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# Realism, Liberalism and Non-Ideal Theory: or, 'Are there Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory'

## Abstract

*The charge that contemporary political theory has lost touch with the realities of politics is common to both the recent ideal/non-ideal theory debate and the revival of interest in realist thought. However a tendency has arisen to subsume political realism within the ideal/non-ideal theory debate, or to elide realism with non-ideal theorising. This paper argues that this is a mistake. The ideal/non-ideal theory discussion is a methodological debate that takes place within the framework of liberal theory. Realism, contrary to several interpretations, is a distinct and competing conception of politics in its own right that stands in contrast to that of liberal theory and its ambitions. While the two debates are united in a sense that contemporary liberal theory needs to be more realistic, they differ significantly in both what this critique amounts to and, more importantly, what it is to do more realistic political theory.*

While the accusation that political theory is too detached from the real world of politics is hardly a new claim, it has been made repeatedly throughout the years by those more sympathetic to the empirical study of politics or who see themselves as men (or women) 'of action', this charge is now being loudly and forcefully voiced from within the sub-discipline itself. Both the ideal/non-ideal theory debate and the recent resurgence of interest in realist political thought pursue this line of criticism, most often in relations specifically to the work of John Rawls and the form of neo-Kantian liberal theorising which he has inspired. However, though non-ideal theory and political realism make prima facie similar claims regarding the need for contemporary liberal theory to be more in touch with reality, this thematic similarity obscures a series of significant differences in relation to their critiques of liberalism and their suggestions as to how political theory can be more realistic. These differences are being lost in an increasing and unfortunate tendency in the literature to elide the realist critique of liberalism with the non-idealist critique of ideal liberal theory, and more generally, realism with non-ideal theory. Realism is often presented as a variation of a non-ideal theme. This conflation is a mistake. Whereas the ideal/non-ideal theory debate is a series of methodological issues that take place squarely within the liberal framework and hence retains many (if not all) of its assumptions regarding the purpose of politics and the ambitions of political theory, realism is a competing theory of politics in its own right, and, importantly, one that presents a radical challenge to those liberal assumptions. In the context of ongoing concerns about the relationship between political theory and political practice including the question of how realistic our theorising of politics needs to be, it is important that these significantly different accounts of what it is to do realistic political theory are highlighted and preserved.

In order to make these arguments I want to proceed in three stages. The first section will explicate the central features of the ideal/non-ideal theory debate, and in particular draw attention to its critique of contemporary liberal theory and how realism has been incorporated into this framework. The second section will then briefly set out the general features of the

realist account of politics, drawing particular attention to those aspects that lead it to dismiss liberal theory as grounded in an inadequate conception of politics as a human activity (rather than as excessively fact-insensitive or impracticable as is the non-ideal charge). The final section shall then trace the consequences of these differences, exploring how non-ideal theory and realism lead to alternate accounts of what it is to do realistic political theory, including what the appropriate objectives of political theory should be and the nature of the constraints under which it must work. In doing so, it shall also highlight those areas in which non-ideal theory's status as a methodological debate within liberal theory leads it to replicate several assumptions of the liberal conception of politics that from the perspective of realist theory are thoroughly unrealistic and must be abandoned if we are to engage in properly realistic political theorising.<sup>i</sup>

### **The Ideal/Non-Ideal Theory Debate**

Even a cursory glance at the impressive body of literature that the ideal/non-ideal theory debate has already generated is enough to demonstrate that there is little consensus on how to characterise these arguments, exactly what the shortcomings of ideal theory are taken to be, nor any common understanding of the nature of the relationship between the two (see Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012; Valentini 2012). Nevertheless, theorists have offered two broad responses to the question of what ideal theory is and its perceived limitations. Some insist that ideal theories are those which are directed towards 'modelling perfection', setting out what a perfectly just society would look like and which provide a vision of the ideal towards which we should work (Estlund, 2011; Jubb, 2012; Lawford-Smith, 2010; Simmons, 2010; Swift, 2008). 'The aim of ideal theory', as Ingrid Robeyns has put it, 'is to work out the principles of justice that should govern a society, that is, to propose and justify a set of principles of justice that should be met before we would consider a certain society just' (2008, p. 343). On such a view, ideal theory provides the blueprint for a perfectly just society, our desired endpoint towards which political action, reform and design should be directed. And by providing such a blueprint, it also enables us to make evaluative comparisons between the ideal and the non-ideal circumstances we live in today, allowing us to determine where injustices prevail and when at least partial justice has been achieved. But ideal theory tells us nothing about how we get from our circumstances of partial justice to those of full justice. Addressing this specifically practical and transitional question is, on this view the proper purview of non-ideal theory. There is no claim that ideal theory is deficient in any regard; rather there is simply a division of labour between the aims and objectives of ideal and non-ideal theories which mean that the latter needs to be engaged in questions of the implementation of normative recommendations in practice in a way that is not appropriate for the former.

Others have identified ideal theories as those that share a particular deficiency in common, that of impracticability (Farrelly, 2007; Miller, 2008; Stemplowska, 2008; Valentini, 2009; Wiens, 2012). Ideal theories offer 'no immediate or workable solutions to any of the problems our societies face' (Stemplowska, 2008, p. 19) insofar as they are either inadequately sensitive to certain politically salient facts (about human nature, psychology, economics, etc.),

incorporate inappropriate idealisations (see Valentini, 2009, pp. 351-55), take place at too high a level of abstraction to allow it to offer anything in the way of relevant action-guiding recommendations in relation to the actual political problems we face, or pay little heed to the existence of feasibility constraints which limit how effectively normative prescriptions could be put into political practice. The charge is that these deficiencies in ideal theory make it at best an insufficient guide for political action in our non-ideal contexts, at worst an irrelevant or possibly even dangerous blueprint for political reform (Hendrix, 2013; Miller, 2013; Robeyns, 2008, pp. 357-8; Valentini, 2009). The majority of those who endorse this account of ideal-theory-as-impracticability support the former claim and hence argue that ideal theory retains an appropriate role in normative theorising, though it might be a much more circumscribed and focused one. Some of the more extreme critics of ideal theory, such as Farrelly (2007), Mills (2005), Sen (2006) and Wiens (2012), have argued that there is no place at all for ideal theory as it has most often been understood and practiced, and hence that the vast majority of work undertaken in our theoretical investigations into the demands of justice for instance in the past four decades has been fatally and seemingly irredeemably methodologically flawed. But for most, non-ideal theory is not a rival approach to ideal theorising, indeed it is not a distinct theory at all, but rather a set of concerns regarding the practicability of liberal theory in its most idealised form. Hence even those who see ideal theory as impracticable often believe that it remains a necessary or important facet of normative political theorising, though one that needs tempering with more non-ideal concerns.

For non-ideal theory, the problem with contemporary liberal theory is that its insufficient regard for the facts has impeded its ability to fulfil its normative ambitions of providing guidance for political action and reform. Greater concern for the facts, either in relation to implementing the recommendations of ideal theory in the real (non-ideal) world or through incorporating those facts into the very normative theorising itself, will produce a theory more suited to guiding action here and now. The more facts one incorporates the more *realistic* the theory will be. This link between fact-sensitivity, practicability and realism is made most explicitly in Laura Valentini's important survey piece (2012) 'Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map'. Realism is presented by Valentini as a subset of non-ideal concerns about ideal theory and about utopian forms of ideal theory more specifically. 'Utopian theories', we are told, 'argue that principles of justice are altogether independent of factual constraints' (Valentini, 2012, p. 657). Realist theories, on the other hand, recognise that reality places certain feasibility constraints on what is possible when designing normative principles. As few theorists think that normative theorising should be fully utopian in assuming that it must remain completely indifferent to facts about our social world, Valentini suggests that what we really have is a spectrum of 'more or less realistic theories'. When key features of political life are not taken sufficiently seriously within a theory then such theories are not 'realistic enough'. The more salient facts about the real world a political theory incorporates, the more 'capable it will be of effectively criticising political circumstances and guide action in the real world' (Valentini, 2012, p 659). And the more realistic a theory it will be also. Realism is not therefore an alternative to utopianism but rather is situated at one end of a fact-sensitive (realistic)/fact-indifferent (utopian) spectrum 'with no categorical difference between them' (Valentini, 2012, p. 660) Theories are not realistic or utopian, but rather *more* realistic or *more* utopian.

It is important to recognise that neither liberal politics nor theory is at stake in the ideal/non-ideal theory debate, however conceived.<sup>ii</sup> This debate is a consciously methodological one (Valentini, 2012) directed exclusively towards the question of how one *does* liberal theory, and in particular how one does it in such a way that it can better fulfil its normative ambition of guiding political action and reform. It is not assumed to challenge, nor seek to challenge, liberal theory on any of its central normative or conceptual commitments. It may urge liberal theory to expand its scope to include non-ideal concerns regarding applying principles in practice, or to be more conscious of the appropriate level of abstraction and idealisation that it engages in, but it does not reach deeper than that to pose more fundamental questions to its theoretical framework itself. Non-ideal theory is (in most cases) seen explicitly as an amendment or corrective to ideal liberal theorising. To equate realism with non-ideal theory, to characterise it as a corrective to liberalism's lack of appropriate fact-sensitivity or appreciation of feasibility constraints that impinge on the implementation of ideals in practice, is therefore to think of it also as situated in a critical but necessary relationship to ideal theory. Realism becomes a remedial set of considerations for ideal theory, it is not an independent and distinctive theory of politics, nor can it be construed as a radical or critical challenge to ideal theory or, more importantly for our purposes, to liberal political theory more generally. A more realistic liberal theory would be one that paid greater heed to the facts of our social world so as to offer better normative guidance for political action.

### **Realism and the Political**

If we think about the canon of realist thinkers in political theory, which includes at least Thucydides, Saint Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume, Nietzsche, Weber, and Schmitt (though several of these are admittedly contested - though this is true of some figures in all canons), then it is not easy to see exactly how they count as realists if by realism we mean a concern for the implementation of ideals in practice or the need to engage in more fact-sensitive normative theorising. While many (though not all) of these realist theorists did indeed concern themselves with how we should theorise politics in light of facts and constraints imposed upon our political projects by the natural and social world, this does not make their theories simply more realistic versions of otherwise utopian theories; Hobbes is not simply a less utopian Locke. We recognise in their work radically different political theories, grounded in very different commitments and assumptions about the nature of politics. And none of them, apart from Hume (and possibly Hobbes under certain interpretations), can plausibly be thought of as liberal theorists.<sup>iii</sup>

What this immediately points to is that our ordinary interpretation of the realist tradition of political thinking is not easily characterised by an emphasis on the practicability or implementation of political theory in the real world. Indeed, many of these realist thinkers would be guilty of some of the very charges of being 'unrealistic' made by non-ideal theorists towards liberal theory: their theories often take place at very high levels of abstraction which at best seem to only indirectly address our real political issues and rarely translate into detailed plausible accounts of what should be done or recommendations for guiding political action in practice. Nor, more importantly, does this characterisation of realism capture what seems to be interesting

and so perennially compelling about the realist tradition. It would be difficult to see why we consider that tradition to represent a distinct and often radical challenge to liberal theory if all it were is a corrective to some of the more extreme utopianism of which such theorising can be prone. It is clearly more than this. *Realism stands to liberalism as a fundamentally different conception of politics, one which has very distinct notions regarding the purpose and limits of politics, as well as the appropriate ambitions of political theory.*

Disagreement and conflict is ubiquitous in social life. Such disagreements reach down to all areas of the human experience, including not only religious and moral matters but the most fundamental questions and issues of politics also. We disagree about the terms that should regulate our shared political association, the values and principles that should guide political action, and the ends towards which political power should be employed. Realists offer varying accounts as to why disagreement is permanent and ineradicable. Many earlier realists, like Carl Schmitt, Hans J. Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, saw the sources of conflict in features of human nature itself, the desire for power and domination over others, or the pernicious effects of prejudice, egoism, passion, and pride (Morgenthau, 1946; Morgenthau, 1967; Niebuhr, 2005; Niebuhr, 2011; Schmitt, 1996). Despite several declaration of the need for a more realistic account of human psychology (Galston, 2010), this work has still to be undertaken and certainly contemporary realists have so far tended to shy away from such seemingly controversial anthropological or psychological explanations, preferring to see the sources of conflict in meta-ethical or epistemological features of the human experience (though these are hardly uncontroversial). So several theorists have arrived at the centrality of conflict via the plural and incommensurable nature of human values (Gray, 2000; McCabe, 2010), the relational yet exclusionary nature of social identities which necessarily engender resistance and struggle (Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 2005), or the inherent epistemic limitations of human rationality which lead people to different and conflicting moral and political positions even when using their reason in a sincere and genuine manner (Geuss, 2008; Waldron, 1999).

Despite these varying accounts of the origins of this conflict, realists agree that the prevalence of disagreement gives the political a particularly agonistic character. Politics takes place in conditions of ineradicable conflict and is hence a site of perpetual struggle for power and dominance. Yet politics is also the activity through which such struggles are contained in a manner that prevents them from descending into war by providing the mechanisms and procedures through which political settlements can be reached. Chief amongst these is the provision of authoritative order that settles by law what cannot be settled by reason or morality. Appeals to morality will be unable to resolve the questions of politics for the very reason that many of our moral disagreements, especially our conflicting notions of what values or ends should be pursued both individually and collectively, are part of the context of conflict and struggle which politics responds to. We disagree about morality; in part that is why we need politics. Likewise the appeal to reason is deeply problematic both because reason is taken to significantly underdetermine moral and political questions and hence cannot authoritatively settle disputes (either it is unable to offer anything other than very local solutions to the incommensurability of values or the epistemic limitations of human reason ensure that persons can reach differing yet nevertheless still rational normative positions), but also because rationality only provides a partial account of the motivations and reasons that move humans to action.

Confidence in the capacity of practical reason to significantly restrain self-interest and direct us towards common goals seems misplaced in light of the limited motivational powers of reason, and seems to exclude completely the important role of the passions and emotions (anger, love, hatred, loyalty, the desire to dominate others, etc.) which always have the potential to disrupt any settlement or order. Any attempt to settle political questions by replacing or tempering such emotions with reason, or by ignoring them completely, is likely to fail precisely because politics is not a realm dominated by reason or populated by fully rational actors. The institution of a political authority that can provide commonly binding decisions through law, with the legitimate right to employ coercion to ensure obedience with those decisions where necessary, is thus of paramount concern.

The provision of a form of political authority addresses what Bernard Williams called the 'first political question' of securing 'order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions of cooperation' (2005, p. 3). This does not mean that just any response will be a sufficient answer to the first political question. While the political is indeed a sphere of conflict and the struggle for power, politics is not merely a realm of unmediated brute coercion. One of the central truths of politics is that there is a difference between the ability to rule and the right to do so, that might does not equal right, that politics is not the same as successful domination. Any claim to be ruling *politically* will need to make some appeal to the principled grounds on which such rule is exercised, principles that should be intelligible to both the rulers and ruled such that it can be recognised as a form of politics rather than simply domination (Philp, 2010, p. 471; Philp, 2007, p. 56; Sleat, 2013, ch. 5; Williams, 2005, p. 5-6, 23, 135-6). This is the truth in Hume's remark (1994, p.16) that it is 'on opinion only that government is founded'; while governments will need to employ force in order to rule, it cannot rule through force alone. Power does not self-justify and hence any form of rule that is properly speaking political must be appropriately legitimated.

The processes of bringing order to conflict through authoritative rule realism insists are part of what makes the political a distinct sphere of human activity, one which addresses its own unique set of concerns regarding the first political question and through the employment of a distinctive set of means (e.g. power, legitimation, authority). While this can often be somewhat overstated as demonstrating the 'autonomy of the political' from all other domains, morality, economics, law, etc., such that politics has its own completely unique internal logic (see Scheuerman, 2013), the claim is better stated that there must be *some* space within a theoretical account of politics that can recognise the distinctiveness of the political sphere, that it does have its own character, purposes and means, while also acknowledging that it sits in a series of complex relationships with other human activities. What realism rejects is any understanding of politics in which the distinctiveness of politics is overlooked. Most often this has been expressed in terms of avoiding forms of political moralism that give 'priority of the moral over the political' (2005, p.2). By this Williams meant that moralist theories, of which he took utilitarianism and the work of John Rawls to be exemplars, either make politics 'the instrument of the moral' in which its role is to enact principles, concepts and ideals formulated by political theory in practice, or places moral constraints upon what politics can rightfully do (2005, p. 1-2). In either case morality has antecedent authority over the content and limits of politics. Raymond Geuss makes a similar complaint about what he calls 'politics as "applied ethics"', by which he means a 'specific view about the nature and structure of ethical judgement and its relation to politics, and in

particular a theory about where one should *start* in studying politics, what the final framework for studying politics is, what it is reasonable to focus on, and what is possible to abstract from' (2008, p. 6). In particular Geuss objects to the notion that theorists should begin by completing the ethical work of discovering the 'ideal theory' that tells us how we should act, and then seek to apply that theory to the action of political agents (2008, p. 8). Realism need not reject that politics has any relationship with morality or moral concerns, but what it must disavow is the notion that politics can be fully understood in terms of moral first principles (and, indeed, the full complexity of the relationship between politics and morality cannot be appreciated if the distinctiveness of the political is not acknowledged). An appropriately *political* theory must be sensitive to the concerns, content and materials of politics itself.

Though brief, even this quick survey allows us to identify several general features of a realist conception of politics. It assumes that politics cannot be reduced to any other sphere of human activity, nor that any other sphere has antecedent authority over the political, especially not morality though it is also deeply sceptical about the limited role of reason in politics. Disagreement and conflict, including about politics itself, are constitutive of the political insofar as they provide the ineradicable circumstances in which the need for politics and its unique concerns regarding stability and authoritative order arise. That such disagreement is permanent ensures that power and the ability to coercively impose the will of one group (the rulers) on others (the ruled) where required is a necessary component of politics also, indeed the first question that politics must address. But politics cannot just be imposition through coercion. Hence legitimacy becomes a, if not the, central *political* concept because it ensures that politics is not merely a relationship of brute domination but represents an activity that generates order and stability through the provision of authoritative and commonly binding decisions in conditions of disagreement.

Realism is not necessarily antithetical or hostile to liberal *politics*. There is nothing in the realist conception of politics which must inevitably lead to the rejection of liberal institutions, practices or values. Indeed, several realists have tried to recast liberalism in realist terms as a particular response to the problem of securing order and stability in conditions of conflict. Though not necessarily a realist herself (see Forrester, 2012), Judith Shklar's 'liberalism of fear' (1998) has been particularly influential in this regard, not least on the work of Bernard Williams (2005). Others have attempted to develop *modus vivendi* liberalisms in which liberal political frameworks are understood as compromises reached between persons with radically different political ideals (Gray, 2000; Horton, 2010; McCabe, 2010), or theories of 'liberal realism' (Sleat, 2013) in which liberalism is reconceived as a hegemonic project conscious of its deeply contested and political nature and its relationships of domination over those that reject fundamental liberal values. It is true that there are some realists who do reject liberal politics; here Chantal Mouffe's Schmittian theory of agonistic democracy is particularly illuminating (Mouffe, 2005), as is Raymond Geuss' more critical realism (though his own political position is more ambiguous). But nevertheless, most recent work on political realism has not sought to undermine liberal politics via its critique of liberal theory.

Yet what realism must necessarily reject are those *theories* of liberal politics that share at least one of two features, both of which are purported to be present in the neo-Kantian liberalism exemplified by Rawls and his followers. The first of these is an assumption that the



function of politics is to resolve conflict, to 'meet the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of certain political basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority. Doing this takes those guarantees off the political agenda' (Rawls, 1996, p. 161). Such resolution has often been sought by discovering those principles or constitutional essentials that are acceptable to all those subject to them (Rawls, 1996, p. 137). Political activity, properly speaking, hence takes place within the confines of or with reference to principles and values that are or can be represented as the subject of universal agreement. Such a harmonious view of the nature of politics fails to take seriously the extent to which disagreement and conflict, including about the fundamental terms of our political association, are ineradicable features of political life in the context of which political action must still take place. This is why several realists have charged liberalism as failing to have a theory of politics at all, rather by focusing on agreement and consensus it seeks to 'displace' (Honig, 1993), 'repudiate' (Morgenthau, 1946, p. 75) or 'abolish' (Gray, 1995, p. 76) politics, or provide an account in which the disagreements and conflict that politics responds to have been resolved once and for all (Newey, 2001). In assuming the possibility of an actual or hypothetical consensus on political principles and values, which allows all persons to live according to laws that they are in some important sense the authors of, liberal political theory is simply not a theory of *politics* at all (for this general critique see also Schmitt, 1996; Sleat, 2011; Stears 2007). The second feature of a liberal conception of politics (indeed any conception of politics) that realism must necessarily reject is the attempt to make the moral prior to the political by insisting that its content (the ends to which it should be directed) and/or limits (which political actions are permissible) are given by a set of pre-political moral values and principles, e.g. rights, autonomy, freedom, etc., that are taken to have antecedent authority over it. While realism certainly does not refute that morality plays any role in political life (for clearly it does), to reduce politics to 'applied ethics', or to circumscribe rightful political action through morality is to miss the extent with which politics is a distinct sphere of human activity with its own character and nature that while related to morality is neither reducible to it, nor are its content and limits exhausted by the demands that morality might make of it.

From the perspective of the realist conception of politics, liberal theory fails to be sufficiently political: either it does not adequately recognising the extent to which politics is an autonomous human activity or it overlooks the extent to which politics is characterised by political disagreement and conflict rather than harmony and consensus. The essential claim is not that liberalism is too ideal - lacking a sufficient regards for the facts such that its normative recommendations cannot be put into practice - but that it fails to properly comprehend the real or proper nature of politics. Realism's disagreements with liberalism are therefore best understood as conceptual rather than methodological. They turn on their alternative accounts of the nature, content and limits of politics. They are not methodological differences that take place within a shared (liberal) account of the political. They stand as rival accounts of the political. This means that realism cannot be synonymous with non-ideal theory because that, as we have seen, is a set of concerns that are situated within liberal theory. Nor can realism be properly or fully understood as a corrective to the excesses of ideal theorising, for again realism is a distinct conception of politics in its own right. While it might challenge liberal theory (as we shall explore in more detail in the following section), it does so from an external perspective of a distinct rival conception of politics and not as a part of some imminent critique internal to liberal theory itself.

## Doing Realistic Political Theory

We should expect that if realism and non-ideal theory are not synonymous that though they might proclaim the need for theorists to be more realistic they nevertheless have very different notions of what it is to do more realistic political theorising, the objectives that a more realistic theory should pursue and the constraints under which it must work. For non-ideal theory, the problem with contemporary liberal theory is that its insufficient regard for the facts has impeded its ability to fulfil its normative ambition of providing guidance for political action and reform. Greater concern for the facts, either in relation to implementing the recommendations of ideal theory in the real (non-ideal) world or through incorporating those facts into normative theorising itself, will produce a theory more suited to guiding action here and now. The more salient facts one incorporates, the more realistic the theory will be. Realist thought, on the other hand, believes that much contemporary liberal theory has assumed a flawed conception of the political, one in which the conflict that is constitutive of the political is overcome through appealing either to moral values that have antecedent over politics or through the use of reason to identify principles of co-existence that all persons should rationally endorse. A more realistic theory accepts the fact that conflict is ubiquitous in human life, that it can never be permanently overcome though it is the role of politics to provide an authoritative order that prevents such conflict from descending into chaos and anarchy. And while morality is clearly related to politics (as are other activities such as law and economics), it is neither reducible to it nor are its aims and objectives exhausted by moral demands.

If non-ideal theory and realism are so clearly distinct, how (we might ask) are we to account for the tendency to elide them? Why have non-ideal theorists thought they were doing realistic political theory, or that realism is a form of non-ideal theory? There are probably two answers to this. The first is that there is undoubtedly something intuitive about the idea that a theory which seeks to closer align the worlds of political theorising and political practice deserves the name realism. And realism is a natural term to oppose either the utopianism or idealism of which contemporary liberal theory is often accused. Yet while there is clearly a sense in which realism makes a claim to being in touch with the realities of political experience, this is not through a greater sensitivity to the facts but through commitment to a different conception of politics. The second answer, and probably the more important, likely relies on a mistaken notion that a theory is realistic if it appropriately attends to those facts which separate our non-ideal social world from the ideal. If this is the case then a non-ideal theorist might argue that conflict is one of the facts of our social world that falls short of the ideal (in which such conflict is absent) and which any full or adequate normative political theory must therefore incorporate.<sup>iv</sup> The central claim of realist thought regarding the permanence of conflict therefore becomes merely one more fact that a non-ideal theory needs to take seriously in order to prescribe more action-guiding normative recommendations.

While it is true that conflict is a fact of the social world that political theory needs to take more seriously, acknowledging this within the context of the ideal/non-ideal theory debate and the general liberal conception of politics that it presumes is not enough to make the theory consistent with realist thought. This account assumes that our non-ideal world falls short of the

ideal by lacking certain features, the absence of conflict being chief among them. Yet the circumstances of disagreement and conflict in which the need for political activity arises and in which it takes place are constitutive of politics itself, and hence such circumstances cannot fall short of any *political* ideal. Some may see those circumstances as regrettable from a *moral* perspective (depending on how we account for the origins of conflict), but they cannot strictly speaking be seen as politically non-ideal insofar as they are necessary preconditions of politics itself. Put differently, the ideal from which our non-ideal world deviates cannot be a context in which conflict is conspicuously absent, and to theorise for such a context would be not to engage in *political* theorising at all. It may be (as realists suspect) that the objective of ideal liberal theory is indeed to put an end to politics, and hence some might be satisfied with the position that politics would not feature in an ideal world. But insofar as realism takes conflict to be a ubiquitous aspect of the human experience, politics is going to be permanent also. So this account of how non-ideal theory might incorporate the fact of conflict, and in that manner be realistic, still relies upon a conception of politics that realism steadfastly rejects. It is not enough for a theory to simply accept the fact of conflict in politics in order to count as realist. It must recognise that such conflict is a constitutive element of politics which, once acknowledged, undermines the conception of politics that the ideal/non-ideal theory debate assumes.

Relatedly, realism is going to insist that any political theory which does not appreciate the constitutive nature of conflict in politics and which takes as its main objective to overcome such discord is never going to provide the sort of practicable normative guidance for political actions that it hankers after, regardless of how many salient facts it incorporates. Paying greater attention to 'the facts' effectively misdiagnoses the problem of contemporary ideal liberal theory. 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 it makes will likely still be unsuccessful guides to action insofar as it misunderstands what politics is, the context (opportunities and limitations) under which political decisions are made, and the conditions that determine the success or failure of political actions. The issue is not that such theories will lack factual information relevant to implementing a theory in practice, information that if supplied will make such a theory better action-guiding, but that the theory fails to understand the complex nature of the context of power, struggle, interests and values for which the theory is intended to apply such that further information is unlikely to help augment its potential for successfully guiding political action. It fundamentally misunderstands the political sphere, the problems that it addresses, and the material with which it must work. This is not a question of failing to incorporate enough facts into the normative theory (as Valentini's account of realism suggested), but of failing to properly comprehend the nature of the political.

It is the gap that exists in contemporary liberal thought between the ideal in which conflict is abstracted away and the actual in which conflict is present that (alongside other conditions) generates the specific concerns of non-ideal theory. Such a gap cannot arise in realist thought. Yet issues of practicability still feature in realism, though they do so for reasons other than the deviation of the real from the ideal, and they relate to a different set of problems from those in non-ideal theory (which ensures that realism and non-ideal theory will focus on different research agendas). Central amongst these are concerns regarding how political rule operates where it is a fundamental aim of politics to establish and maintain political (that is to say

legitimate) authority in conditions of discord and when the obedience of those over whom authority is claimed and power exercised is not to be assumed as inevitable. The complex manner in which patterns of authority and legitimacy are forged, sustained and reconstituted, and in particular the related but not necessarily harmonious roles that coercion, agency, principles, norms and values play in these processes, ensures that questions of practicability do not arise once we turn to the possibility of instantiating ideals in practice but are rather raised as soon as we start to consider how the first political question might be answered and continue to be answered (which always has to be a question raised in relation to a specific context). How one employs the monopoly of legitimate violence in conditions where law cannot be represented as reflecting the will of all; what the practical and moral limits of that force may be; the ways in which institutions and practices actually affect people's behaviour and actions; how the mechanisms and processes of legitimation function, including the importance of non-rational features such as charisma, myth and history; which normative principles might plausibly be appealed to that can be recognised as authorising political rule by those subject to it; what minimum level of competency can be tolerated in terms of the ordering of conflict; and which conflicts and differences can and cannot be settled at any one time, and which groups or individuals must be satisfied that such conflicts are settled, all become deeply important issues related to the first political question of creating order and subordinating conflict. Ideal/non-ideal theory assumes that such issues only arise in world that deviate from the ideal, or are secondary questions that we encounter only once we ask how we are to implement ideals in practice. By virtue of their relation to the first political question, realism takes them to be issues inherent in politics itself, and hence necessarily basic to any properly political theory.

Even in those cases where non-ideal theory and realism do focus on similar questions of practicability, their differences ensure that they will have diverging views as to what counts as an appropriate response to these issues. The theorising of legitimacy is a case in point. In the Kantian strand of contemporary liberalism 'the task of discovering the conditions of legitimacy is traditionally conceived as that of finding a way to justify a political system to everyone who is required to live under it ... the search for legitimacy is a search for unanimity' (Nagel, 1991, p.33). Likewise, Waldron wrote that 'a social and political order is illegitimate unless it is rooted in the consent of all those who have to live under it; the consent or agreement of these people is a condition of its being morally permissible to enforce that order against them' (1987, p. 140).<sup>v</sup> But liberals have always been realistic enough (in the non-utopian sense) to acknowledge that actual unanimity is a highly unlikely if not impossible prospect in human life, at least not without exercising the sort of relentless and overwhelming oppressive power that represents a major threat to individual liberty. So the conditions of legitimacy are amended (or their practical demands relaxed) in such a way that they become realisable in non-ideal conditions of disagreement and conflict though realise the same normative requirements of representing unanimity. Very broadly, that a conception can be *represented* as something that all persons could accept, even if they currently do not, or as Kant put it, 'even if the people is at present in such a position or attitude of mind that it would probably refuse its consent if it were consulted' (1999, p.79), is sufficient for the purposes of legitimacy (see Rawls, 1999, p. 12).<sup>vi</sup> A central challenge of contemporary liberal thought has been to show which political institutions, practices or principles, if any, can be represented as the focus of such a hypothetical consensus.

It is the strategy of 'relax[ing] the exorbitant demands of unanimity', as Manin put it (1987, p. 340), that is important to us here, for it is a clear instance in which the ideal normative requirements of legitimacy, i.e. actual unanimity, have been amended in light of factual constraints of the (non-ideal) real world, in this case the unlikely prospect of any order enjoying the consent of all those over whom it rules.<sup>viii</sup> Such a strategy is understandable in light of the fundamental liberal commitment to respecting all individuals as free and equal, hence political power must arise from and represent the will of all (see Manin, 1987, p. 340-1). It is not a commitment that liberal theory could therefore simply abandon in response to criticisms that actual political unanimity is deeply unrealistic or overly utopian, for if that were true and there is nothing more that can be said, then it would say something important yet deeply depressing about the possibility of freedom and equality in modernity.

As we have seen, the demand for legitimacy arises within realist thought as inherent in any claim to rule politically rather than through brute coercion. For reasons that are hopefully now clear, realism would reject universal consent as a condition of political legitimacy as it would be a contradiction to say that only political orders that are unanimously endorsed or endorsable are legitimate for, even if that were a realistic possibility, they would not be *political* orders at all. Unanimity cannot even be an ideal requirement of political legitimacy not because it is utopian to think that such consensus is possible in our non-ideal world but because unanimity is a denial of the conditions in which the need for politics arises and in which political activity takes place. As such the appropriate response to the question of legitimating power despite ongoing existent disagreement is not to try and find theoretical means of representing political orders as representing the will of all, but to deny that unanimity, actual or hypothetical, is a condition of legitimacy at all. The legitimation of power must take place in ongoing conditions of conflict, including of disagreement that the political order is legitimate at all, and amongst the very relationships of power, rule and coercion that require legitimation. Exactly what the legitimation of a political order requires is a matter of disagreement amongst realists, and there are several avenues currently being explored (see, for example, Beetham, 1991; Horton, 2012; Horton, 2010; Mason, 2010; Mouffe, 2005; Newey, 2010; Philp, 2012; Sleat, 2012; Rossi, 2012; Rossi, 2010; Waldron, 1999; Williams, 2005), including whether the commitment to freedom and equality that underpins the liberal principle of legitimacy can be realised within a realist conception of politics that rejects the possibility of unanimity (Sleat, 2013). In many ways, and given the significance of legitimacy to much realist thought, the question of whether a coherent and plausible account of realist legitimacy can be developed is likely to be crucial in determining whether realism represents a viable alternative form of political theorising in its own right. But what is crucial for our purposes is the fact that a realist account of legitimacy cannot simply amend the condition of unanimity but must reject that political legitimation demands universal consent at all (hypothetical or actual). Hence the manner in which we theorise legitimacy, and what would constitute an appropriate theory of how power is legitimated, differs in realism and non-ideal theory as a direct result of their competing accounts of politics.

## Conclusion

The subtitle of this paper asks whether there are two ways to do realistic political theory. In part this question was posed because of the increasing tendency to assume that the recent debates surrounding political realism and non-ideal theory are effectively synonymous insofar as they are united in their general critique of contemporary liberal theory as out of touch with reality. I hope to have shown that this is not the case and that they actually represent two very different analyses and evaluations of what is problematic in much recent liberal thought. But this then poses the question as to whether non-ideal theory qualifies as a distinct but related form of realist thought. Though very little ever really hangs on the question of what name one uses to describe a theory (though it often plays an important rhetorical function - 'realist' political theory being a case in point), what I have sought to do here is demonstrate that non-ideal theory remains tied to a conception of politics that stands in stark contrast to the realist understanding of the political and which relies upon a set of assumptions about the ambitions of politics and political theory that realism rejects. And insofar as that is true, they also point to two different and competing ways of rescuing contemporary political theory from its unrealistic shortcomings.

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<sup>i</sup> It is worth noting from the outset that it is not within the remit of this paper to examine the validity of either non-ideal theory or political realism's critiques of liberal theory, or, maybe more interestingly, to assess their characterisations of liberal theory. Very significant questions have been raised (and still require further exploration) as to how far both correctly characterise the nature and objectives of contemporary liberal theory, and specifically in relation to realism the extent to which it focuses too much of its critical attention on a very specific and in many ways non-typical neo-Kantian form of liberalism at the expense of other liberal theories which might not be liable to the same alleged shortcomings and difficulties. These are important issues that are being investigated elsewhere, but not ones immediately relevant to the focus of this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> The only exception to this that I am aware of is Mills (2005) for whom ideal liberal theory is a form of ideology that masks the true inequalities and injustices within society.

<sup>iii</sup> For two excellent interpretations of Hume as both a realist and a liberal see Sabl (2012) and Whelen (2004)

<sup>iv</sup> Something like this can be found in the manner in which Rawls thought about the division of labour in political theory: the aim of the 'ideal' part is to define a standard of social interaction (justice) for conditions that are favourable to coexisting on just terms. These conditions he assumed include strict compliance where everybody knows, endorses and abides by the same principles of justice. The second, 'non-ideal', part, which we turn to after we have completed the inquiries of ideal theory, attends to those questions that arise when those conditions are not present, which includes conditions of non-compliance where persons might as a matter of fact reject the regulative conception of justice or, for whatever reason, fail to be adequately motivated to obey its demands (Rawls, 1999, p. 216).

<sup>v</sup> For other statements of this liberal account of legitimacy see Hampton, 1998, p. 180; Manin, 1987; Rawls, 1996, p. 224; Rawls, 2007, p. 13.

<sup>vi</sup> Bernard Manin (1987) has explored the alternative, but potentially related, strategy pursued by Sieyès and Rousseau in light of the difficulty of reconciling the requirement of unanimity with the practical necessities of political life of demonstrating how a majority of actual consent can be considered as equivalent as universal agreement.

<sup>vii</sup> Though A. John Simmons (1999) has argued that if Rawls really was motivated by an ideal of a fully voluntary society then rather than adopting a form of 'quasi-voluntariness' in the face of the facts of political life he should have been 'interested in restructuring political societies so as to make the choice of membership (or nonmembership) as voluntary at least as circumstances would permit' (p. 761).