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Can political realism be action guiding?

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ABSTRACT:

Various political realists claim the superior 'action guiding' qualities of their way of approaching normative political theory, as compared to 'liberal moralism'. This paper subjects that claim to critique. I first clarify the general idea of action guidance, and identify two types of guidance that a political theory might try to offer - 'prescriptive action-guidance' and 'orienting action-guidance' - together with the conditions that must be met before we can understand such guidance as having been successfully offered. I then go on to argue that if we take realist understandings of political psychology seriously, then realist attempts to offer action guidance appear to fail by realism's own lights. I demonstrate this by means of engagement with a variety of different realist theorists.

KEYWORDS: political realism; moralism; liberalism; action guidance

The broad approach in political theory known as 'political realism' has been described as "parasitic on what it is not" (Horton, 2010, p. 445). By that is meant that political realism has in significant part been preoccupied with making a negative critique of what it sees as the dominant 'liberal moralist' mode of normative political theory. One central strand

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of that critique has been to decry liberal moralism's prospects for successfully offering 'action guidance'. As John Horton puts it, one of the "two related but distinguishable broad lines of criticism that lie at the heart of the realist critique" [1] of liberal moralism is that the latter

> can provide us with little normative guidance about how we should act in the real world. Because the idealising assumptions of liberal moralism leave it at some considerable remove from the world as it is … its bearing on how we should act, even were one to accept the validity of its normative principles, becomes at best vague and at worst irrelevant (Horton, 2017, pp. 490-91).

One particular aspect of "the world as it is" that realists understand liberal moralists to problematically idealise away, or indeed to fail even to recognise, is the inevitability of disagreement. As Matt Sleat puts it: "Disagreement in politics is the rule rather than the exception. The persistence of disagreement is one of the fundamental and 'stubborn facts' of political life which ensures that there is rarely any natural harmony or order in human affairs" (2013, p. 47). Realists worry that liberal moralism, rather than recognising this, instead treats politics merely as a site for the application of a 'pre-political' morality, with the latter often grounded in the idea of consensus.

A second aspect of "the world as it is" purportedly ignored by liberal moralism is persons' actual psychological dispositions and capacities. Consider, for a paradigmatic example, Rawls's 'ideal theory' of justice, wherein it is assumed that all citizens will reliably be led by their 'sense of justice'. Each person is postulated to be capable of realising their 'full autonomy', that is, of "affirming the first principles of justice that would be adopted [in the original position] … [and] acting from these principles as their sense of justice dictates" (Rawls, 1980, p. 528). For Rawls, "full autonomy is a feasible ideal for political life", consistent with the "capacities of human nature" (1980, p. 534).

The picture of human psychology developed is one in which persons are capable of consistently being guided and motivated by 'reason' put in service of their 'two moral powers'. These two moral powers – the capacity for a sense of justice and a conception of the good – essentially constitute the totality of the conception of the person in Rawls's constructivism.[2]

Political realism, by comparison, claims a "more complex moral and political psychology" (Galston, 2010, p. 408). This more complex psychology – which I will refer to hereafter as *realpsychologie* for short – has at least three main aspects. First, realists explicitly acknowledge the existence, permanence and theoretical relevance of a wide range of political emotions and attitudes such as "[a]nger, hatred, the urge to dominate, the desire to destroy", as well as love, friendship, loyalty, partiality and so on (Galston, 2010, p. 398). Second and relatedly, realists voice considerable scepticism about the ability of 'moral reason' to ground our political convictions, or to reliably to keep in check either our irrational emotions and passions or our rational self-interest. Reason must take its place as a political motivator alongside, for instance, "the role of interests, rhetoric, political leadership, appeals to history and, maybe more controversially, the use of coercive force to generate desired human responses" (Rossi and Sleat, 2014, p. 691). As a result, "real-world political deliberation is and will always be incompletely rational" (Galston, 2010, p. 398-9).

Third, realism emphasises "differences in cognitive and moral capacities": persons are not equally capable of reasoned reflection, and neither are they equally (in)capable of stemming irrational impulses (Galston, 2010, p. 399). To stipulate, as Rawls does, that all persons are equal in their capacity to develop their 'two moral powers', then, is to stipulate something that is not and will not be true.

Ideal theory of the Rawlsian type thus fails to recognise or wishes away aspects of "the world as it is" in a way that political realists believe renders it unable to offer successful guidance for action. And 'non-ideal theory' makes the same kind of mistake, because it continues to view things like conflict, disagreement and limited 'moral motivation' *as* non-ideal. But for realists, such things "cannot, strictly speaking, be seen as politically non-ideal insofar as they are necessary preconditions of politics itself". This is important, because "if the attempt to be more fact-sensitive is undertaken within the context of the liberal conception of politics, then realists suspect any normative recommendations [non-ideal theory] makes will likely still be unsuccessful guides to action insofar as it misunderstands what politics is" (Sleat, 2016, p. 36).

The question naturally then arises whether political realism can do better on this front. Can political realism offer us *successful* guides to action? That is the question I will be considering here. One might be minded to reject the question itself as mistaken. Certain strands of realist thought, after all, seek not to offer guidance, but focus instead on the description and interpretation of politics (e.g. Freeden, 2012; Newey, 2001). Nevertheless, I take Horton to be right when he states that "the majority of realists…want to harness their approach to the aim of providing practically useful political advice" (Horton, 2018, p. 132). It is this "majority of realists" with whom this paper is concerned. Such realists do appear to believe that they possess an advantage over methodological competitors in the action-guiding stakes. As Edward Hall puts it, for example, "action-guiding political theory should … take certain features of our politics as given, most centrally the reality of political opposition and the passions and experiences that motivate them" (2017, p. 283). Since realists believe that this is precisely what realism does, the implication is that it is the realist in particular who can offer "action-guiding political theory".

My argument, however, is that political realism's own premises entail that it can do no such thing. In particular, if we take realists' psychological claims seriously, then it must follow that their attempts to offer successful action guidance fail. In order to make good on this argument it is first necessary to elaborate upon the idea of 'action guidance'. In doing so, I will distinguish two kinds of action guidance – prescriptive action guidance and orienting action guidance – together with what I call their respective 'success conditions'. The proceeding two sections then take each of these variants in turn, considering examples of realists apparently engaging in attempts to offer such guidance. In each case, I will argue that they fail by their own lights.

Action Guidance

Despite the frequency with which political theory's methodological disputes make easy reference to the idea of action guidance, quite what is at issue is not always clear. In this section I will therefore first clarify the general idea of action-guidance as I understand it to be treated by political theorists, and as it will correspondingly be treated in this paper. I will then identify two variants of action guidance, together with their respective 'success conditions' for the successful offering of guidance.

As I understand the relevant debates, for a theory to be considered action-guiding, it is *not* the case that that theory must in fact ever guide political action in the real world; the quality 'action-guiding' denotes the successful *offering* of guidance for political action, not the actual guiding of action. This is admittedly somewhat counter-intuitive given the phrase 'action guidance'. Even more counter-intuitively, however, the successful offering of action-guidance itself does not seem to entail a given theory in fact being widely publicised within the population the theory supposedly aspires to guide. This is strange, since one might reasonably expect it to be a basic feature of A offering something to B

that B comes to learn about the offer. And yet the issue of action-guidance is typically treated separately from what we can call the problem of publicity, which is the problem that modern academic political theory extremely rarely finds its way into the 'public sphere'. There are various reasons for this lack of publicity (Vincent, 2004: 27; see also Finlayson, 2015), which are surely of central importance to any political theory that seeks to impact upon real-world politics. Nevertheless, disputes between political theorists about the 'action-guiding' qualities of different methodological approaches largely proceed as if the publicity problem does not exist.[3] What is apparently being assumed by all parties to these disputes is a counterfactual world in which political theorists write for and are read by the public at large, or else a world in which the tenets of the various approaches to normative political thinking simply implant themselves in the minds of the public in some other way. When realists (or anyone else) trumpet the superior action-guiding qualities of their way of doing things, then, I take them to be arguing that, in this counterfactual world, it is their approach that can best provide action-guidance.

Another way of putting this would be that realism has the best *potential* to be action-guiding, were the publicity problem to be solved. In my view that would be a preferable way to think about the idea of action-guidance since it recouples the publicity problem to the idea of action-guidance in a way that makes sense if theorists actually care about guiding action. Nevertheless, this paper grants the separation of the action-guidance issue from the publicity issue, and thus the argument that unfolds in this paper does not appeal in any way to realist theory's connection (or lack thereof) to the public sphere. Instead, my argument is an internal critique of realist theorising. This argument proceeds from a recognition of the perspectival nature of action-guidance claims: judgements of the action-guiding qualities of a theory are conditional, among other things, upon the compatibility between the normative demands of the theory in question

and the judger's pre-given understanding of politics, political agents, and their possibilities. Disagreement about the action-guiding qualities of a given theory occur in large part because of underlying disagreements about politics and its limits. My aim is this paper is not to adjudicate between these underlying disagreements, but rather to highlight how political realists' normative offerings are inconsistent with their own understanding of politics, and thus ought to be judged as failing to be action guiding by realists themselves.

With these clarifications out of the way, let us know look at two specific forms of action-guidance and their respective 'success conditions'. As will be made clear, certain of these conditions are explicitly perspectival.

Prescriptive action-guidance

Much political theorising concerns itself with offering a specific answer to some particular normative question. What does distributive justice demand, amongst whom? When ought a political institution to be considered legitimate? When is a war just? Do states have a right to close their borders to potential immigrants as they see fit? And so forth. Theorists have offered numerous different answers to these and many other questions, with numerous different justifications. All such answers profess to tell us something about how things should be – they offer us specific political prescriptions.

When, though, are these prescriptions "action guiding"? No one, as far as I'm aware, takes the view that a theory is action guiding *whenever* it offers an answer to a normative question. Rather, I suggest that such theories are considered action-guiding when they meet three types of condition.[4] The first are *formal* conditions, relating to the basic legibility or coherence of the answer being offered. Suppose, for example, that a theory prescribes adherence to two main principles: Principle 1 says "do X" and Principle

2 says "don't do X". This is obviously not guidance that anyone could possibly act upon. One formal condition, then, is that the prescription is internally consistent.

The second kind of success condition is a *feasibility* condition. There are two senses in which a theory might fail to meet this condition. The first, strict sense is by recommending the impossible. Guidance that literally *cannot* be acted upon by definition fails in the function of offering guidance to be acted upon.[5] Relevantly for us here, normative political theories can face the criticism that they are strictly infeasible because their prescriptions are incompatible with the perceived limits of human nature. We have already seen that this is part of political realism's critique of Rawlsian moralism, proceeding from the realist's *realpsychologie*.

A second way that a theory can fail to meet the feasibility condition is by declining to engage with the question of how the theory might be implemented, given the practical gulf between what the theory recommends and the position in which we currently find ourselves.[6] It may be that the gulf is so large that we simply cannot know how to proceed. This kind of charge is often levelled against ideal theory by non-ideal theorists.[7] Realists too make a similar complaint. As Raymond Geuss vividly puts it (fairly or not), for example, "[t]he often noted absence in Rawls of any theory about how his ideal demands are to be implemented is not a tiny mole that serves as a beauty spot to set off the radiance of the rest of the face, but the epidermal sign of a lethal tumour" (2008, p. 93-4).

The final success condition is a *conceptual* condition, which requires that a theory offer guidance *for the matter at hand*. If I am looking for guidance regarding how to build my new flat-pack wardrobe, and you pass me a manual for installing a new oven, you haven't offered me guidance I can use for the matter at hand. Similarly, a normative theory isn't a *political* theory if it isn't recognisably about politics. Again, as we saw above, this idea forms part of the realist critique of liberal moralism, where the latter

purportedly 'misunderstands' what politics is.[8] To fail to meet the conceptual condition is important with respect to action guidance *if it will lead to failing the feasibility condition*: just as I can't feasibly use an oven manual to successfully build a wardrobe, it will not be feasible for a polity to meet the demands of a normative theory that radically misunderstands what politics is like or might become. This is in fact the fuller thrust of Geuss's above complaint against Rawls: *because* Rawls doesn't recognise the central place of power in politics, he is unable to tell us anything about how his principles of justice might come to be realised.

What should be clear is that whether or not one adjudges the feasibility and conceptual conditions to have been met by any one prescriptive theory depends upon one's antecedent view about the constitutive features of politics and its possibilities. In that sense, judgements about whether a prescriptive theory is action-guiding are perspectival. For the realist, prescriptive theories that hypothesise stable moral consensus, and/or overestimate the potential of human psychology relative to the realist understanding thereof, will inevitably fail to be action-guiding. To suppose that there could be moral consensus is to misunderstand politics and why we need it, thus flouting the conceptual condition (and thereby the feasibility condition). And theories that ignore *realpsychologie* will, for realists, fail the feasibility condition directly.

Orienting action guidance

In my understanding, most realists do not engage in the practice of offering prescriptive action guidance (although we will consider one apparent instance shortly). This is not surprising: one consequence of realists' emphasis upon the limited power of reason and the inevitability of deep disagreement, as well as their underscoring of the importance of political context and the role of situated political judgement (see Rossi and Sleat, 2014, p.

694), is that they are reticent to construct abstract grand theories that are supposed to provide us with determinate prescriptions for real world polities. The question then arises, however, as to what it is that realists who reject the prescriptive mode *are* talking about when they profess the superior 'action-guiding' qualities of political realism as compared to liberal moralism.

I propose that these realists are engaged in offering what I will call 'orienting action-guidance'. I said with respect to prescriptive action-guidance that whether or not one understands such guidance successfully to have been offered in any one instance will depend upon one's perspective of the constitutive features of politics and its possibilities. To offer orienting action guidance involves offering an account of (some of) these constitutive features of politics. This account – or 'orientation' – can then be used to illuminate, interpret and evaluate extant political circumstances, and to inform subsequent political action. Unlike prescriptive action guidance, however, precisely what political action ought to follow is not prescribed by the theory.

The success conditions for orienting action guidance are different to those for prescriptive action guidance. With respect to the *conceptual* condition, there is no fully pre-established account of 'the political' against which to judge orienting action-guidance – rather, it is partly an account of (some aspect of) the political that such guidance is offering. By contrast, *formal* conditions hold: as with prescriptive action guidance, it is a mark of failure if orienting action guidance is, for example, internally self-contradictory.

The *feasibility* condition is more complex. In the case of orienting action-guidance, there is no immediate political prescription which can be adjudged feasible or infeasible to implement. Instead, a way of thinking about politics is offered. The relevant feasibility consideration here, I contend, is whether this way of thinking about politics can be psychologically feasible as an orientation to be internalised and employed by persons in

their political lives. Again, the judgement about feasibility is perspectival: it will be relative to a particular account of political psychology. In this paper we will judge the feasibility of political realism's orienting action-guiding from the perspective of realism's own political psychology.

Does orienting action guidance meet this feasibility condition so long as *someone* is able to internalise it, even if it is psychologically too demanding (according to some particular account of political psychology) for the vast majority of people? The answer here depends upon the notional 'target' for guidance.[9] If the guidance is only ever designed for some small subset of society – an intelligentsia, say, as with Richard Rorty's appeal for "ironism" (1997) – without any desire that it should have wider political import, then it will not matter if that guidance is infeasible as an orientation for citizens generally to internalise and act upon, as long as it is feasible for that subset. On the other hand, if the notional target of the guidance *is* the citizenry generally, then the guidance will indeed fail to meet the feasibility condition if it is too psychologically demanding for most people to internalise and act upon.

My aim in what now follows is to demonstrate that, if political realists take their own perspective on politics seriously – in particular, what I have called *realpsychologie* – then they will, by their own lights, struggle to offer either prescriptive or orienting action guidance. I pursue this aim by surveying a range of realist attempts at normativity which, I suggest, are indicative of a problem for realism more generally.

Realism and prescriptive action-guidance

As I have noted, the offering of prescriptive action guidance is a rarity in realist theorising. However, before moving on to orienting action guidance, I want to consider one instructive case that appears to fit the prescriptive model. My claim is that it fails to

demonstrate that it can meet the feasibility condition, in a way representative of any attempt realists may make to offer prescriptive guidance.

Robert Jubb makes the case that the tenets of political realism are compatible with "high levels of material equality", even though defences of the latter are more typically the preserve of the moralistic, ideal-theoretic theorising that realism decries (Jubb, 2015, p. 69). Indeed, in Jubb's view, such equality may be a *requirement*, from a realist perspective, for a legitimate political order (at least today). Jubb is then understandable as prescribing a specific criterion of political legitimacy from realist starting premises. Jubb's argument appeals to what he calls "negative non-intrinsic egalitarianism" (NNIE). Non-intrinsic arguments for equality value that equality not because it is valuable in and of itself, but "because of a set of social relations to which it is closely connected" (Jubb, 2015, p. 681). Here, Jubb concurs with Martin O'Neill that distributive equality is necessary "to avoid the badness of servility, exploitation, domination and differences in status" (quoted in Jubb, 2015, p. 681). *Negative* non-intrinsic arguments for equality decline to say anything further about what the best way of life for a given political community is – equality is not offered as a positive ideal, but only as a means of avoiding the aforementioned badness.

NNIE is, says Jubb "appropriately political", by which is meant that it is compatible with how realists understand politics. In particular, Jubb emphasises that it avoids "drawing on unavailable moral agreement" (2015, p. 683), by grounding distributive equality on the avoidance of "widely acknowledged bads rather than contentious claims about the good" and ideal social order (2015, p. 679). Let us grant this specific claim about the avoidance of appeal to unavailable moral agreement, in order to consider NNIE's compatibility with another realist premise: can NNIE really, as Jubb implies it can, "avoid placing too much motivational stress on agents like us, with our … inability to consistently

govern ourselves through reason alone?" (Jubb, 2015, p. 681)? In other words, is NNIE consistent with the realist premise of *realpsychologie*?

Whether or not a theory "places too much motivational stress on us" depends on what the theory is trying to motivate us to do. At one point, Jubb makes the following statement:

> A non-intrinsic egalitarianism will be vulnerable to attack by realists if its justification *and implementation* depend on moral or psychological resources unavailable in the circumstances of politics generally or the political situation in which its particular audience find themselves (Jubb, 2015, p. 681, my emphasis)

Since it is Jubb's claim that NNIE is compatible with realism's premises, he clearly does not see it as vulnerable in this way. Thus for Jubb, the justification *and implementation* of NNIE can avoid placing too much motivational stress on agents like us.

What, though, does "implementation" mean here? One apparent possibility is that a theory is "implemented" simply when its political prescriptions – in this case, "high levels of material equality" – are realised in the world. That cannot be what Jubb means by 'implementation', however, since on that understanding both 'positive' and 'negative' non-intrinsic egalitarianisms – indeed, all egalitarianisms[10] – would be as "implementable" as each other, whereas Jubb wants to identify NNIE as uniquely motivationally plausible. The alternative then is that for NNIE (or any other prescriptive theory) to be "implemented" is for the relevant policy prescription to be, to some significant degree, realised and publicly sustained *by the justification for the prescription that the theory offers*. I thus take the implied claim that NNIE is implementable to amount to the claim that NNIE is action-guiding (i.e. meets the formal, feasibility and conceptual conditions for prescriptive action-guidance).

The problem for the realist, however, is that if we take *realpsychologie* seriously, then it's far from clear that public commitment to NNIE could ever be a major part of the explanation for why an egalitarian distribution might come to exist. Indeed, Jubb himself is alert to the issue here. In consideration of the practical possibilities of instituting an egalitarian distribution, Jubb raises the question of whether, *inter alia*, "the beneficiaries of an egalitarian politics can dominate the domestic political scene to the extent necessary to restructure the content and distribution of property rights" (2015, p. 683). What's being recognised here is that if and when an egalitarian outcome is achieved, a major part of *how* it will be achieved will be the successful, self-interested political struggle of a particular sub-societal constituency, rather than a societal-level subscription to the tenets of NNIE. And indeed, where such an egalitarian outcome is achieved, it will in reality surely be on account of a constellation of factors: a propitious balance of political forces, a diverse range of political *and moral* convictions (some of them egalitarian, and of them, some 'negative' and 'non-intrinsic', but some positive and comprehensive), unreflective nationalist sentiment, the skill and charisma of political leaders, and so on.

Given this, what is the basis for supposing that NNIE is "implementable" in the second, action-guiding sense identified above, and indeed *uniquely* implementable among theoretical defences of egalitarian distributions? A sufficient answer to this question would first need to tell us something about the particular political and sociological circumstances that represent the qualitative threshold between a given policy – in this case, "high levels of material equality" – being enacted (regardless of cause), and a particular theoretical *justification* for that policy – in this case, NNIE – being implemented in the action-guiding sense. What is it that makes the difference between bare policy enactment and theory implementation? What evidence of the way citizens

think and act, for example, would we need to observe in a given instance before we were happy to say that a theoretical justification, and not just a policy, had been "implemented"? Jubb does not engage with this question, however. His "main concern" in his paper is "to show that at a suitably abstract and general level, non-intrinsic egalitarianism can meet realism's methodological demands" (2015, p. 684). In other words, his main concern is justification itself, not "implementation". That is fair enough – but since Jubb does not address the threshold question, the claim that NNIE can be implemented without depending on "unavailable moral or psychological resources" is unsupported. Moreover, it is very difficult to see how, if we take realist premises seriously, the claim *could* be supported without proffering an extremely weak account of the threshold that would mean it was difficult to distinguish policy enactment from theory implementation at all.

The dynamic at evidence here will presumably befall any prescriptive realist theory that attempts to claim that it is "implementable" or action-guiding: where 'implementation' is to be understood merely as enactment of the policy prescription that the theory recommends, the claim will not distinguish realist theories from other kinds of theory that offer a different kind of justification for the same prescription, and so won't vindicate any claim to the superior action-guiding qualities of realist theory. On the other hand, where the claim is to be understood as saying that realist justifications, in particular, can be motivationally efficacious in publicly sustaining a given policy prescription, realists will have an extremely hard time vindicating such a claim without either ignoring their own methodological premises or offering an understanding of theory implementation so weak that it is indistinguishable from mere policy implementation. At least, prescriptive realists keen to emphasise the action guiding

qualities of their way of doing political theory will need actively to attempt this difficult task.

Orienting action-guidance

I want now to consider three instances of realist attempts to offer orienting action guidance. In each instance, such attempts ignore realism's own *realpsychologie* premise, and thus fail to meet one or more success condition for having offered action guidance.

Modus vivendi

A political *modus vivendi* is a particular kind of settlement on terms of coexistence between parties who radically disagree. The settlement is no party's preferred solution to the issue(s) at hand, but it is tolerable to each in the interests of avoiding further escalation of the dispute. As Sleat puts it, a *modus vivendi* "will have a sort of 'second best' quality; it is not what any citizen would ideally choose but they accept and endorse it on the grounds that it secures peace amongst radical disagreement and conflict" (Sleat, 2013, p. 96). This distinguishes a *modus vivendi* from the Rawlsian idea of an 'overlapping consensus', since the latter anticipates the possibility of moral agreement (albeit for diverse reasons) on citizens' political 'first choice'.

The idea of a *modus vivendi* has been employed by theorists for at least two, slightly different purposes: first, as a way to think about liberal politics that eschews the search for a moral consensus on liberal values (e.g. Gray, 2000; McCabe, 2010); and second, as a way to think about the demands of legitimacy (e.g. Horton, 2018). I propose here to concentrate on the first group, and on John Gray in particular, as an apparent example of appealing to the idea of *modus vivendi* in the process of offering orienting action guidance. Although Gray does not speak in the language of 'political realism', his

work has been described by one card-carrying realist as "one way to develop the new realist programme in political theory" (Rossi, 2018, p. 95). We will here understand Gray, then, as a realist liberal.

Gray introduces the idea of *modus vivendi* as an implication of one way – in his view the right way – of thinking about the liberal value of toleration. Instead of viewing toleration as means to eventual rational consensus about the truth, it should rather be viewed as a condition of peace among permanently incommensurable ways of life. Gray makes the following statement:

> If the liberal project is to be renewed, the ambiguity that has haunted it from its origins must be resolved. The idea of toleration as a means to a universal consensus on values must be given up, with the adoption instead of a project of modus vivendi among ways of life animated by permanently divergent values (Gray, 2000, p. 25)

What are we to make of this statement? What *is* it? It certainly seems like a piece of guidance: liberal societies should adopt a "project of modus vivendi". What does this project involve? Largely it seems to be a matter of *reconceiving* of liberal institutions in a particular way:

> We will come to think of human rights as convenient articles of peace, whereby individuals and communities with conflicting values and interests may consent to coexist. We will think of democratic government not as an expression of a universal right to national self-determination, but as an expedient, enabling disparate communities to reach common decisions and to remove governments without violence. We will think of these inheritances not as embodying universal principles, but as conventions, which can and should be refashioned in a world of plural societies and patchwork states (2000, p. 106)

The main point then, is to start to *think about* liberal politics in a different way, rather than to start doing different things. I take this to be a piece of orienting action-guidance.

Gray has faced some criticism for apparently supposing that a *modus vivendi* will necessarily provide us with a form of liberalism (Horton, 2018: 133; Rossi, 2018), and, relatedly, for imposing a moral minimum on any *legitimate* modus vivendi in a way that appears to ignore the fact that pervasive political disagreement will hold with respect to that minimum too (e.g. Sleat, 2013, p. 107). I want here though to set aside those particular critiques, and instead consider Gray's endorsement of the adoption of the 'project of *modus vivendi*' with the premises of deep disagreement and *realpsychologie* in mind.

Gray is frank that "the ethical theory underpinning *modus vivendi* is value-pluralism" (2000, p. 6), and that "*modus vivendi* articulates a view of the good. It is an application of value-pluralism to political practice" (2000, p. 25). There appears to be an obvious problem here: aren't we being offered a particular view of the good to coalesce around as a response to the inevitability of diversity of views of the good? Apparently not – for we are also told that "*modus vivendi* is a political project, not a moral ideal. It does not preach compromise as an ideal for all to follow. Nor does it attempt to convert the world to value-pluralism" (2000, p. 25). So: modern diverse societies ought to adopt the political project of *modus vivendi*, in which liberal institutions come to be explicitly understood as political conventions, rather than as the embodiment of universal principles. The theoretical justification for this entreaty involves an appeal to value-pluralism, but the persons who are to change their thinking are not to be expected to become value pluralists. Indeed, it would be a "vain hope" to expect "human beings to cease to make universal claims for their ways of life". Persons are then to continue to hold

on to these universal claims, while also fostering a "commitment to common institutions in which the claims of rival values can be reconciled" (2000, p. 25).

But what is the reason why people might come to foster such a commitment, in Gray's view? On what basis would they be moved to adopt the project of *modus vivendi,* if not via endorsement of value pluralism? One apparently obvious answer here is agreement about the value of peace and security: all parties may be motivated to accept a *modus vivendi* because doing so is preferable to an alternative of ongoing war. A problem with this answer though is that, as certain realists have themselves pointed out, there may not exist any agreement about *how much* security it is desirable to trade off against other political values (Sleat, 2013, p. 101).

Even setting aside that problem, however, a mutual recognition of the value of peace is not sufficient ground for a genuine commitment to the political project of *modus vivendi* among parties that continue to hold universalist visions of the good. We must note here that there is an important difference between (i) there being reason for a party to accept a *modus vivendi* in particular political circumstances, and (ii) that party self-consciously 'adopting the project of *modus vivendi*'. The valuing of peace may lead to the acceptance of a *modus vivendi* in circumstances in which one doesn't foresee that their universal vision of the good can win the day. But one's acceptance of that *modus vivendi* for that reason does not mean that one has adopted the *project* of *modus vivendi*. The latter involves a personal reconceiving of the purpose of liberal political institutions, and the willingness to engage in that reconceiving seems to entail recognition of value pluralism – or at least a rejection of the universal claims for one's way of life. Gray is then trading on an ambiguity between (i) and (ii) when he states that "modus vivendi can be pursued by ways of life having opposed views of the good" (2000, p. 25). This is true of (i) but is not demonstrated with respect to (ii): it has not been explained on what basis

someone who isn't a value pluralist can become psychologically "committed" to Gray's *project* of *modus vivendi*. In other words, Gray does not offer us anything to suggest that the feasibility condition for successful orienting action guidance can be met, since he doesn't show how it can be psychologically for those who hold universalist visions of the good.

This is true for all universalisms, but the problem is particularly severe when we consider what is asked of a liberal who endorses what Gray calls the first 'face' (i.e. the moralist face) of liberalism. A liberal of this type is seemingly expected to think two contradictory things at once about liberal institutions: that those institutions are mere political conventions that enable the reconciling of diverse ways of life, rather than institutional expressions of universal liberal principles (per the 'project of *modus vivendi*'); *and* that they are indeed the expression of such universal principles (per their universalist liberal commitments, which Gray has said it would be a "vain hope" to expect them to give up). For these universalist liberals, then, the problem is not merely that they are urged to reorient themselves politically without sufficient indication of why they might be motivated to do so - it's that they're being asked to think the impossible. The 'project of *modus vivendi*' here flounders on two separate levels of psychological implausibility. In other words, it fails not just to meet the feasibility success condition, but also a formal success condition: basic coherence.

Our discussion of Gray's project of *modus vivendi*, understood as prospective orienting action-guidance, in some ways mirrors the previous discussion of Jubb's realist egalitarianism. As with an egalitarian distribution, *modus vivendi* outcomes (i.e. mutual acceptance of 'second best' circumstances) are potentially politically possible. But that is something different to saying that *modus vivendi* outcomes *sustained by public endorsement of the philosophical project of modus vivendi* are possible. It is the latter

which is at issue when thinking about *modus vivendi* as an action-guiding theory, and it is in the latter sense that *modus vivendi* is left wanting as regards its psychological plausibility (and formal legibility). It therefore cannot represent a plausible action-guiding theory for realists who are explicitly committed to a 'more complex moral and political psychology'.

Williams and the nature of political opposition

Among the complaints that Bernard Williams raises against 'political moralism' is that it "construes conflictual political thought in society in terms of rival elaborations of a moral text" (2005, p. 12). This complaint is levelled explicitly at Ronald Dworkin. Part of the charge here is that the moralist imagines that what is (or should be) going on when we disagree politically is an exchange of purely moral arguments about how society should be best structured, equivalent to the purely legal argument that is going on when supreme court justices disagree about how best to interpret a constitutional text. But as Williams rightly points out, "this is not the nature of opposition between political opponents" (2005, p. 12). That is because, in fact, a range of disparate factors go in to determining our political convictions:

> our and others' convictions have to a great degree been the product of previous historical conditions, and of an obscure mixture of beliefs (many incompatible with one another), passions, interests, and so forth… we would be merely naive if we took our convictions, and those of our opponents, as simply autonomous products of moral reason rather than as another product of historical conditions (2005, p. 12-13)

'Moral reason' may be a *part* of the reason why we hold the political convictions we hold, but only a part.

Williams believes that this truth should mean "that we take certain kinds of view of our allies and opponents". Among other things:

> we should not think that what we have to do is simply to argue with those who disagree [with us]: treating them as opponents can, oddly enough, show more respect for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers — whether as arguers who are simply mistaken, or as fellow seekers after truth (2005, p. 13)

Quite what this may involve is cashed out a little further by Williams in his discussion of the possibility of conflict between the values of equality and liberty, a possibility denied by Dworkin. Williams here speaks of the need for a "double-mindedness", wherein we actively situate our own understanding of the demands of equality "in relation to other interpretations" (2005, p. 125). We decline simply to reject those other interpretations as mistaken and resultantly of no normative import; rather, we recognise that from the perspective of those who hold those other understandings, if our own favoured account is enacted, then they will feel resentment. This represents a *genuine* loss of liberty to them, given their opposing views. We are to come, then, to engage in a kind of relativizing of our own convictions.

Where stable recognition of the non-rational (even *irrational*), contingent nature of one's political commitments has been achieved, one can see how it might go toward sustaining this kind of double-mindedness. After all, a recognition of the lack of firm rational foundation of one's own commitments seems likely to produce a kind of intellectual humility that could lead one to pay due heed to the fact that others think differently. But achieving this stable recognition in the first place itself involves a different, *prior* kind of double-mindedness, namely the double-mindedness of indeed

recognising these origins of one's own commitments while still holding them *as* commitments.

Let us consider these senses of double-mindedness as forming components of a proposed political orientation for citizens generally to internalise and act upon.[11] I want to argue that both the requirement to recognise the non-rational causes of our political convictions, and the subsequent implications this ought to have our political disagreements, are psychologically demanding to the extent that no consistent realist could expect either to achieve wide uptake in the cut and thrust of real world politics. However accurate Williams's depiction of the causes of our convictions may be as a matter of description, it does not follow that the internalisation of this depiction can, for a realist, form the basis of feasible orienting action guidance.

First, let us take the idea that we ought to recognise that our own specific political convictions find their cause in "an obscure mixture of beliefs (many incompatible with one another), passions, interests, and so forth" (2005, p. 13). We should first distinguish what's at issue here from Williams's broader thoughts about a thin liberalism[12] "making sense" in conditions of "modernity" as an answer to the 'Basic Legitimation Demand' (i.e. the demand that political power offer a justification of its power to those over whom such power is wielded). In that regard, Williams has a story to tell about a socio-historical process, involving, *inter alia*, progressively increasing levels of 'reflectiveness' and the resultant unsettling of prior forms (e.g. religious, hierarchical) of ethical 'knowledge' (Williams, 1985). While for Williams there are no philosophical 'foundations' to be found for our modern commitment to this thin liberalism, so long as upon inspection a 'genealogical enquiry' does not undermine our own understanding of why we have such a commitment, we can foster and retain a kind of "confidence" in it (Hall, 2014). Confidence in a moralist grounding of liberalism will not – so it is claimed – survive this

enquiry, because its metaphysical claims cannot be redeemed; by contrast, a liberalism that is clear-eyed about its own contingent 'foundations' may well do so.

We are here concerned however not with this societal-level commitment to a generic and thin liberalism, but rather with the multiplicity of finer-grained political convictions, each compatible with that thin liberalism, that produce intra-societal political conflict. It is *these* convictions of which Williams is urging us to recognise the "obscure mix" of causes. At *this* level, though, it is far from clear that one will still feel 'confident' in their convictions after they have confronted the fact that they are in large part caused by, *inter alia*, internally incompatible beliefs, rationalisation of self-interest, and emotional reaction.

Indeed, such confrontation is more psychologically demanding that the recognition of the contingency of our commitments urged by the moralism of, for example, Rawls's political liberalism. There, 'reasonable' citizens must recognise the 'burdens of judgement': given the multiple difficulties that accrue to the employment of reason, we must recognise that there can be no final way to vindicate the moral conclusions that *our* employment of reason has reached when others have reached opposed conclusions. As has been pointed out, Rawls is here demanding

> an active and taxing psychological position … it is one thing to grant the truism that the concepts employed in framing our comprehensive doctrines are subject to hard cases or that we always select from an array of values that admit reasonable alternatives; it is quite another, when the doctrine I ardently uphold entails a particular resolution of a hard case or a certain choice from the range of available values, to acknowledge that opposing views are equally reasonable, and that the political significance of the doctrine I cherish must be curtailed by

deference to the reasonableness of beliefs I vehemently reject. (Callan, 1997, p. 34)

In crunch situations, we may well find it *overly* psychologically taxing to uphold recognition of the burdens of judgement. Or if we *do* manage to uphold such recognition, it may be difficult for the 'ardency' of our own commitments to withstand.

But although Rawls's psychological position is indeed demanding, Williams's is only *more* so, given Williams's own depiction of political psychology. Williams asks persons to accept not simply that their political convictions represent one reasonable terminus of the employment of reason among others, but rather that their convictions are little to do with moral reason at all and are instead the product of potentially internally inconsistent beliefs, self-interest, socialisation, passion, and so forth. One way of putting things is to say that part of what Williams is doing is attempting to orient us toward recognition of *realpsychologie*. But the problem is that to anticipate that persons would be able so to orient themselves would be to ignore the *realpsychologie* premise itself. If we take *realpsychologie* seriously, then much more likely than the taking on board of Williamsian recognition of the causes of our convictions is the kind of post-hoc rationalisation of political commitment that political psychologists have recently been documenting (e.g. Lodge and Taber, 2013). There is ample empirical evidence, for instance, of the existence of "motivated reasoning" – that is, the biasing of the seeking and processing of information due to positive "affect" (i.e. non-rational, emotional attachment) for pre-existing commitments and a corresponding negative affective response to information that challenges those existing commitments (see e.g. Redlawsk, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2006).

We would surely expect this kind of dynamic to hinder widespread recognition of the contingency of our convictions that Williams urges, since many persons already have

affective attachment to the notion that their political convictions are not merely theirs, but *are correct* (Haidt, 2012). Rather than judiciously consider and weigh arguments to the contrary, such persons are in fact likely to demonstrate negative bias in the way they process such arguments, and instead expend psychological energy on the identification of intellectual resources that can help rationalise their existing affective attachment. Such rationalisation amounts to something of a self-deception, but surely this sort of thing – the rejection of a reasoned proposition motivated by the desire to protect our pre-existing emotional attachments – is entirely consistent with what *realpsychologie* would predict.

Let us turn nevertheless to the state of 'double-mindedness' that Williams thinks ought to follow from recognition of the causes of our own convictions. It in fact anticipates a radical change to the phenomenology of political disagreement. Williams at one point characterises those who believe that there exists a right that their favoured account of justice be enacted, and that others who disagree ought not to disagree (he speaks in particular of Dworkin again), as supposing "that all the urgency and dignity of justice applies to one's own political interpretation of justice" (2005, p. 125). We are apparently to think this "very strong", by which is meant "too strong". But this reveals more about the curiosity of Williams's view than Dworkin's. For if one does indeed earnestly believe that an injustice is at hand, one will presumably also believe that such injustice demands urgent rectification as a matter of political priority – that seems to be internal to what it *means* to hold to an account of (in)justice. To understand one's own account of justice as simply one interpretation among others, from which no urgent political implications ought necessarily to proceed, is to hold an emaciated understanding of justice that would perhaps only seem plausible to one – like the Williamsian realist – who was already

sceptical about the very idea of producing a specific, prescriptive account of justice to which to be committed.

Moreover, and as David Enoch has clearly articulated, when two people disagree about the answer to what they nevertheless both recognise is a moral question (Enoch cites abortion), it *feels like* they are disagreeing "about an objective matter of fact, that exists independently of us and our disagreement" (2010, p. 212). This is true *whether or not* there really is such an objective matter of fact at hand. By contrast, where two persons disagree instead about some matter of personal preference (Enoch's example is whether bitter chocolate is better than milk chocolate) the phenomenology of the disagreement (if we can be bothered to actively disagree about it at all) is different: more playful, perhaps even ironic. Williams apparently anticipates our coming to experience political disagreement as distinct from both moral disagreement and disagreement about personal preference: it is still to be taken seriously and considered important (these are to be our "opponents", after all), but yet it will also be explicitly and mutually recognised that we are not disagreeing about any objective matter of fact.

This is quite a strange aspiration for a realist to hold. It's certainly true that the picture of the phenomenology of political disagreement ascribed to the moralist – i.e. experienced as that between the intellectually correct (us) and the intellectually mistaken interpreter of a moral text – is divorced from reality, not least because the cut and thrust of real world politics is in many instances experienced as disagreement between those in the right (us) and those who are not even *trying* to be right, but are instead pursuing their own disguised self-interest, or some other nefarious agenda. And yet, a realist who endorses Williams's aspiration for political disagreement apparently hopes for what is in one sense an *even more* idealistic future, in which citizens not only

cease to ascribe ulterior motives to others, but in addition cease even to consider those others intellectually mistaken, or one's own position morally justified.

Perhaps this is not in fact infeasible. But it will require a significant increase in trust in our fellow citizens, a corresponding increase in our own humility, and an ability reliably to restrain ourselves and retain in front of mind, during the heat of political conflict (not just in moments of quiet philosophical contemplation)[13], the obscure, non-rational causes of our own commitments. It is however a fundamental premise of what I've been calling *realpsychologie* that the ability of reason to keep our irrational emotions and passions in check in this kind of way is highly limited. In this case, the relevant piece of 'reason' is Williams's own insight into the fundamental contingency of our political convictions. A consistent realist then either has to argue that our being consistently guided in our political practice by Williams's insight does not fall foul of this premise of *realpsychologie*, or else must accept that such an insight cannot in practice meet the feasibility condition for being action guiding. We might reasonably ask any political realist seeking to argue the former *how* such a change in public attitude toward political disagreement might be possible without infringing upon the premises of their own political psychology. But no such answer to this question is offered by Williams or his followers.

Realism as ideology critique

As Raymond Geuss puts things at one point, "A "realist" in the sense in which I am using the term will…start from an account of our existing motivations and our political and social institutions" (2008, p. 59). 'Start from' does not mean 'take as axiomatic'. Indeed, the latter is precisely what Geuss accuses two "nonrealistic approaches" – Robert

Nozick's rights-based libertarianism, and Rawls's privileging of our "intuitions" about justice – of doing. By contrast, the realist pays due heed to the fact that

> the reasons why we have most of the political and moral concepts we have (in the forms in which 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, p. 69).

What this historical account may well reveal to us is that prevailing sentiments, beliefs and ideas are ideological: they appear as universal or natural but are in fact maintained by particular "configurations of power" (2008, p. 53). Clearly there are similarities with Williams here, but with a difference in emphasis: while Williams emphasises the prospect of sustaining the endorsement of our convictions while recognising their true causes, Geuss by contrast emphasises the prospect of emancipating ourselves from ideological thinking.

Geuss explicitly refers to the idea of action guidance when distinguishing realist from 'nonrealistic' theory:

> If one thinks that a political theory can be a good guide to action only if it is minimally realistic, in the sense of being in cognitive contact with the real world, one will demand of a candidate theory that it actively encourage one to understand the ways in which power, interests, priorities, values, and forms of legitimation concretely interact in society. An "ideal theory" without contact to reality is, then, no guide to action (2008, p. 93-4).

Geuss is here accusing ideal theory of failing to meet what I called the 'conceptual condition' for being action-guiding in the prescriptive sense. Ideal theory, by purportedly ignoring the role of power, in particular, just doesn't get politics right: as he puts it in one

of his pithier statements, "modern politics is importantly about power, its acquisition, distribution, and use" (2008, p. 97). A theory, like Rawls's, that doesn't recognize this will not be able to offer us guidance about politics, and thus won't be feasible as guidance *for* politics. By contrast, realist theory can guide action, in the orienting sense, by "actively encouraging one to understand" the ideological role of political power.

Geuss's is a claim about what realist theorising can offer, but not, I suggest, an instance of it actually *being* offered. There are two ways in which this offering might occur: by providing individuals with the theoretical 'tools' they require to engage in their own realist 'ideology critique'; or by practicing such critique oneself, enabling others to orient themselves by the findings of that critique.[14]

Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi engage in what I take to be the former course of action when they articulate the principles of an explicitly realist form of ideology critique which "seeks to be an instrument for agents' understanding of their political and social order" (2017, p. 362), leading to the possibility of realising "action-orienting normative evaluation" from realist premises (2017, p. 349). They do this "with the help of recent developments in analytic philosophy of language and metaphysics, as well as of recent Frankfurt School Critical Theory" (2017, p. 357). What follows is as complex as that sounds and, frankly, somewhat opaque – I will not attempt to recapitulate their argument here, not least because I am not confident that I have understood it. This difficulty in understanding, though, is in itself significant. As noted, the authors want to offer a theoretical framework which can be "an instrument for agents' understanding of their political and social order". *Which* agents, though? I submit that an 'instrument' that requires nuanced understanding of analytic philosophy of language and metaphysics, as well as of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, will not be a usable instrument at all for the vast majority of people. One reason for this is the inevitable differences in cognitive

capacity to learn about these ideas and theories. Another is that of those that do have the cognitive capacity to do so, many will nevertheless simply lack the personal motivation to bother. These variations in cognitive capacity and motivation are, of course, tenets of realist *realpsychologie*.

To them we can add the simple fact of the division of labour in complex modern societies (cf. Bertram, 1997, p. 566): regardless of whether one might potentially have both the capacity and the motivation, persons pursue different professions, with their differing technical languages: it is distinctly *unrealistic*, therefore, to suppose that the technical language of some subset of highly trained academic philosophers might form the material for a widely useable political 'instrument'.

Is realist ideology critique then maybe supposed to be an 'instrument' only for a select group of agents, akin to Rorty's ironic "intellectuals"? Presumably not, since the very point of ideology critique is not the private enlightenment of those who are able to engage in it, but rather the stimulation of radical political change and resultant social emancipation (Geuss, 1981, pp. 73-75). In other words, the notional target is society at large. Such societal level change is however extremely unlikely to occur if the reasons why it should are destined to remain inaccessible to most people. Or at least, it is extremely unlikely to occur *on account of the widespread employment of the instrument of realist ideology critique* (clearly history is replete with formerly dominant modes of thinking being replaced). While the instrument of realist ideology critique may orient the thinking of some subset of a society, then, it is ultimately the society as a whole that the ideology critic wishes to orient – and if we take *realpsychologie* seriously, then we must surely say that they are destined to fail to do so.

Practicing realist ideology critique oneself, thereby demonstrating the instrument in action and offering the conclusions up as orientations to be used by others, will face a

similar problem. Some people may indeed come to accept a particular conclusory idea – "the idea of private property is ideological", for example (Rossi and Argenton, 2017) – but the complexity of the instrument used to derive that conclusion will insure that the *reasons* for such a conclusion are understood by only a few. Those who may accept the conclusory idea without encountering or understanding the reasons for it have not been guided by realist ideology critique at all, but have instead been 'guided' to the conclusory idea by other factors – perhaps by rhetoric, by self-interest, or by partisanship. All the sorts of things, that is, that *realpsychologie* urges us to take seriously.

Conclusion

Various political realists claim that their way of doing political theory is better able to offer action guidance than 'liberal moralism'. I have identified two possible understandings of action guidance: the first, 'prescriptive action guidance', offers a specific prescription for how things should be; the second, 'orienting action guidance', offers a more generalised view about how we should conceive of some aspect of politics, which we can thereafter use to inform our political conduct. Realists have engaged in both kinds of pursuit – although mainly the second – and I have considered a selection here. Clearly, I have not been able to consider all existing cases, but those I have considered demonstrate a pattern that I believe will hold across the wider set. That pattern is one of political realisms that seek to offer action-guidance being unable to incorporate their own methodological premises – in particular, they are unable to pay due heed to what I have called *realpsychologie*.

In order to incorporate recognition of *realpsychologie* at the point of action-guiding *output* rather than methodological *input*, realist political theorists would seemingly need to be willing to subvert the very practice of political theorising: they

would need to be willing to swap out what Iris Marion Young called "the soft tones of the seminar room", the pursuit of theoretical nuance, and philosophical coherence, and instead to employ simple slogans, humour, and passionate rhetoric (2001, pp. 675-7). They would need to be willing to be strategically *incoherent*, to stoke fear where efficacious, and to explicitly appeal to our *irrational, emotional* side. They would need to be willing, that is, to be more like political actors, and less like political theorists.

How, then, for a realist to react? There seem to be two main paths available. The first is to reject the aspiration to offer action-guiding political realism, and instead to remain in the realms of description and interpretation, as I noted at the outset that various realists indeed do. However, to make such a move would be to recede from what we noted in the introduction was one of the two main lines of criticism against liberal moralism, namely the latter's perceived normative irrelevance. To retreat into description and interpretation is to admit that political realism in fact possesses little advantage in this respect.

The alternative path is to offer some further systematic account of which particular aspects of *realpsychologie* are, and are not, relevant to normative theory construction. Realists are clearly right that our moral and political psychologies are far more complex than the essentially rationalist picture offered to us by Rawls. I have argued here, however, that if one takes this complexity in its entirety to be part-constitutive of the perspective from which one adjudges whether a given theory is action-guiding, then realists' own normative offerings must themselves fail to be action-guiding. Might it then be possible to offer a philosophical defence of the circumscription of certain aspects of *realpsychologie* that are to be considered normatively relevant? Perhaps so, but the danger lurking for realists is that doing so would be in considerable tension with the central realist commitment to theoretical recognition of "the world as it is".

Notes

[1] The other being liberal moralism's purported descriptive inadequacy.

[2] Even in the move to 'political liberalism', we are still to "think of persons as reasonable and rational, as free and equal citizens, with the two moral powers and having, at any given moment, a determinate conception of the good" (Rawls, 1997, p. 800).

[3] Contributions to these meta-ethical debates about 'action guidance' are themselves not even notionally addressed to the public at large, but rather to other political theorists. Yet within these debates arguments are made that one methodological approach or another is best placed to provide public action-guidance.

[4] Note that a theory could meet all of these conditions and still be thought *wrong*. It would be action guiding, nonetheless. By analogy, if you ask me the way to the bank, I point you in the opposite direction, and you set off in the direction I point, then I have still successfully offered you directions, even if I haven't offered you the right directions.

[5] Although some theorists dispute that action-guiding theories ought necessarily to be *immediately* feasible (e.g. Gheaus, 2013).

[6] Some political philosophers take the view that answering the 'how' question is not their domain (e.g. Swift, 2008).

[7] See, for example, Farrelly,2007; Miller, 2013; Mills, 2005; Sen, 2006; Weins, 2015. For a qualified defence of the action guiding qualities of ideal theory, see Valentini, 2009.

[8] For a rejection of the normative significance of the purported constitutive features of politics, see Erman and Möller, 2018.

[9] Notional because, as we made clear above, political theorists face a publicity problem which they tend to ignore.

[10] At least, all egalitarianisms with the same 'site', 'scope' and 'currency'. See Tan, 2012; Cohen, 1989.

[11] Williams does at various points give the impression that he is primarily targeting other political theorists rather than offering an orientation for citizens generally to take on. Yet this impression is not consistent. For instance, Williams writes that "Even if we were utopian monarchs, we would have to take into account others' disagreement as a mere fact. As democrats, we have to do more than that" (2005, p. 13). Here there does appear to be a wide notional target in view (i.e. all "we" who are "democrats").

[12] In this context "liberalism" is not the pejorative 'liberalism moralism' which realists criticise, but simply a commitment to general liberal ideas like individual liberty and toleration, aversion to cruelty, and the limitation of political power.

[13] We might draw an analogy with Hume's philosophical scepticism, which he found necessarily subverted when leaving the 'philosophical sphere' and returning to the 'sphere of common life'.

[14] Ed Hall suggests to me that Charles Mills's work, in *The Racial Contract* (1997) and elsewhere, is a good example of the latter. However, while Mills certainly emphasises the ideological nature of certain political ideas – and indeed of 'ideal theory' generally – he is nevertheless ultimately working within a self-confessed 'non-ideal' liberalism.

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