary political theory – and this is an important step if one is to critically engage with realism on its own terms.

One impulse that motivates some realists is that of developing a more practical political theory whose closer proximity to the real world of

politics, through a greater appreciation of feasibility constraints or sensitivity to the conditions of political possibility, makes it better suited as a guide to action for political agents as they actually are. From this perspective, the key failing of much contemporary political philosophy has been to abstract or idealise away too far from the real world, creating an unbridgeable gap between theory and practice.<sup>1</sup>

A second, more philosophically nuanced, impulse stems from the thought that politics has a character that cannot be sufficiently subsumed by morality, especially the ethical thought appropriate for reflecting upon individual behaviour, either because politics pursues ends that are sufficiently distinct from other areas of human life (such as order and stability), or because politics is inherently a collective rather than individual endeavour. Such a position does not pit politics against ethics but rather insists that there might be something appropriately called political ethics that is not simply the application of personal morality to the political sphere. This position does not commit realists to the thought that the demands of (non-political) morality have literally no place in politics, only that those demands do not have automatic or antecedent normative authority over political life.

Both of these motivations to realism stem from the basic thought that there is something specific about politics that needs to be reflected in any appropriately realistic political theory. Neither seek a political theory cleansed of all moral content, but it is clear that the impulse to both of these kinds of realism comes through a concern for recovering what is specifically political from the tendency to subsume politics into moral philosophy. Importantly, these forms of realism do not necessarily have anything to say about the subject matter of moral philosophy as traditionally conceived beyond their rejection of the idea that the prevailing modes of moral philosophising can be seamlessly applied to the political sphere.

There is another possible impulse to realism, one that comes more directly via moral philosophy and which is grounded in a related set of critiques of contemporary moral philosophy which then feed into a series of political positions that are recognisably realist. It is distinctive of this motivation to endorse political realism that it depends upon certain substantive attitudes and concerns within moral philosophy, or maybe more precisely attitudes *towards* moral philosophy from the perspective of the ethical more broadly conceived. On this impulse, political realism is driven by a set of philosophical concerns about the nature of ethics and the place of ethical thinking in our lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For such a reading see Valentini 2012. For scepticism that such 'non-ideal' theory ought to be understood as a form of realism see Sleat 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Some recent work engages in this endeavour of making explicit the ethical commitments or motivations behind realist political thought. See Hall 2014; Owen forthcoming; Nye 2015; Sagar 2016.

These three different impulses have tended to be somewhat elided in the contemporary literature; not only by realism's critics. A familiar view of what realism is for tends to be some combination of the first two impulses – to create a more relevant political theory that does not reduce politics to morality. This is not necessarily mistaken but it is not the entire story, especially because the third perspective we have introduced is precisely the impulse that (even allowing for the differences between them) motivated both Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, the two most influential thinkers in contemporary realism, to versions of distinctively realist political thought. Though it is not wrong to think that Williams or Geuss were concerned about the issue of feasibility constraints, nor that they sought a more distinctively political form of thinking about politics, they arrived at those positions via the route of considerations that are properly thought of as part of ethical thought.

It is important to emphasise this now as confusion about what realism is for – why we need realist political thought – is to a large extent responsible for the frequent misunderstanding (typically endorsed by realism's critics) that realism hankers for a political theory that eschews all ethical content. The impulse to realism that we wish to highlight here points rather to the fact that its most recent instantiation in political theory grew out of specifically ethical concerns, and in particular the attempt to think philosophically about politics from a particular ethical standpoint.<sup>3</sup> Realism on this reading does not set politics against ethics *per se*; instead it is an attempt to philosophise about politics without relying on understandings of morality which we have little reason to endorse.

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That there might be some uncertainty about what realism is for and the needs to which it responds will likely look strange given the quantity of survey articles that have already been published which address this question directly. But it might be that these are part of the problem. While Bernard Williams' *In the Beginning was the Deed* was published in 2005 and Raymond Geuss' *Philosophy and Real Politics* in 2008, it was the publication of William Galston's 'Realism in Political Theory' in 2010 that in many ways marked the start of the realist discussion in the discipline as whole. Galston's piece weaved together a myriad of otherwise very disparate theorists into a tapestry that could plausibly be called realist, and in doing so help set a research agenda for realism that it has largely followed since. Realism is presented 'as an alternate to ideal theory'; an attack on the 'high-liberalism' of Rawls and Dworkin; a rejection of utopianism, moralism, hypothetical consent, universal principles and the priority of justice. According to Galston, realists urge us to focus on the distinctiveness of the political; the ways that institutions actually function;

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<sup>3</sup> We are not attributing this intellectual impulse to all realists (either those who have been attributed the label or freely self-identify).

the motivations that people actually have; the importance of order and stability; the contingency of all political arrangements; the limits of political possibility; and the ubiquity of conflict and disagreement. What is realism for? It is, we are told, for correcting the excesses of ideal normative theorising by drawing our attention to an 'experience-based concept of feasibility' (Galston 2010, 400-01) which will enable normative political theory to finally get the ear of policy makers and have the sort of 'impact' on the real world that it has long hankered for.

Since Galston's article there have been several further reviews or surveys of the realist literature, all of which carve the intellectual terrain up differently but generally stress something like this view of realism, and Williams and Geuss remain constant throughout as the intellectual figureheads of this movement in contemporary political theory.<sup>4</sup> While we do not want to deny that Williams and Geuss deserve this place in the recent realist pantheon, their inclusion as advocates of *this sort* of realism is problematic. When Williams and Geuss were developing their respective realisms were they really developing it simply in order to construct a more politically feasible form of theorising, or was there a different intellectual impulse behind their turn to political realism?

Speaking of Williams and Geuss together in this way necessarily overlooks some very significant differences between them. We do not wish to deny the existence of these and indeed will return to some of them later, but from a suitable level of generality they have much in common and it is this that we wish to focus on initially here.<sup>5</sup> They are unquestionably united in their deep scepticism, if not outright rejection, of most forms of modern moral philosophy, and certainly those we have inherited from Plato, Aristotle, Christianity, Kant and utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham. This is sometimes the result of worries about specific features of these philosophies, such as Williams' charge that utilitarianism cannot make sense of the value of integrity or Geuss' worry that Kantianism misconceives of morality as a 'rule-guided activity'.<sup>6</sup> But often, and here they draw inspiration from Nietzsche whom both appreciated as a thinker of tremendous (if underappreciated) significance<sup>7</sup>, they were

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<sup>4</sup> See Baderin, 2014; Freedon, 2012; Philp, 2012; Rossi and Sleat, 2014; Runciman, 2012; Scheurman, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The differences between Williams and Geuss are often significant but this paper seeks to paint a big picture in little space, and we think that the commonalities are worth noting in order to elucidate our point that realism is not necessarily best understood in the terms in which it is often presented.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular, Geuss 2010b; 2005c and Williams 1993; 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, for example, writing in 1981, declared that 'It is certain, even if not everyone has yet come to see it, that Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century. This was, above all, because he saw how totally problematical morality, as understood over many centuries, has become, and how complex a reaction that fact, when fully understood, requires' (2014a, 183). Geuss has written a large number of well-received essays on Nietzsche's thought: see especially 1994; 1997; 2005c; 2014b. For Williams's key discussions see Williams 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2007d; and 2002 which is deeply indebted to Nietzsche in a number of ways.

concerned more with identifying the most basic and often shared but implicit assumptions of modern moral philosophy that gave it its problematic character – especially insofar as it fails to make sense of the essential untidiness and complexities of our lived ethical experiences.<sup>8</sup> So we find both Williams and Geuss rejecting the possibility of fully distinguishing the moral from a non-moral point of view; the thought that morality is best understood as the impartial application of rational principles; and doubting the overriding authority of rationality (and philosophy more generally) in human lives.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophical import of these criticisms is best grasped by focusing on the distinction between ethics and morality Williams draws and his related rejection of ‘morality, the peculiar institution’; the unquestioned framework within which most contemporary philosophers approach the study of ethics. Morality is ‘a particular development of the ethical’, one which ‘emphasizes certain ethical notions rather than others... and it has some peculiar presuppositions’ (1985, 6). In particular, Williams criticises the role that morality gives to the ideas of moral obligation and blame at the expense of other things such as our dispositions, moral sentiments, and the thick ethical concepts that give life meaning and purpose (1985, ch. 10). In addition, morality hopes to rescue moral value from contingency and this encourages it to emphasize a series of idealised contrasts ‘between force and reason, persuasion and rational convictions, shame and guilt, dislike and disapproval, mere rejection and blame’ (1985, 194–5). Williams and Geuss both deny that the aspiration to achieve such a pure moral theory is coherent because they insist that we cannot study the subject matter of ethics ‘without constantly locating it within the rest of human life, and without unceasingly reflecting on the relations one’s claims have with history, sociology, ethnology, psychology and economics’ (Geuss 2008, 7). To this end Williams holds, and Geuss’s insistence that we must think *outside* the prevailing models of moral understanding shows that he agrees, that philosophers are mistaken in thinking that ‘morality just is the ethical in a rational form’ (1995a, 246). By forgetting this, Williams alleges that morality has pernicious implications for ethical life because it ‘makes people think that without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice’ (1985, 196).

Neither Williams nor Geuss thought that their scepticism about modern moral philosophy implied some disabling moral scepticism or nihilism because neither thought philosophy stood in that sort of foundational role

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<sup>8</sup> Insofar as Ancient Greek tragedy was ‘realistic’ in the sense that ‘it is about people (eventually) facing up to the dire situations in which they actually find themselves without flinching and making difficult choices’, Geuss insists that ‘Philosophy is not the “natural” successor of tragedy but, if anything, of comedy. It is a kind of comedy without the humour’ (2014e, 207).

<sup>9</sup> Williams, 1985, ch. 4 and 1981. See also Geuss, 2010b.

to ethical life. Rather, ethics is a deeply socially embedded and practical activity: a matter of acting in accordance with a set of internalized dispositions which are the result of a 'very complex historical deposit' (Williams 1995b, 189). Although philosophy is devoid of the sort of 'force' that might compel someone to act in the ways that many philosophers insist morality demands, it does not obviously follow that this recognition must unseat our ethical dispositions and sentiments. Yet because there is, in Williams's terminology, no "Archimedean Point" from which we can argue the amoralist into moral life<sup>10</sup>, we ought to accept that philosophy, if it can be of any help at all, has to start from within moral experience and so cannot ground it.<sup>11</sup> The aim of moral philosophy is 'to sharpen perception, to make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling' (Williams 1993, xv). What philosophy cannot claim to do is to provide a perspective from which we are able to transcend our history and experience to rationally validate particular moral practices because there is no 'absolutist Platonic conception of the world' from which we can make such judgements (Geuss 2005a, 4). In this sense, no moral philosophy is going to do the sort of justificatory work that has so often been demanded of it. However, philosophical reflection can aid self-understanding by helping us to appreciate where our commitments and values might be the result of self-deception, metaphysical illusions, or social deceit. This kind of self-understanding undermines certain intellectualised pictures of ethics and this has important ramifications for practice because morality 'is a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life' (Williams 1985, 196).<sup>12</sup>

Williams and Geuss are not alone in contemporary philosophy in their holding out little hope for a philosophical understanding of morality that can provide an ultimate justification of a particular form of ethical life or a set of 'universal' moral principles. Acknowledging the socially embedded nature of moral thinking should lead us to acknowledge that 'we do not

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<sup>10</sup> Williams 1985, ch. 2 and 1993, ch. 1.

<sup>11</sup> This is why Williams is adamant that 'one's initial responsibilities [when approaching moral philosophy] should be to moral phenomena, as grasped in one's own experience and imagination', (1993, xxi).

<sup>12</sup> For Williams the most important ramification being an unmasking of the alienating moral perspectives the morality system favours which encourage us to experience ethical life in terms of fulfilling obligations (Williams 1985, ch. 10). The other key implication of Williams's view is wonderfully put by Nakul Krishna in the following terms: 'the world, Williams thought, is full of temptations to take simple moral views – everything from "bomb Iraq" to "maximize the good" – because the longer route of self-understanding and critique is hard, uncertain and risky. If philosophy can help us with any of this, it won't be because it discovers a formula to replace the traditional sources of moral understanding ... but because it helps to improve the reflective self-understanding of those who have more, much more, to their lives than philosophy' (Krishna 2016). Geuss thinks that loosening the hold of such a view of ethics matters precisely because it forms the 'tacit background of thinking and debate' in the modern world. Hence his insistence that getting outside ethics is 'an exceptionally good way to contribute to further human enlightenment' (2005a, 4 + 10).

make our thoughts out of nothing; they come in part from what is around us, and we have a very poor grasp, of what their source may be' (Williams 2007c, 327). Yet this appreciation of the limits of our philosophical understanding does not lead Williams or Geuss to hold that we must therefore abandon the hope of achieving any kind of more reasoned comprehension of our commitments (or indeed ourselves), even if they think it should give us pause. It does, however, force us to pose some potentially unsettling questions. Thus Geuss insists that once we accept that 'the Cartesian project of setting aside everything we know and value and starting *ab nihilo* to build up our own views about the world on a certain and incontrovertible base that owes nothing to social conventions is unworkable', the most pertinent question we have to ask is 'to what extent is it possible for us to free ourselves from our own illusions and work our way towards a realistic, or at least more realistic, worldview' (Geuss 2010c, x). Attaining such a worldview is the basic precondition of making any sense of our lives here and now.

Williams and Geuss both grappled with this question in some detail and recognised that it had important ramifications for the dominant form political philosophy had taken in the late twentieth-century, what Williams called 'political moralism' and Geuss 'politics as applied ethics'. As they saw it, this approach holds that politics has its theoretical and normative foundation in some external non-political moral system or set of values which then provide the justification for a particular form of political life. In liberal political theory this often takes the form of relying upon something like a neo-Kantian account of the autonomous individual and from that justifying specifically liberal institutions and practices. Politics is grounded in morality and political philosophy is but a sub-branch of moral philosophy. Yet if morality cannot be all it has purported to be not only does this undermine traditional moral philosophies, it also throws into severe doubt any political theory that takes itself to be grounded in those philosophies. Accordingly, one of the reasons why politics cannot be applied ethics is because ethics cannot be applied ethics. If we continue to think that politics is a form of 'applied ethics' then the problems that we encounter in making sense of morality are only going to replicate themselves at the level of politics.

So how should we understand politics and our political commitments if we accept that they are not grounded in an ahistorical, objective, universal morality? And how might we stabilise our political beliefs without falling into a crude relativism or a nihilism of political abandonment?

From the 1980's through to his death in 2007, Richard Rorty offered his own contentious anti-foundationalist response to this question which he called liberal ironism (Rorty 1989). To be a liberal ironist is to be someone who is fully aware of the contingent nature of their beliefs, that they cannot be universally justified to all people, but who manages to cling to them by adopting a spirit of ironic wonder. Neither Williams nor Geuss were satisfied with Rorty's answer, yet it haunted them both. In the last

decades of his life Williams made several attempts to distinguish his position, both philosophically and politically, from Rorty's: Rorty is one of the main 'deniers', those who reject that truth has any value, that Williams sought to refute in *Truth and Truthfulness*, and liberal irony is the object of some scorn in *In the Beginning was the Deed*.<sup>13</sup> Geuss, who admits that he spent more time thinking about Rorty than anyone else outside his small circle of intimates, characteristically focuses more on his political differences with Rorty, though those seem underlined by a worry that there might be a connection between a rejection of traditional philosophical endeavours and endorsing American patriotism (Geuss 2010d). The lack of seriousness with which most moral and political philosophers have taken Rorty's anti-foundationalism stands in contrast with the significance that Williams and Geuss gave him. And one plausible reason for this is that Rorty matters to Williams and Geuss insofar as they shared his sense of the philosophical problem of making sense of ourselves in modernity.

What unites Williams and Geuss' response to the problem of anti-foundationalism was a turn to truthful, realistic reflections on our existing practices in the hope that we might be able to find in them adequate basis for our beliefs or grounds for ethical, social and political critique. For Williams the basic legitimation demand falls out of the very practice of politics itself – rule through legitimated power (Williams 2005, 5). Likewise, we can understand basic human rights violations and even certain forms of minimal liberalism as supported by basic facts of the activity of politics (Williams 2005, 62 – 74). Geuss' background in critical theory led him in a quite different direction: while he warns us that 'what is "out there" is usually a farrago of truths, half-truths, misperceptions, indifferent appearance, and illusion that needs to be seriously processed before one can accept any of it as "real"' (2014a, 140), he still thought that with care reality can give us the grounds to engage in the critique of power, to see through extant political relations as the rule of one group over another, to unmask moral justifications as ideological niceties. We have no need for Rorty's ironism if reality gives us enough material to work with.

We might say therefore that the realist spirit is imbued with a certain ethic – the ethic of truthfulness, a willingness to see our political reality as it really is, to not succumb to illusions or wishful thinking, or to imagine a greater fit between our needs, interests and values and the world than actually exists (Williams 1993, 166 and Geuss 2005c, 223). In this regard,

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<sup>13</sup> Williams 2002, *passim*. The basic problem Williams has with Rorty's ironism lies in his insistence that the ironist posture is 'itself still under the shadow of universalism' because it suggests that you cannot really believe in anything unless you endorse the kind of universalist moral grounding we cannot have: (2005, 67). For discussion of this see Hall 2014 and Sagar 2016. Geuss on the other hand rejects Rorty's ironism because he sees it as the philosophy of bookish intellectuals who 'do not pressingly have to act'. In this regard he insists that 'irony will not allow the right kind of theoretically reflective, engaged political practice' (2005b, 27).

part of the value of truthfulness lies with the thought that we have good reasons to 'want to understand who we are, to correct error, to avoid deceiving ourselves, [and] to get beyond comfortable falsehood' (Williams 2002, 15). Or, in a characteristically more polemic tone, Geuss writes that we should 'try to become aware of the extent to which we presuppose certain values, and try to make our assumptions as realistic as possible. We can, that is, try to be as truthful and truth-loving as possible in developing an alternative to the deceitful, hypermoralised views of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and the other major figures in the history of Western ethics' (2005c, 230).<sup>14</sup>

In large part it is this ethic of truthfulness that led Williams and Geuss to their realist political positions. Vitaly, they both insist that a truthful account of ourselves and our ethical predicament requires us to endorse a more historical philosophical perspective. Here their debt to Nietzsche is clear even if his influence plays out in different ways in their work. For Geuss, to keep the real world in view requires one to think largely in terms of an ideological critique of existing power relations, and to remain forever sceptical and vigilant in the face of normative theories that claim to be grounded in rationality or morality but are really covers for more sectional interests. Precisely because the question of how power actually operates in a given context to influence our beliefs is deeply complex, Geuss insists that 'only a historical account of the particular details of the case will be at all enlightening' (2008, 51). Moreover, because power influences our ways of orienting ourselves to the world in myriad ways, the reflective philosopher must ask why certain issues are not being accorded the attention they deserve and why other issues are treated as having central significance (2008, 54).<sup>15</sup> Here historical reflection is again invaluable: 'the reasons why we have most of the political and moral concepts that we have (in the forms we have them) are contingent, historical reasons, and only a historical account will give us the beginnings of understanding of them and allow us to reflect critically on them rather than simply taking them for granted' (2008, 69).

Geuss' politics are difficult to pin down exactly. In part this is because he rejects, wholesale, the suggestion that political argument (or criticism) must be constructive, effectively insulating him (he thinks) from the need

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<sup>14</sup> Like Geuss, Williams denies that Aristotle's approach can help us to make sense of our ethical lives in modernity. However, while Williams is sceptical of the attempt to ground ethical life in considerations about human nature – he notes that 'it is hard to believe that an account of human nature...will adequately determine one kind of ethical life among others' (1985, 52), precisely because the pervasively reflective nature of modernity has shown that 'there are various forms of human excellence which do not fit together in one harmonious whole (153) – he is equally adamant that Aristotle's project 'at least makes sense; that it operates, so to speak, in the right corner of the field' (1996, 213).

<sup>15</sup> Hence Geuss's (deeply controversial) contention) that Rawls' work is ideological insofar as it 'draws our attention *away* from the phenomenon of power and the way in which it influences our lives and the way we see the world' by getting us to focus instead on our intuitions on what is "just" (2008, 90).

to offer fully worked out alternatives to the forms of liberal capitalism that Western European and North American states practice, which he so vehemently loathes (2014c and 2010a). It is also because of the difficulty of adequately grasping the nature of his response to liberalism. In 'Liberalism and its discontents', Geuss suggests that even if the Kantian inspired strands are non-starters we might be able to vindicate the strand of liberalism 'that is action-oriented but reflexively anti-utopian and [which] asserts that no system either of action or thought is perfect' (2005c, 28). More recently, however, Geuss has dismissed Rawlsian liberalism as the political-philosophical equivalent of "trickle-down" economics, declaring that its central purpose is to allow 'people who observe great inequality in their societies to continue to feel good about themselves, provided that they support some cosmetic forms of redistribution'. And regardless of the gloss that liberal philosophers may put on it (and here Geuss's condemnation seemingly applies beyond Rawls to all self-avowed liberals) the fact is that modern capitalism is nothing more than a rotten prison.

A prison warden may put on a benevolent smile (Rawls) or a grim scowl (Ayn Rand)... [but] that is a mere result of temperament, mood, calculation and the demands of the immediate situation: the fact remains that he is the warden of the prison, and, more importantly, that the prison is a prison. To shift attention from the reality of the prison to the morality, the ideals and the beliefs of the warden is an archetypical instance of an ideological effect (Geuss, online).

As a result, even though it is very hard for us to think of politically plausible alternatives to capitalism, realists must avoid the temptation of distracting themselves from the task of unmasking the power relations present in their societies by refining their moral intuitions or setting them out in painstaking detail

Like Geuss, Williams also urges us to recognise that we must attend to history 'if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions' (2006, 191). This is because some of the elements of our moral and political outlooks function, in a Wittgensteinian sense, like fixed points around which the rest of our arguments revolve. Hence, Williams claims that our belief that 'every citizen, indeed every human being...deserves equal consideration', is best understood not as a 'propositional belief than the schema of various arguments'. But it does not therefore follow that it is sufficient to make as much sense of our moral and political outlooks from the inside as we can. Rather, the very fact that such fixed points can seem *unhintergebar* means that if we are to adopt the correct reflective attitude towards our own conceptions we have to ask a series of historical questions because such an understanding alone can help us to 'distinguish between different ways in which various of our ideas and procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond

them, that there is no conceivable alternative' (2006, 195).<sup>16</sup> This is why Williams insists that while one cannot in good faith reproach liberal political philosophers for not seeing beyond the outer limits of what they find acceptable, one can reproach them for not being 'interested enough in why this is so, in why their most basic convictions should seem to be... simply there' (2006, 197).<sup>17</sup>

Williams also insists that while it is simply a fantasy to think that all of our current conceptions, beliefs and forms or arguing for them will continue to make sense to us when we take his scepticism about philosophy and the morality system seriously, there is equally no reason to assume that they will all be discredited. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere (Hall 2014), Williams was adamant that a form of liberalism associated with Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear, extricated from the thick metaphysical and moral assumptions of previous justifications, could be vindicated in modernity (Williams 2005, 1 - 17 and Sagar 2016). This is because although Williams was deeply impressed by aspects of Nietzsche's critique of morality, he rejected the suggestion that 'our growing understanding that the world has no metaphysical structure whatsoever' *must* also discredit liberal ideas of humanitarianism, equality and freedom (2007a, 316). Although his scepticism about the morality system may have discredited the grounds upon which moralised conceptions of liberalism are built, he insists that if we focus on the nature of politics and the basic legitimation demand that is internal to it, we can find sufficient reason to continue to endorse a version of liberal politics because it alone can realistically claim to help people here and now avoid what is universally feared: 'torture, violence, arbitrary power, and humiliation' (2002, 265).

Williams's attempt to sketch a realist defence of actually existing liberalism generated a rather scornful response from Geuss, who accused Williams of paddling about in the 'tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J.S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin' (2014a, 184). It is, however, worth noting that this is (fittingly) not really best understood as a philosophical dispute but as a divergence in political and historical judgement. Geuss insists that Williams's (purported) optimism about finding meaning in our social world is not something that should be taken for granted and mused on the

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<sup>16</sup> Geuss claims that philosophers inspired by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein acknowledge that 'at a certain point inquiry into the relevant context of human thought and action simply stops...[this means] that at some point we will simply encounter *facta bruta*, either expressions of human volition (will), natural phenomena, or human practices embedded in historically... contingent assumptions' (Geuss, 2010a, 182).

<sup>17</sup> This informs Williams more general complaint that moralistic liberalism 'has a poor account, or in many cases no account, of the cognitive status of its own history' and no answer 'to the question of why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the questions of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European society from the late seventeenth century onward' (2005, 9). This claim is obviously more problematic when thinking about Rawls' later work than the approaches favoured by thinkers like Nagel and Dworkin.

divergence between himself and Williams in this respect by remarking that Williams 'was a man who was remarkably comfortable in his own skin, and who fitted in easily with the existing world of politics and academic society, despite his high skepticism about many of the purported theoretical pillars of that world' (2014a, 189).

Whether or not this kind of psychological speculation is helpful or accurate is not for us to decide, although it is worth noting that Williams does not deny that 'there are very compelling true accounts of the world that could lead anyone to despair who did not hate humanity' (2002, 268) and this hardly strikes us as the kind of statement the naively or wilfully optimistic would countenance. It is true, though, that Williams's political thought retains a judgment that although we might still be struggling to make sense of our moral and political practices the prospect remains of a coherent and plausible genealogical account of our politics which is not thoroughly debunking. Geuss on the other hand has seemingly fully resigned himself to the incoherent and fractured nature of life in modernity: 'The only possible meaning you could give your life in the twentieth century that is minimally realistic is to resist the social pressures towards uniformity and homogeneity in all areas, and to struggle against the subordination of human subjectivity and individual life to the demands of the maximisation of return on capital ... even a "bitter" happiness is not nothing and in any case it is probably all we have left' (2014d, 108-10). Such utter pessimism and resignation stands in contrast to Williams's political thought, no doubt intentionally so. Nevertheless, the importance lies in the fact that these are both attempts to try and make sense of our political and moral condition in a disenchanted world. The turn to the realities of political life is a response to the fact that we can no longer truthfully yearn for an escape from the contingencies of politics via the permanence and stability of morality.

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We hope that it is by now clear why Williams and Geuss rejected the idea that political theorists must begin by articulating an empirically abstemious and systematic ideal ethical theory which can then mechanically be applied to the political world (Geuss 2008, 6-7). Their point is not merely that such an approach fails to operate with the kind of experientially grounded conception of feasibility. It is rather that this cannot be the right way to think about politics because there is little reason to think that we can construct such a pure ethical theory in the first place. Yet despite their scepticism of modern conceptions of 'morality' and the received understanding of its relationship to political practice, it is a mistake to think that their political realisms are committed to thinking that prescriptive political argument should eschew the use of first-order ethical claims or avoid appealing to moral values *tout court*. In *Philosophy and Real Politics* Geuss is especially clear on this score: 'nothing in this book should

be taken to imply that no one should ever allow normative considerations of any kind to play any role whatever in deciding to act politically' (2008, 99).

This comes out especially clearly by focusing on how to theorise in terms of Williams's basic legitimation demand. As noted earlier, Williams attempts to articulate a freestanding conceptual distinction between politics and mere domination which can ground our attempt to reflect normatively on politics without making the mistake of thinking that politics is reducible to morality. The fact that politics exists to solve the first political question, and that the state's claim to be acting legitimately rests on the recognition of the governed, enables us to evaluate the actions of states from a normative perspective without merely applying an antecedently justified ideal moral theory to the political domain.<sup>18</sup> Williams accordingly rejects the '*basic* relation of morality to politics as being that represented either by the enactment model or the structural model' whereby the former seeks to enact prior moral principles in practice (such as utilitarianism) and the latter wants to structure politics through limiting what counts as rightful political action by pre-political moral principles (2005, 2). However, he is also at pains to point out that his realism recognises that 'there can be local applications of moral ideas in politics, and these may take, on a limited scale, an enactment or structural form' (2005, 8). This follows when we recognise that when we ask whether or not we should continue to comply with our state's demands we will only answer in the affirmative if we think it satisfies the basic legitimation demand. The (often tacit) legitimation story must "make sense" (MS) – and when we ask what makes sense to us here and now we are posing a normative question because 'what (most) MS to us is a structure of authority which we think we should accept'. Thinking in these terms therefore requires us to engage in 'first order discussions using our political, moral, social, interpretative, and other concepts' (2005, 11). The key point, however, is that these moral ideas have to be understood in a way that is congruent with Williams and Geuss' sceptical remarks about the morality system. This means that there is no reason to think that moral reasons will always trump all other reasons in play. Moreover, their brand of political realism advises against any complacency as to which moral ideas we can help ourselves to in the attempt to make sense of our political lives, for many of the moral ideas that contemporary political philosophers utilise may 'no longer do what they once did or us; some of them may not, in honest reflection, now be credible' (Williams 2014b, 317). Geuss gives an especially illustrative example of such realist theorising when criticising political theories which assume that one can start theorising by treating certain moral concepts like rights as foundational, as Nozick does, without engaging in an historical analysis of why we think this is appropriate here and now (2008, 60–70).

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<sup>18</sup> For further discussion see Hall 2015; Sagar 2016; and Sleat 2014.

In addition, they both think that the political credibility of our first order arguments depends on whether or not such ideas actually make political sense in our historical and political context. Once we grant that 'politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action', we ought also to acknowledge that 'if one wants understanding or any kind of guidance for action, one will have to take the specific cultural and historical circumstances into consideration' (Geuss 2008, 11 + 14). In this sense political philosophy must appeal to resources that moral reflection cannot provide by itself. This commitment drives Williams's (under-appreciated) papers on liberty where he argues that a workable political conception of liberty has to be constructed from a non-political conception of freedom and yet be 'socially presentable' where that means it must be compatible with a realistic assessment of political and practical possibility (Williams 2001). For these reasons, his realism is committed to the view that social and historical interpretation is not an optional extra that political theorists can choose to engage *if* they want to think about how to their pure moral principles might be applied. Instead, this kind of reflection plays an ineliminable role in the articulation of our political values and commitments (Hall forthcoming). This illustrates that moralism is not the only vice realists seek to avoid; wishful thinking is just as, if not more, politically and philosophically problematic. Williams and Geuss both think that the only way to avoid this vice is by reflecting unsentimentally, honestly and truthfully, even though the truths about our political situation that they seek to reveal sometimes conflict quite sharply.

This is in an important sense to be expected, for such differences are properly to be thought of as contestable interpretative claims about the political world we inhabit and are exactly the sort of disputes that we should recognise and wish to preserve as political. Furthermore, they are both good enough philosophers – and good enough Nietzscheans – to know that there is no 'standpoint from which our representations as whole could be measured against the world as (in this sense) it really is' (Williams 2002, 17). Only very crude conceptions of political realism will forget this (Geuss 2005a, 4). We can adjudicate between competing interpretations, most notably because some interpretations will not be adequately responsive to the demands of truthfulness. The key point is that for both Williams and Geuss the endeavour to avoid wishful thinking is exactly what realism demands even when doing so is difficult for us because it may problematize some of our most cherished political ideas or undermine the likelihood that they might be realised any time soon. This impulse is the beating heart of Williams and Geuss' realisms. Their work sees the need to be truthful as a kind of 'ethical necessity' which needs intellectual courage (Williams 2002, 15) because they both think that if we do not 'face the world truthfully, any hope for a better politics will be doomed' (Williams 2007c, 329).

This is why there is some inevitable indeterminacy about precisely what this strand of political realism demands. The insistence that we must speak truthfully about politics and the role that morality plays in political argument is elusive. However, grasping this clarifies why realism cannot accurately be characterised as a purely negative, or critically spasmodic, reaction to everything neo-Kantian. Rather, at its best realism offers glimpses of an alternative, constructive, way of doing political philosophy if one is sceptical of the prevailing conceptions of morality we have inherited. And while any coherent realism recognises that prescriptive realist political arguments will inevitably be ethically laden in various ways, contrary to what some of its least charitable critics imply (Erman and Moller 2015), this is not something realists should be embarrassed about (much less does it show that the realist project is self-refuting).

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The impulse that drove Williams and Geuss to adopt variations of realistic approaches to understanding politics was not primarily dissatisfaction with how little 'impact' normative political theory has had, but rather how the realities of politics might help us make better sense of our political lives in a modern world in which the traditional certainties of morality and religion are no longer available to us. What is at stake is not how appeals to reality might close the gap between theory and practice, but how (if at all) reality might help stabilise our ethical and political beliefs in a disenchanted world. This *is* an ethical question in the broadest sense. It is wrong, therefore, to think that the point of realism is to find an amoral perspective from which we can begin doing pure political thinking unhampered by morality or normative thinking more generally. The driving impulse behind both Williams and Geuss' realism is the attempt to find an *ethical* position from which to reflect on politics once we truly recognise the manner in which the frameworks of moral thought which we have inherited – Aristotelian, Christian, Kantian and Utilitarian – cannot make adequate sense of our ethical and political lives. But it remains an open question, to which Williams and Geuss had different answers, as to what kind of politics we can affirm in the aftermath of such a critique.

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