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Painted Scenes’ or ‘Empty Pageants’? Superficiality and Depth in Realist Political Thought

In his seminal paper, *Realism in Political Theory*, William Galston identifies the (re)emergence of an alternative approach to political philosophising, captured by the term ‘political realism’ – a ‘dissenting movement’ against the dominant mode of political philosophising (Galston 2010, 386) which is steeped in Platonism, and which propounds a monistic vision of perfection and harmony (see also Geuss 2008; 2015; 2020; Raekstad 2015; Sabl and Sagar 2017; Vogler and Tillyris 2019). ‘The place for political realism’, Mark Philp writes, ‘has been inscribed in political philosophy since Plato first distinguished between cave and sunlight, with realists being committed to bringing political theory out of the sun’, drawing our attention to the ‘grubby exigencies of the political cave’ (2012 2, 18). Political philosophy, realists emphasise, should be realistic: it should resist Plato’s moralism and pay attention to the realities of politics¹.

Though obviously appropriate, the realist injunction to attend to the ‘realities of politics’ when we do political philosophy, is platitudinous and – despite the recent explosion of

¹ Realist sources of anti-moralism are numerous but elaborating these is beyond the paper’s remit. We focus on its contemporary proponents, understood as resisting ‘the authority of moral philosophy in the discipline of politics’ (Philp 2012, 3). Whilst the “realism” discussed here follows canonical accounts which distinguish between realism in political thought and realism in international relations (Rossi and Sleat 2014), these two traditions need not be incompatible altogether (see McQueen 2018; 2020). Yet, exploring these connections is not essential for our purposes.

interest in realist thought – remains quite mystifying². With few exceptions, most philosophers are, at *some* level, interested in the realities of politics; or, in reverse, few philosophers admit no interest in these. Even Plato, in *The Republic*, denounces works of literature and poetry for their tendency to ‘create phantasms not reality’ – to misconstrue *real* life and supplant the truth with illusion (1974, 599a). As a prominent contemporary realist concedes: ‘it is hard to be against “being realistic”’ (Geuss 2008, 59). But the tricky question is what *being realistic means* in the first place – *what reality is*, and what it means to *engage with* it. In this paper, we want to get at just one aspect of this question (there are, we believe, several aspects).

The issue that interests us is captured by the two leading characters in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian Gray is a realist in a straightforward sense³. Inspired by Lord Henry’s insistence that it is ‘only shallow people who do not judge by appearances’, Dorian Gray demands that we take seriously the surface appearances of everyday life: ‘The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible’ (Wilde 2007, 28). In Gray’s view, apprehending reality entails that we should *first* pay attention to that which is

² For instance, this issue – though persistent throughout realism –, is epitomised by Geuss’s *Reality and its Dreams* and Matt Sleat’s *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, which, their commitment to taking reality seriously notwithstanding, neglect the questions and problems we identify. See Edyvane (2020).

³ Dorian Gray is also an aesthete. While there exist interesting connections between aestheticism and Dorian Gray realism, we do not pursue them here. Our appeals to ‘Dorian Gray/Sibyl Vane realism’ serve as shorthand for the positions we delineate, *not* as an exegesis of Wilde’s novel.

directly disclosed by our senses. For Dorian Gray, Wilde (2007, 115) writes, 'No theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared with life itself. He felt keenly conscious of how barren all intellectual speculation is when separated from action and experiment. He knew that the senses, no less than the soul, have their spiritual mysteries to reveal'. Serious intellectual thought must, on this view, *begin from* the reality with which it is immediately confronted. But Dorian Gray is not the only realist in Wilde's tale. His love interest, the actress Sibyl Vane, is a realist too, but of a different stripe. In the novel, Sibyl Vane explains how she lost her will to act, upon coming to see the theatre as a *distortion* of reality:

The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. You came – oh, my beautiful love! – and, you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. To-night, for the first time ..., I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played (Wilde 2007, 77).

Sibyl Vane also stresses the importance of attending to what is real. But, in her view, reality resides *beneath* the semblances of everyday life, the 'empty pageant' we play.

The contrast here is striking. In Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane we find the representatives of two distinct conceptions of realism, each of which corresponds to two distinct accounts of reality and of what it means to engage with it. For the Dorian Gray-style realist, engaging with reality entails beginning from *the surface of human life* – the direct objects of perception, readily available to our senses. For the Sibyl Vane-style realist, by contrast, the direct objects of perception are a fraudulent sham – false appearances which distort

or mask reality. For the Sibyl Vane-style realist, engaging with reality entails beginning from *the hidden depths of human life*, by ‘unmasking’ its surface appearances. This simple distinction between surface and depth – a notorious distinction in the history of philosophy –, forces a question which contemporary realist thought has insufficiently entertained: to insist that we should take the realities of politics seriously is fine and well, but where *exactly* should we seek these⁴? On *or* beneath the surface? Of Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane, it is imperative that we ask: who is the realist?

⁴ To be sure, in rejecting ‘political moralism’ (Williams 2002), ‘high-liberalism’ (Galston 2010), ‘the ethics first’ or ‘applied ethics’ approach (Geuss 2008; Rossi & Sleat 2014), realists identify various more specific ways in which political thought should be realist – e.g. attending to real facts and the real social, political, economic, historical and ethnographical context; being concerned with actual institutions and practices and the way in which these really operate; taking conflict seriously; and, focusing on the real sources of human motivation and action (see Geuss 2005; 2008; 2015; Rossi & Sleat 2014, Galston 2010, Raekstad 2015, Williams 2002; for a more detailed taxonomy of realist thought, see Rossi 2019). What unites a large portion of these insights and appeals to political reality which engulf these though, is that they are broadly consistent with both Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane styles of realism. Put simply, everything depends on what political reality is, and what it means to engage with it in the first place – what it means to attend to real facts, and to the reality of the social, political, economic, historical and ethnographical context; what it means to be concerned with actual social, political, economic and religious institutions and practices, and the way in which these really operate; what it means to take conflict seriously and attend to ‘what really does move human beings to act’, to use Geuss’s (2008, 9) words.

The example is suggestive of the poverty of the rhetoric of the realist turn. The blank acceptance of the realist vocabulary has enabled us to overlook the distinction between the aforementioned styles of realism and has sown confusion about where, exactly, the precise distinctiveness of realism lies⁵. By drawing on the unsystematically explored realist insights of Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, and Hannah Arendt, this paper elaborates this neglected distinction, and considers its implications for the realist project. Specifically, we seek to illustrate how that distinction reveals some important tensions within realist thought and, in so doing, to go some way towards untangling and addressing these.

⁵ That the distinctiveness of realism remains somewhat unclear is a well-documented issue in realist scholarship. As Andrew Sabl and Rahul Sagar note, ‘realism was often unclear as to what it was actually aiming at’, as its proponents have spent more time critiquing moralism ‘than doing “realist theory”’: ‘Eager to escape the Rawlsian camp, many realists understandably cared more about justifying the exodus ... than about which path out they took (2017, 270; see also Horton 2010, Hall 2015, Baderin 2014, Vogler & Tillyris 2019, Freedden 2018, Rossi 2019, Cross 2021). Though some of the issues we explore partly arise from the complexity of the realist tradition (see Freedden 2012, Rossi, 2019, Cross 2021), our analysis transcends such diagnoses. Imprecision and uncertainty about political reality, we argue, does not just hinder the development of a coherent realist alternative, but also muddies the waters of the realist critique of moralism and casts doubt on the coherence of the very notion of ‘a realist family’.

The discussion proceeds as follows. In the first section, we say a little more about the distinction between Sibyl Vane and Dorian Gray-style realism by locating it within the context of a prominent realist critique of moralism. In the second section, we elaborate the implications of this distinction for a particular strand of realism, owed to Raymond Geuss and his heirs. Whilst Geussian realists appeal to Dorian Gray-style realism when challenging the Platonic/moralist tendencies of contemporary philosophy, their endeavour to address the unsystematically theorised question of what a more affirmative realist philosophising might entail is infused with Sibyl Vane-style realist rhetoric, at the core which lies a residual Platonism/moralism. Unmasking surface appearances and beginning from the hidden depths of public life, we argue, is akin to beginning from the 'sunlight'. At best, this recognition casts doubt on the internal coherence of such realist accounts: the positive accounts of realism proposed run the risk of collapsing into the moralist/Platonist vision they profess to evade. At worst, such accounts might have serious, indeed disastrous, political implications – they bear the potential for a moralist fervour to mould the world to the extra-terrestrial substantive vision that lies beyond the masks of appearances and, might, thereby jeopardise certain political goods cherished by realist thought: a modicum of order and security. In the third section, we sketch the contours of what a more affirmative, fully-blooded Dorian Gray-style realism might entail. In particular, we highlight two directions which realist scholarship can pursue in its endeavour to offer a more meaningful alternative to moralism: i) a rejection of scientism and an emphasis on the Vichian notion of *fantasia* – a specific kind of knowledge which does not merely entail historical awareness but also sensitivity to philology; and, ii) an emphasis on suffering and injustice as a basis for critique and for building a suitable political sphere.

Before proceeding any further, we should note that we do not wish to offer an all-encompassing vindication of one style of realism *per se*. Debates about surface and depth are longstanding in the history of philosophy and we do not expect to resolve these here (or, anywhere else). Whilst we lean towards what we call Dorian Gray-style realism, our purpose is to explore how the distinction between Sibyl Vane and Dorian Gray-style realism exposes certain neglected contradictions and incoherencies within the realist camp – contradictions and incoherencies which realists, concerned as they are with reality on the one hand, and with expunging Plato’s ghost on the other, should be alive to. Further, we do not wish to suggest that contemporary realist thought *in toto* fails to distinguish between these two conceptions of reality and succumbs to Platonist temptations we identify (see Prinz and Rossi 2017, Rossi 2019, Honig and Stears 2011, Freedman 2012, 2018). Finally, though most realists fail to pay sufficient attention to the distinction between these two styles of realism, our discussion uncovers an overlooked schism within realist thought which casts further doubt on the tendency to portray realism as a coherent tradition which promotes a ‘common perspective’ (*pace* Sigwart 2013, 409; Galston 2010; Philp 2012; Sleat 2018, see also Rossi 2019, Cross, 2021): between contemporary realists whose accounts comprise a melange of contradictory elements (e.g. Raymond Geuss, Hans-Jörg Sigwart, Duncan Bell, and William Scheuerman) and which are prone to the problems we highlight, and philosophers who, by virtue of their rejection of monism, can be labelled as realists⁶ (e.g. Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, Hannah Arendt), but whose neglected insights into reality reveal that they are more attuned to the nuances of engaging with it. The latter seem unlikely allies. For, Berlin’s and Hampshire’s well-known friendship was unified by a shared antipathy towards

⁶ See Horton (2010), Tillyris (2019), and Vogler and Tillyris (2019).

Arendt. Elaborating on the differences between these thinkers is beyond the paper's remit. However, by putting some flesh on the bones of their unsystematic insights into political reality, we want to suggest that their thought converges towards a consistent rejection of Sibyl Vane-style realism on the one hand, and to an adherence to Dorian Gray-style realism on the other. Such points of convergence are innately valuable for the realist turn; for, they enable us to clarify and enrich the realist critique of moralism, and to lay the foundations on which a more positive, coherent realist alternative might be developed – an alternative which resists the conservative impulses with which realism is often associated (Finlayson 2017, Markell 2010; c.f. McQueen 2018, Rossi 2019), and which contributes to the recent project of reclaiming the radical potential of political realism without perpetuating moralistic fantasies (Honig and Stears 2011, Prinz 2016, Raekstad 2016, Prinz and Rossi 2017, Cross 2020).

The Realism of Surface versus the Realism of Depth: A Preliminary Consideration

The tension between the two rival approaches to reality sketched in the introduction of the paper, is captured most vividly in Berlin's (1976; 1996; 2000) writings on Karl Marx and Giambattista Vico who – though in agreement that sound philosophising should take a particular society and men as they *really* are –, articulate two radically distinct conceptions of reality, each of which constitutes a specific manifestation of Sibyl Vane-style realism – what we may term the *realism of depth* – and Dorian Gray-style realism – what we may term the *realism of surface*⁷ – respectively. Berlin's reading of Marx and Vico

⁷ Whilst we focus on Vico and Marx, the Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane styles also correspond to Berlin's (2002a) negative and positive liberty. Indeed, Berlin's writings provide a list of thinkers belonging in each style: Heraclitus, Herder, Machiavelli, and Tolstoy can be

is controversial, and it is not our intention to defend it here. Though we cannot delve at great length into Berlin's exposition, we wish to suggest that the sharp juxtaposition between Vico's and Marx's accounts which emerges from his work can serve as a fruitful starting point for elaborating on the aforementioned styles of realism, and their implications for the realist turn.

Echoing Arendt's (1953b, 129) suggestion that Marx conceives of speech as "ideological" talk whose chief function is to conceal the truth', Berlin (1996, 132) argues that Marx's thought discounts the surface appearances of public life as *distortions* of reality: 'the outlook, beliefs, ideals, institutions, cultures, religions of men' are *never* what they seem to be; they are 'part and parcel of the historical situation' which 'is conditioned by the development of productive forces'. Hence, 'beliefs and institutions' are 'conscious or unconscious falsifications of reality – various kinds of degrees of self-illusion, self-deception, or deliberate trickery, designed to prop up the domination of a particular class'. Correspondingly, 'ideals, codes of behaviour are weapons in the struggle' whose *real* purpose is to conceal conflicts beneath the surface; appeals to 'lofty abstractions ... universal human goals masquerade the true 'interests of a particular class' and stupefy those who are not members of it (Berlin 1996, 133). These phenomena can only be properly understood by *first* grappling with that which lies beneath the surface of public life: the hidden economic basis of society, the relationship between the concealed operations of productive forces, power, and human consciousness, and the shrouded laws

classified as Dorian Gray-style realists whereas Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Lenin, and Voltaire dovetail with Sibyl Vane-style realism.

of history (see also Arendt 1953b; Hampshire 2000). To 'show' all these illusory products 'in their true guise', Berlin (1996, 132) writes, is 'to unmask' and "'demystify" them'.

Berlin's Marx and, more broadly, Sibyl Vane-style realism, dovetail with what Paul Ricoeur (1970) terms 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' – the commitment to unmask the illusions of our superficial institutions, actions, and beliefs fuelled by an *a priori*, though hidden, and distorted, conception of reality. We say more on this later on. What we want to emphasise here is that *contra* this style of realism, Berlin's Vico demands that we take the surface appearance of public life seriously:

The creations of man – laws, institutions, religions, rituals, works of art, language, song, rules of conduct ... – are not artificial products created to please ... nor weapons deliberately invented to manipulate or dominate men ... but are natural forms of self-expression, of communication with other human beings ... The myths and fables, the ceremonies, and monuments of early man, according to the view prevalent in Vico's day, were absurd fantasies of helpless primitives, or deliberate inventions designed to delude the masses and secure their obedience to cunning and unscrupulous masters. This he regarded as a fundamental fallacy (Berlin 2000, 13-14).

If correct, Berlin's suggestion that Vico and Marx espouse two rival conceptions of reality, entails that each of these conceptions is also animated by its own distinct account of history and, correspondingly, of social conflict. Whilst Vico and Marx converge to the realist point that fidelity to reality entails fidelity to history and conflict (more on this

later on), Vico does not unmask: his thought flies on the face of Marx's conviction that the surface appearance of history and conflict are 'illusory', ultimately surmountable, and reducible to the hidden operations of power which distort our capacity to apprehend our interests and which prohibit us from realising our *true* selves or history (Berlin 2000; see also Arendt 1979a). Reality *and* history, for Vico are not constellations of camouflaged laws, but are visible from the surface of public life. So, too, are societal conflict and its sources. *Contra* Marx's denunciation of 'language, religious rites, myths, laws, social, religious, juridical institutions' as 'manifestations of false consciousness, and 'false statements about reality', Vico perceives these as 'forms of self-expression' which convey the *real* ideals cherished by members of a *particular* 'way of life' in a *particular* epoch – ideals which render that 'way of life' different from, and incompatible with, others: 'to sing, to dance, to worship ... the institutions which embody these activities ... compose a vision of the world' that is *genuine* and *distinct*: 'the myths and poetry of antiquity embody a vision of the world as authentic as that of Greek philosophy, or Roman law, or the poetry and culture of our own enlightened age (Berlin 1979, 4 – 5).

The Vichian point that engaging with reality entails beginning from the surface of public life sustains the recognition that 'conflict', to use Hampshire's (2000, 51) words, 'is perpetual' – that, our world is characterised by a plurality of different, irreconcilable, and *genuine* ways of life which are not necessarily the product of clouded thinking, irrationality or hidden structural influences and power apparatuses. This recognition does not just depart from Marx's vision of true history and conflict; it also plants a question mark on the plausibility of that vision, by casting doubt on its underlying monism – what Berlin (1990) alternatively terms the Platonic Ideal – and, its extra-terrestrial conception of human consciousness: the conviction that human consciousness

has a convergent property – that, it enables agents to ascend to the common good or certain shared substantive values and to perfectly resolve conflict once-and-for-all; that, ‘true history’ constitutes ‘the ascent of mankind from barbarism to rational organisation’; a drama which, though superficially ridden with ‘tribulations’ and ‘collisions’, culminates into a ‘harmonious whole’, ‘a conflict-free society’, which entails ‘the ultimate resolution of differences’, and in which ‘men are rational, cooperative, virtuous’ (Berlin 1990, 44).

Realist Families and Realist Critiques

Attempts to identify *the* realist approach, realists caution, are destined to fail. As Matt Sleat (2018, 8 – 12) notes, it is ‘wrong to think that there is one realism, even as an approach to thinking about politics’; rather, realism is a ‘family of theories’ united by virtue of their ‘fidelity’ to political reality. Whilst the existence of ‘family resemblances, common concerns, and arguments’, allows us ‘to speak meaningfully of there being a realist countermovement’ to moralism (Sleat 2011, 471), that countermovement embraces disagreement among its members about ‘what politics is “really like”’ and how to respond to the realities of politics (Sleat 2018, 2; see also Galston 2010, Philp 2012, Rossi 2019). This characterisation – nuanced as it might be – nonetheless neglects the deeper kind of difficulty outlined above. For, that difficulty does not merely pertain to the existence of disagreement about *the nature of politics* and how best to respond to it, but rather to a *deeper* metaphysical disagreement about *the nature of (political) reality* in the first place – a disagreement which explodes the conceptual coherence of the notion a ‘realist family’ or ‘countermovement’.

To wit, failure to appreciate the distinction between Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane-style realism, does not merely compromise the realist endeavour to develop a coherent

alternative to moralism, but also renders the realist challenge less pellucid than assumed. To be sure, realists advance several criticisms of political philosophy (see Galston 2010, Philp 2012, Rossi and Sleat 2014, Hall 2015, Vogler and Tillyris 2019, Geuss, 2020), and it is not our intention to elaborate on all of these here. We wish to illustrate, however, how imprecision about reality muddies the waters of a prominent realist objection to moralism – an objection which is thought to be constitutive of the realist turn: the tendency of philosophers to articulate hopeful, abstract, and monistic visions of perfection under the aegis of rational harmony; comprehensive, all-inclusive conceptions of the good and/or justice, captured by a set of substantive ideals upon which rational agents can ascend.

To cut a long story short, realists argue that the image of rational agreement on universal/society-wide substantive ideals (whatever these might be), is inattentive to the complex, conflict-ridden nature of our world – the recognition that individuals embrace different, and antagonistic ideals *and* different, and antagonistic conceptions of the same ideals (see Williams 2002, Galston 2010, Geuss 2008, 2020, Bell 2010, Sigwart 2013). Though correct, the realist mantra that contemporary philosophy effaces conflict seems vague. A breezy reading of the realist scholarship reveals the existence of considerable confusion and disagreement on the way in which we should conceive of conflict. Simplifying somewhat the richness and diversity of realist thought, we can identify two prominent ways in which this realist critique is rehearsed, each of which is couched onto a distinct conception of conflict and of political reality.

The first of these sits neatly with the ideal/non-ideal theory debate, and takes issue only with the *feasibility* of monistic visions: it suggests that whilst perfection under the aegis

of rational harmony might be plausible in theory, the messiness and irrationality of our world is such that that vision cannot be practically realised *tout de suite*⁸ (see Finlayson 2017, Philp 2007, Galston 2010, Estlund 2014, Valentini 2012, Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012, Erman and Moller 2015, McQueen 2018, Sabl and Sagar 2017, Cozzaglio and Favara 2021, Maynard 2021). Objections of this sort, Alice Baderin (2014, 136) writes, are animated by the contention that ‘philosophers are not attentive to real-world political complexities’, ‘the factors that constrain political decision-making here and now’, and ‘difficult questions about whether and how our normative ideals might be realized’. This line of criticism thus appears to align more closely to Sibyl Vane-style realism; for, though seemingly sensitive to the inevitability of *superficial* conflict, realists who espouse this position, – by virtue of their supposition that rational agreement on certain substantive moral ideals and principles need not be implausible – treat conflict as transient and resolvable – a manifestation of our irrationality and/or the pervasiveness of socially constructed dogmas, ideologies and prejudices – and, not as constitutive of political reality-proper. On this account, political reality does not lie on the surface of public life, the world of ‘mere appearances’, its constraints on political decision-making and political action notwithstanding but, rather, in the hidden depths of public life – the minds of

⁸ Bernard Williams, though usually associated with the view that pluralism and conflict are perpetual, also comes close to this position. As he notes ‘perhaps toleration will prove to have been an interim value, serving a period between a past when no one had heard of it and a future when no one will need it’ (Williams 1996, 26). On this point, see Edyvane (2019)

individuals: the properties of reason, the unfettered exercise of which can lead to convergence to the common good and/or certain substantive ideals⁹.

The second version of this objection to moralism, often voiced by the same realists (see Philp 2012, Galston 2010), and a host of others (Geuss 2008, Rossi and Sleat 2014, Sigwart 2013, Bell 2010), appears to dovetail with Dorian Gray-style realism: philosophers, realists who articulate such an objection caution, should refrain ‘from seeking to resolve conflict through theoretical means’ in the first place (Baderin 2014, 136). Such an objection is articulated in different ways and is couched onto different argumentative strategies, each of which leads to a somewhat different strand of realism, each with its specific sources of normativity (Rossi 2019, Cross 2020). Reduced to its essentials, however, this line of criticism appears to begin from the surface of public life: rather than endorsing a sharp distinction between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ (Geuss 2020, 31), and thereby taking issue merely with the feasibility of the monistic vision, realists

⁹ The elision of the ideal/non-ideal theory debate with the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ found in Berlin’s Marx and, as we argue, Geuss’s more positive critical theory-style realism might seem problematic. However, as we elaborate in due course, both approaches – despite important differences between them – appear to contain a residual ‘Platonism’ which is constitutive of ‘the realism of depth’: an underlying monism, and the conviction that there exists a sharp separation between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’. Otherwise put, both approaches, appear to share fragments of what we might crudely term, following Jonathan Floyd, ‘mentalism’: they prioritise or start from ‘patterns in the way that we think’ (or should think), as opposed to ‘patterns in the way that we behave’ (Floyd & Stears 2011, 6; see also Floyd 2011).

who articulate that objection take issue with its conceptual plausibility and the Platonic *theory of knowledge* onto that vision is couched. Monism, Geuss (2015, 4 – 5) writes, is sustained by an erroneous ‘ethics-first’ approach to politics – the conviction that political philosophizing should start from an external moral standpoint, the sunlight. Politics is thus problematically reduced to ‘matter of knowing the ethical truth about the world’; and, ‘to have this knowledge’ requires one ‘to have a grasp of eternal verities, which should be ‘first stripped’ from the superficial ‘accidents of empirical existence and of history’ – the cave. The trouble with monistic visions is that they start from the wrong premises and displace the surface appearances of public life: a ‘danger in using highly abstractive methods’, is that ‘one will succeed merely in generalizing one’s own local prejudices and repackaging them as demands of reason’ (Geuss 2005, 38). Such visions do not just amount to philosophical *hubris*; rather, as Geuss explains in his more recent critique of the Enlightenment in *Who Needs a World View?*, they also have disquieting political implications. What is paradoxical of such visions is that whilst they purport to be ‘indefatigable’ enemies of ‘prejudice’ and ‘rigid dogma’, they tend to ‘be themselves caught up inextricably in “dogmas” of their own’: ‘the conception of “reason” to which many of the major figures of the Enlightenment were most attached was almost as inflexible and dogmatic as the theological doctrines of the established Churches they so vigorously rejected’ (Geuss 2020, 55 – 56, see also Geuss 2010).

Thus far, we have offered a sketch of Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane styles of realism. In doing so, we suggested that inattentiveness to the distinction between these two styles of realism casts doubt on the coherence of the notion of a realist countermovement and renders the realist tent unappealingly broad and mystifying. This much is conceded by Geuss (2008, 59): ‘one might worry’, he writes, ‘that realism’ is ‘so broadly construed as

to be vacuous, excluding nothing'. Geuss's concession, it would appear, yields a straightforward conclusion: if realists wish to avoid incoherence, they should, at least, clarify the conception of reality they espouse, and refrain from equivocating or oscillating between Sibyl Vane and Dorian Gray-style realism. In what follows, however, we question the suitability of Sibyl Vane-style realism as a coherent alternative to moralism. In so doing, we uncover a stark contradiction at the heart of Geussian realism which epitomises some of the aforementioned pathologies of realist thought.

Against the Realism of Depth

The suggestion that Geuss's thought oscillates between Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane realism, seems *prima facie* problematic. Not only is Geuss's (2020) more recent work animated by an attentiveness to the nuances of engaging with political reality, but, as gestured, his critique of contemporary political philosophy commences from the surface of public life and history, and plants a question mark on the conceptual plausibility and attractiveness of moralist visions (see Raekstad 2015, Prinz 2016, Honig and Stears 2011, McQueen 2018, Scheuerman 2018). However, we want to suggest that whilst Geuss's negative project – his critique of moralism – is predominantly rehearsed from a Dorian Gray-style realist standpoint, his more positive account – the endeavour to articulate a more affirmative realism, found in his earlier work –, is infused with Sibyl Vane-style realist rhetoric, at the core of which lies the Platonic theory of knowledge which Geuss, the Dorian Gray-style realist critic of moralism, rails against.

What is frequently remarked but insufficiently explored in realist scholarship is that Geuss is an intellectual child of the Marxist tradition – the Frankfurt School and critical theory. One can hear loud and clear Geuss the critical theorist and author of *The Idea of a*

Critical Theory. Habermas & the Frankfurt School, when Geuss (2008, 99) the realist and author of *Philosophy and Real Politics*, asserts that: ‘a serious understanding of politics’, requires political philosophers to ‘embrace the “realist” view’ or ‘neo-Leninism’. A constitutive feature of realism, Geuss (2008, 51 – 52) contends, is the key insight of ‘the theory of ideology’: that, ‘the existence of specific power relations in society will produce an appearance of a particular kind’. ‘Power’, Geuss notes is ‘not so easily visible’: it can be ‘used indirectly to shape opinions, attitudes and desires, and manufacture what looks like “consent”’. Echoing Sibyl Vane’s conviction that we should not be duped by appearances, Geuss (2008, 11; 53) surmises that realism should ‘distinguish between a correct conception of the world and illusion’. That realist philosophising should commence from the depths of public life is advanced more vigorously in *A World Without Why*, in which Geuss (2014, 140) emphasises that ‘the truth is down in the well’: ‘it does not lie there in the sun waiting to be observed by anyone who glances in its general direction’. ‘What is “out there”’, Geuss (2014, 140) elaborates, is a melange of ‘misperceptions, indifferent appearance and illusion that needs to be seriously processed before one can accept it as real’. Apprehending reality requires one to ‘extract it’: ‘to see and recognise the truth requires the exercise of some systematic violence on the inchoate and formless mass of undifferentiated appearance, wishful thinking, fantasy and half-truth in which we live most of our lives’.

On Geuss’s account then, a more affirmative realism is akin to critical theory: just like critical theory seeks to ‘free agents from coercion’ – partly ‘self-imposed’, and partly imposed by various hidden structures and power apparatuses which ‘prevent agents in society from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests’ (Geuss 1981, 2 – 3) –, a more affirmative realism should ‘play a progressive role in combating ideological

illusion' and 'configurations of power that would otherwise remain hidden'. That quest for emancipation, Geuss contends *a la* Berlin's and Arendt's Marx, can only be achieved via a process of 'unmasking': by "unveiling", and "demystifying" beliefs, phenomena, or objects which are illusory in order to reveal their true guise and real purpose (Geuss 2008, 11; 53).

To be clear, we do not wish to suggest that critical theory as such need be associated with Sibyl Vane-style realism and the problems we highlight (see Sagar 2018, Rossi 2019, Prinz and Rossi 2017). Nor, do we contend that a more positive realism need be concerned only with the task of 'interpretation', to use Michael Freeden's (2012) words, a crude behaviourism, or an uncritical affirmation of the *status quo* [*pace* Markell (2010), and Finlayson (2017)]. For, as we argue, even Dorian Gray-style realism is predicated on the acknowledgement of a distinction and potential discontinuity between inner and outer life, both of which are part and parcel of the world of appearances, and carves sufficient room for critique – what we might term, following Peter Baehr and Craig Gordon (2012), *disclosure*: a type of criticism which is primarily concerned with injustice, and which is sensitive to the substantive worldviews espoused by the inhabitants of the public realm. Yet, this approach should be distinguished from the more affirmative realism espoused by Geuss and his heirs which, via the adoption of an unmasking criticism, runs the risk of discounting the world of appearances and the surface of public life *in toto*.

Geussian Realism and the Perils of Unmasking

The unmasking criticism, Alison McQueen (2018) notes, is not limited within the confines of Geuss's work, but has a prominent place in certain strands or treatments of realism

(see also Valentini 2012, Sleat 2018). For instance, Bell (2010, 104) suggests that realism bears a 'critical dimension ... generated by its ability to unmask the existing dynamics of power relations'. In a similar vein, Scheuerman (2013, 801 – 802) notes that 'realism unmasks the underlying power dynamics operating behind even seemingly fair and impersonal norms and rules'; 'it interrogates even seemingly benign ideals and practices and poses unsettling questions about their beneficiaries'. And, Sigwart (2013, 412) acknowledges realism's 'critical orientation' – 'the philosophical practice of unmasking ... functional "illusions"'.

To label an object or ideology illusory and in need of unmasking is not to deny that that object or ideology has some reality or effect in the world. To deny this would be to deny the need for unmasking that object in the first place. As Geuss writes:

Even illusions can have effects. The realist must take powerful illusions seriously as factors in the world that have whatever motivational power they have ... as something to be understood ... It is no sign of gimlet-eyed realism to deny the enormous real significance of religious practices, beliefs, and institutions in the world ... This, however, does not imply that the cognitive or normative claims made by religious believers have any plausibility (2008, 9-11).

To term an object 'illusory' does not just entail that that object is associated with erroneous claims to universality – a conclusion which Dorian Gray realists endorse (Hampshire 1989; Berlin 1990; Arendt 1998). Rather, 'illusory' objects are fraudulent – *not what they seem to be* – and irrational, defective, or repressive – *not what they ought to*

be (Baehr and Gordon 2012). Though unmasking entails ‘a series of connected techniques, tropes, and images’, illusory objects are seen as shadows of deeper realities – the hidden operations of the mind, the heart, or the soul – and as cloaks of ulterior, often malevolent motives; they are intimately connected with the conviction that ‘ordinary consciousness and quotidian existence’ should not be trusted, that ‘agents are typically blind to their own situation and best interests’, and that ‘domination is the central fact of thought and politics’ (Baehr 2020, 33).

This much appears to follow from realists’ aforementioned allusions to power¹⁰, and Geuss’s unmasking of religion. ‘Rites, rituals, and ceremonies’, Geuss emphasises, are not part of real politics; nor, are they reflective of the real, superficial principles, and commitments of their practitioners. At best, they constitute ‘attempts to deal practically with phenomena that are the locus of extreme states of anxiety’; at worst, religious claims are ‘radically a-rational or irrational’ and ‘wilfully obscurantist’ (Geuss 2005, 138; 151 – 152). Echoing Marx, Geuss (2005, 152) thus denounces religion as a ‘misty creation’ or ‘mere ideology’ (Arendt 1953a, 369), the reality of which stops short in its power to obfuscate: whilst ‘the final demise of religion in Western societies ... has not yet taken place’, he surmises, there is ‘little to congratulate ourselves on this’.

¹⁰ As Freedman (2018, 353) puts it: ‘Geuss’s reference to ideology as “a set of beliefs, attitudes, preferences that are distorted as a result of the operation of specific relations of power” perpetuates the denigrating of both ideology and power in the German intellectual tradition of *Ideologiekritik*’.

It is at this point, however, where Dorian Gray-style realists would object to Geussian, Sibyl Vane-style realism. The objection is captured in Berlin's critique of Marxism:

No faithful member of the Party could possibly trace ideas approved of by Marx to nationalist or theological disputes, unless these things can be 'unmasked' in turn to demonstrate deep social conflict. But the religious wars and disputes ... must surely be taken seriously in themselves; their meaning to the participants must not be ignored (2000, 492).

To adopt Sibyl Vane realism, Berlin cautions, is to 'bend or distort reality into conformity with [our] own wills'. Yet, 'things are as they are, and we do well not to analyse away what makes them uniquely themselves': 'Men should never be blinded by the distorting spectacles of theory to what *they know immediately to be true of themselves*' (Hausheer 1979, xix - xl; our emphasis). This worry also animates Arendt's (1953a; 1953b) critique of sociology – specifically, the category of "function" which she traces to Marx. Sociology, for Arendt, by virtue of its obsessiveness with unmasking, portrays a specific episode or phenomenon into something which they are not – 'denying its reality and claiming that it is a symptom or token of a deeper substratum remote from the world of appearances' (Baehr 2002, 808). Such tendency, which inevitably leads to the reduction of one superficial phenomenon to another given that both are facades, hiding something more real, and provided that each of these can be shown to serve the same underlying function, entails that 'what people actually say can conveniently be ignored' (Baehr 2002, 808). The conviction that reality never 'appears as it is', that only 'doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge' is a manifestation of a 'world-less

mentality' (Arendt 1998, 274, 257): it 'methodically' displaces 'the uniqueness of events', their 'felt distinctness which is inherent in our everyday language' (Arendt 1953a, 385).

The sting of the Dorian Gray charge is thus directed against, what Tony Judt (2012: 31) terms the 'fascination with digging beneath the surface explanation, with unpicking mystifications, with finding a story which is all the truer for being denied by those it describes'. But Berlin's and Arendt's remarks do not merely capture the essence of the Dorian Gray-style objection to the realism of depth; they also reveal a contradiction at the heart of Geussian realism: the immediate movement towards the hidden structures of politics is no less problematic than the 'ethics first' approach Geussian realism rejects.

The realism of depth embodies what Hampshire (1983, 151–152) describes as 'the fundamental tenet of Platonism': the supposition that 'there is a deep structure of knowable necessity behind contingent appearances'; or, in Arendt's (1961, 46; 37) words, the conviction that 'human affairs' 'should not be taken too seriously' as 'the true and real is not the world in which we move and live'. Notwithstanding the difficulties to which our metaphors often lead us, there is an important conjunction between Plato's 'sunlight' and 'cave' distinction, and depth realists' distinction between 'surface' and 'depth'. The realism of depth replicates Plato's distinction between the *realm of appearances* – the surface of public life, ridden with shadowy distortions of reality – and the analogous *realm of reality* – a realm hidden from direct view which contains 'proper objects of the purest, most elevated and most honourable kind of thought' and which is 'concerned with things that must be as they are': the cave and the sunlight, respectively (Hampshire 1983, 151). Like Plato, the realism of depth presupposes that a transparent account of the truth

– be it of man’s true nature or soul, or of the real, hidden mechanisms of politics and power– is conceivable and exists prior to and apart from everyday semblances.

From a Dorian Gray standpoint, then, the realism of depth is not devoid from the Platonic exercises in ‘philosophical speculation’ Geussian realists associate with moralism. Hampshire’s more systematic objection to Plato’s theory of knowledge is suggestive: when Plato ascribed to the soul his tripartite, hierarchical structure with reason as the governing part atop desire and appetite he was not really arriving to a transparent account of the truth or identifying the true hidden structures of the soul. Rather, he was seeking to justify his own particular, superficial moral vision to which he was antecedently committed on independent grounds. Plato’s picture of the soul is a ‘fairy-tale’: ‘the decorative part of a polemic against democracy and in favour of oligarchy’ (1993, 45). Hampshire’s reading of Platonism is controversial, and it is not our aim to defend it here. Our point, however, is that Hampshire’s Dorian Gray-style objection to Plato’s theory of knowledge – though echoed by Geussian realists – is not fully acknowledged: it is ‘useless’, ‘inconclusive’ and ‘self-defeating’ to begin from a point other than the surface of public life (Hampshire 2000, 16). We cannot presuppose that a transparent account of the truth exists behind the clutter of every semblances; nor can we claim *a priori* knowledge of what the soul, the structures of the mind or, more generally, the hidden depths of politics look like. For, ‘we do not know anything about reason as a faculty, apart from what philosophers and theologians ... have chosen to put into the concept. Parts of the soul, unlike arms and legs, are a philosophical invention’; ‘philosophers have been free to construct models of the soul as they please’ and to present these as ‘natural to serve their moral and political advocacy’ (Hampshire 1989, 34).

At best, the more affirmative realism espoused by Geuss, and his heirs is prone to collapsing into the 'ethics first' approach it rails against. By unmasking surface appearances and commencing their analyses from the hidden depths of public life, Geussian realists run the risk of starting from what they deem an external moral standpoint, thereby failing to evade what they identify as a 'major' danger of moralism – the effacement of conflict and disagreement via the generalization and 'repackaging' of 'one's own local prejudices as demands of reason' (Geuss 2005, 38). Recall the way in which Geuss unmasks power relations and ideology. Geuss wants to say that what, for the entire world, might look like 'consent' to a particular practice, institution, or ritual is not, really, consent but a manifestation of false consciousness. But the conclusion that a 'set of beliefs, attitudes' and 'preferences' are 'distorted as a result of the operation of specific relations of power' requires an exercise in metaphysical speculation about the hidden, true nature of power relations and the true inner workings of the heart or the mind – an external, reductionist account of the true interests and beliefs which we should espouse, sustained by the supposition, to use Berlin's (1976, xxi) words, that 'philosophy can yield *a priori* knowledge of man's true nature'. This point is gestured *en passant* by Michael Freeden who asks:

Is it realistic to imply that undistorted or true views exist in the first place? Applying a negative appraisal prior to thoroughly examining the nature of a phenomenon is to fall into the trap of employing prejudgment and endorsing discursive mythology—a far distance from realism (Freeden 2018, 353).

This problem also animates Geuss's and Scheuerman's unmasking of religion. For a Dorian Gray-style realist, the suggestion that religious claims and rituals are hardly 'rational' or 'benign', rests on a particular conception of rationality, and benignity, part and parcel of *one* specific substantive moral vision amongst the many. To seek to unmask such claims and rituals, however, would be to denounce these *in toto* at the altar of a comprehensive, extra-terrestrial account of the truth: a 'philosophical invention' that reflects one's antecedent, substantive set of superficial moral sympathies. The upshot of this, Honig and Stears note, is that whilst 'Geuss usefully reorients political theory towards the practices of political life, his realism also leads us away from the accounts that practitioners of politics give of their own efforts and activities. The real it turns out, for Geuss, emerges only by abstracting rather severely from . . . the real'.

At worst, Geussian realism might have disastrous implications if it fulfils its promise to be relevant to us, here and now. The temptation to carry out a radical revision of superficial reality – to express in political action one's philosophical tendency to reduce the plurality of human experiences into hidden patterns, 'neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes' and sacrifice 'living human beings on the altars of abstractions' (Berlin 1990, 19, 16) – is not exclusive to the moralism typically targeted by realists but might be also exhibited by those who seek to tear off the masks of public and social life. Arendt's historical inquiry on unmasking captures this point vividly. 'The passion for unmasking society', Arendt (1990, 108) writes, was a crucial weapon in the intellectual artillery of the Jacobins and Bolsheviks who expressed its therapeutic quality of freeing society from superficial illusions and coercion, of realising man's 'true nature', in denunciation and violence. The quest to unmask and emancipate society from superficial appearances resulted in 'terror ... enacted in good faith', and 'if it became

boundless' it did so only because it 'demands the impossible'; for, 'the heart' or 'the soul' is a 'place of darkness which, with certainty, no human eye can penetrate' (Arendt 1990, 96 – 100; 1970). The supposition animating the quest for unmasking – that, we can arrive to a comprehensive account of the truth by discarding surface appearances and discerning with confidence the true mainsprings of the heart – 'demands of its political adherents the solution to an insoluble problem: to unmask appearances, where appearances are all that exist' (Degerman 2019, 167). The paradox of Geussian realism, then, is that the political manifestation of unmasking – the assertion of a vision of reality 'beyond mere appearances' –, might foster a corrosive, moralist zeal which entails the declaration of war against society *in toto* – the public realm supposed to guarantee a modicum of order, and stability. Unmasking might not just involve hostility towards superficial 'reality in general' – certain superficial practices and their respective conceptions of the good which are deemed illusory – but also towards 'the reality of persons in particular' – the inhabitants of such 'illusory' a realm, the agents who participate in such 'illusory' practices and who espouse such 'illusory' beliefs (Arendt 1990, 59; 90).

Towards a More Affirmative Realism of Surface

Political thought, Bernard Williams writes, 'cannot escape starting from what is at hand' (2002, 23). But what we are to understand as being 'at hand', we argued, is more vexed than assumed. Whilst realists have expended considerable energy in critiquing moralism, uncertainty about reality has allowed a residual Platonism/moralism to persist in certain prominent strands of realism and obfuscated the distinctiveness of the realist project. In this section, we draw on Berlin's, Hampshire's, and Arendt's more positive insights on reality and illustrate how these can provide the barebones of a more affirmative Dorian

Gray-style realism. Though such a style encompasses a range of concerns which we can only sketch here, we wish to highlight two particular directions which realists can pursue in their endeavour to offer a more meaningful alternative to moralism: i) a rejection of scientism and an emphasis on Vichian *fantasia* – a kind of knowledge which does not merely entail historical awareness but also sensitivity to philology; and, ii) an emphasis on suffering and injustice as a basis for critique and for building a suitable political sphere.

Scientism versus Fantasia

Apprehending political reality, Dorian Gray realists emphasise, requires us to remove the argument from ‘the shadowy mental realm into the open world of institutions and practices, as these are studied by historians and by anthropologists’ (Hampshire 2000, 27). Taking the world of appearances seriously, is not to deny that reality comprises different levels – that, there exists no distinction between inner and outer life¹¹. As Berlin (1996, 20) writes, ‘every person and every age’ has ‘at least two levels’: ‘an upper, public,

¹¹ Dorian Gray realism has certain affinities with what Jonathan Floyd (2011, 2020) terms ‘normative behaviourism’ – a realist approach which rejects mentalism, and which commences from the surface of public life. Elaborating on the precise connections between the two approaches, is beyond the remit of the paper, though it is worth noting that Dorian Gray realism goes a step further than behaviourism, as it is animated by a deeper appreciation of the complexities of engaging with the surface of public life – the distinction and potential tension between inner and outer life – and, as we argue, extends the remit of political thinking beyond observable facts in order to grapple with these. On this point, see Hampshire (1982).

illuminated, easily noticed, clearly describable surface', and 'less and less obvious yet more and more intimate and pervasive characteristics, closely mixed with feelings and activities to be distinguishable from them'. As Hampshire similarly notes:

[H]uman beings encounter reality in two linked forms: in an inner life of thought, feeling and perception, and an external life of physical movement and bodily contact. Reality presents itself, and is presented in us, under its two ubiquitous and inseparable headings. The two attributes are related to each other in a way that is similar to the relation of a convex surface to a concave one. We cannot imagine confronting a world which consisted entirely of matter in extension or a world which consisted entirely of thoughts and thinkings (2005, lvi).

This recognition should be distinguished from depth realism's sharp separation between 'surface' and 'depth' – 'mere' appearances and reality. From a Dorian Gray perspective, appearances are all that exist: inner and outer life, though distinct, form an inseparable part of everyday semblances. This is not to deny that 'delving beneath' outer life 'require(s) great effort' (Berlin 2000, 61; see also Berlin 1996, 20; Arendt 1990, 96). For, we know little of the 'level of half-articulate habits, unexamined assumptions, and ways of thought, semi-instinctive reactions, models of life so deeply embedded as not to be consciously felt at all' (Berlin 1996, 20). Though 'not utterly impossible', it is 'agonisingly difficult, to enter into the outlook – the thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, ambitions, imaginative experiences – of beings different and remote from us' (Berlin 2000, 156). This enterprise is less uncertain, only if we begin from the surface of public life and, without losing sight of it, take a 'path to' the 'lower level' – by engaging in an exercise

analogous to ‘deep-sea diving’, without being guided by extra-terrestrial monistic visions, ‘hidden’ substantive laws or truths (Berlin 1996, 20).

Before elaborating on what that exercise entails, we should emphasise that, though sympathetic to the conviction that ‘only by patient empirical observation’ can knowledge of reality ‘be obtained’ (Berlin 1994, 55), Dorian Gray-style realism is not a manifestation of what we might term the *Gradgrindian temptation*¹². From a Dorian Gray perspective, this line of thinking, prominent amongst ‘non-ideal’ theorists who compel philosophers to be more ‘fact-sensitive’ – to create a dialogue between political theory and hard social, even natural, sciences (Farrelly 2007; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012) – is problematic. For, scientism – the systematic pursuit of ‘one complete and all-embracing pyramid of scientific knowledge’ expressed in a desire to establish general laws, capable of explaining entire clusters of phenomena (Berlin 2002, 96) – entails the ‘uncritical assimilation of the human world to the non-human’ (Berlin 2000, 53), the abstraction from the individual and unrepeatable and, correspondingly, the displacement of inner life – an individual’s distinct ‘experiences, thoughts, feelings, purposes and volitions’ (Berlin 2000, 38 – 39; see also Berlin 1994, 73; 1996, 21; 2002a, 108). Put differently, scientism collapses ‘the contrast between inner and outer life’; it effaces recognition that, unlike natural objects, individuals are ‘language-users and potential reporters’ and are thereby not ‘obvious’ but ‘notoriously occult’: they are ‘liars, hypocrites, and suppressors of the truth about themselves’ (Hampshire 1950, 248).

¹² ‘In this life’, Mr Gradgrind in Dickens’ *Hard Times* emphasises ‘we want nothing but facts’: ‘plant nothing else, and root out everything else’ (1854,3).

The *Gradgrindian temptation* might thus exhibit similar perils with the realism of depth. As Hampshire emphasises, in his effort to pierce through appearances, Plato suggests that ‘measuring, counting and weighting’ are the ‘most felicitous aids’, and that, that which entrusts ‘measurement and reckoning must be the best part of the soul’ (1974, 602d – 603a). But whilst ‘the Platonic ordering of disciplines makes mathematical proof the paradigm of reasoning and of rationality’, the ‘Platonic concept of reason is not the only possible one, and for some purposes, such as understanding the nature of justice and morality, it has been greatly misleading’ (Hampshire 2000, 25). The elision of scientism’s monism with political thought would thus reduce the ‘thick texture’ of conflicting ideas, practices, thoughts, and feelings into simple a schema reflective of one’s substantive moral sympathies (Berlin 1999, 114, 139; 1996, 30-31). Arendt’s critique of scientism pushes this point even further. Scientism’s obsessiveness with universal laws and ‘search for “true reality”, Arendt (2006, 262) argues, was unleashed by Galileo’s invention of the telescope, which demonstrated ‘that both the worst fear and the most presumptuous hope of human speculation, the ancient fear that our senses...might betray us, and the Archimedean wish for a point outside the Earth, could only come true together’. Yet, such an obsessiveness is a manifestation of a ‘world-less mentality’ or ‘world-alienation’ (Arendt 1998, 275, 264): it presupposes that we can access reality by ‘reaching beyond what is manifested directly to our senses’, and by subordinating ‘our worldly condition as sensuous beings to some non-sensuous, wordless experience of reality’ (Burdman 2018, 486). The worry is not just that scientism, by virtue of its capacity to account for phenomena only via the formalized language of mathematics lacks connection to our sensuous experience of the world (Arendt 1998, 2006), but, rather, that it might encourage the ‘peddling of mathematical theories aimed at the control of plurality and political life’ (O’Connor 2013, 116). Arendt’s work, Javier Burdman (2008) emphasises,

captures the existence of an interdependence between the scientism *qua* mindset and totalitarianism: the 'fictitious world' of totalitarian leaders was partly construed and enacted with the aid of 'an ideological scientificity': universal laws, lurking beneath superficial reality, seeking to explain every possible event, and, once unleashed, to realise 'true' history or reality by eliminating human spontaneity 'under scientifically controlled conditions' (Arendt 1979, 436).

Making sense of political reality – grasping, for instance, 'what moves human beings to act in given circumstances' to use Geuss (2008, 9) words – thus requires a different kind of knowledge and method than scientific inquiry; it requires an understanding of the specific and particular, the 'unique pattern of experience', 'the unique combination of characteristics' constitutive of a 'particular situation, event, or society' (Berlin 1998, 45). 'Understanding other men's motives or acts, however imperfectly or corrigibly', Berlin (2000, 59; 1976, 23 -28) writes, 'is a state of mind or activity in principle different from learning about, or knowledge of, the external world'. All which is human and belongs to the realm of human experience, is accessible more through intuition or common sense than deduction (Arendt 1953a; Berlin 2002a). Against Plato and his moralist disciples, Berlin and Hampshire invoke Vico's notion of *fantasia*: a process of imaginative reconstruction and historical awareness – a 'capacity for understanding people's characters'; the 'ability to enter into their motives, their principles, the movement of their thought and feelings' (Berlin 1999, 135). *Fantasia* entails a 'theory of knowledge' which is rooted in the idea that conflicts between different values, spheres, conceptions of the good and ways of life are perpetual, and which takes historical knowledge and imagination, rather than mathematics and natural sciences, as paradigms of secure knowledge of political reality (Hampshire 1973, 1994).

That historical awareness is a vital component of political thought is a familiar, albeit vague, refrain of contemporary realism (see, for instance, Geuss 2005, Floyd and Stears 2011). What is less familiar is the Dorian Gray-style realist insistence that historical awareness is not just opposed to Sibyl Vane-style accounts of reality, and the practice of unmasking animating these, but also carries a broader sense. Nurturing *fantasia* requires sensitivity to a range of studies Vico characterised as philology. Described as ‘that of which human choice is author’, Vico contrasted philology with natural sciences and philosophy, which contemplates reason, and interpreted it as encompassing the wealth of phenomena arising from human life and activity – language, customs and rituals, social, political institutions, and practices and, more importantly, art, poetry, literature, and fiction (Berlin 1976; Hampshire 1994). Philology, from a Dorian Gray standpoint, can reveal a more nuanced account of reality than a vulgar historicism. ‘The relation between the social realities, and the art that may truthfully reflect them’, Hampshire writes, ‘is, and always has been, more complex, less direct’ than a crude historicism might suggest:

An individual’s mode of consciousness is not to be found in the history of his time. A literal summary of external events can never be a true account of that which any individual saw and felt; this ... can only be communicated in the metaphors and images and fictions that he himself will recognise with a shock of sudden pleasure as his own, and as answering to his own peculiar sensibility (1969, 144).

An emphasis on philology can thus provide the foundation for developing a more affirmative, richer realist alternative – one which is autonomous from ‘ethics-first approaches’ –, as it goes a step further than most contemporary realist accounts in

emphasising the imaginative capacity of artists, poets, dramatists, and writers – ‘the great enemies’ of Plato – to better apprehend the complex and messy realities of public life, and the idiosyncrasies of human experience and inner life ¹³ (Berlin, 1996, 18 – 25; 47; see also Berlin 2002b; Arendt 1990; Hampshire, 1969). If, as Freedden puts it, ‘getting real’ requires ‘a far more extensive purview of the sources of political thinking rather than one restricted to a narrow and elitist segment of political philosophers and academics’, then philology can furnish the endeavour to ‘adequately decode the political’ by extending ‘the remit of political thinking at various points of articulation’ (Freedden 2018, 362).

But Dorian Gray realism is not just a manifestation or species of ‘interpretive realism’ – the endeavour to provide ‘an empirically related of the features of the political as a basis to understanding politics’. It also contributes to ‘prescriptive realism’ – ‘the enterprise of placing recommendations and justifications for political action’ (Freedden 2012, 1).

Injustice and Critique

Despite, or because of, its sensitivity to pluralism, Dorian Gray-style realism does not amount to an uncritical conservatism, a kind of relativism which takes the world as it is and leaves it as it finds it. Nor does it entail a ‘vulgar Wittgensteinianism’ which, as Williams (1995, 218) puts it, founds ethics on the ‘emptiness and cruel superficiality of

¹³ As Baehr (2020, 1236) remarks, ‘the novel shows why the attribution of motives is no simple thing. The lives disclosed in, say, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* ... are unpredictable. The protagonists move on the page, assuming new qualities as they do ... Novels show that life is inherently disorderly, never entirely predictable’.

everyday thought'. That Dorian Gray-style realism takes appearances and that which is available to our senses seriously need not deprive us of the critical resources necessary to challenge injustice. As in Dorian Gray's experience, works of art and literature, concerned not just with diversity and pluralism but also with the reality of suffering and injustice, can serve as 'the most magical of mirrors', revealing not just outer life, but also the profundities of inner life (Wilde 2007, 92; Hampshire 1999). Hence, Dorian Gray realists emphasise, from the fact that most humans in most times and places recoiled in horror and experienced revulsion in the face of cruelty, starvation, humiliation, war, and slavery we may glean an insight into the kinds of creatures we really are, at least in a negative sense – i.e., the kinds of creatures we should not be (Arendt 1990; Berlin 1990; Hampshire 2000). Equally, the fact that in most times and places, most humans disagreed sharply about the creatures we really are, should also prompt us to start thinking about who we are not and should not be forced to become.

For Dorian Gray-style realists, there is a fact of the matter about the great evils of human life. Though not unproblematic (see Sleat 2013), this shift of focus – from supposed agreement on and quest to realise justice or the common good to the appreciation and prevention of suffering and injustice – seems innately valuable for the realist project. Though negative and (still) pessimistic in its outlook – 'it just tells us', to use Rossi's (2019, 645) words, 'that, given its diagnosis, the society we should aspire to is, for the time being, a non-place' –, Dorian Gray-style realism moves beyond contemporary realism's 'mere' emphasis on legitimacy and order, tethers the relativist temptations and

‘conflict fetishism’ of contemporary realist thought, and does not displace realism’s emancipatory or radical potential *tout de suite*¹⁴ (Rossi 2016; Vogler & Tillyris, 2019).

That it is possible to be mistaken about evil opens up sufficient room for critique. ‘Normally responsive’ persons, Hampshire (2000, xii) writes, will be struck by the great evils of human life, unless they have been ‘distracted from natural feeling by some theory that explains them away’. This much follows from the Dorian Gray-style critique of scientism and of the Bolshevik and Jacobin obsessiveness with unmasking, a by-product of their allegiance to Rousseau’s and Marx’s thought, that resulted in ‘a cruel mockery of all that men hold dear’ (Berlin 1990, 17; Arendt 1979). Dorian Gray-style realism, we noted, cautions against the ‘distorting spectacles of theory’ (Berlin 1979, xl) and carves conceptual space for exploring how the pervasiveness of certain doctrines can ‘corrupt’ and ‘cloud’ our intuitions on injustice and hinder our capacity to ‘think without a banister’ (Hampshire, 1983; Berlin 1994, 55; Arendt 1979b, 336). On this account, realism entails the difficult task of protecting politics and public life from the moralist’s or depth-realist’s temptation to turn to the ‘true world’. A truly political response to these dangers must therefore not only highlight the importance of attending to the realities of politics but to also seek to build a shared public space which acts as a bulwark against injustice, facilitates the negotiation of our differences and the recognition of and discussion on practices, objects, and sensitivities of shared concern – practices, objects, and sensitivities on which our opinions may well collide¹⁵.

¹⁴ On negative morality, see also Allen (2001).

¹⁵ For an example of Dorian Gray style realism which engages with these insights beyond the works of Berlin, Hampshire, and Arendt, see also Judith Shklar’s thought – specifically,

Whether realists wish to adopt such an approach or not, the aforementioned commitments create the possibility to explore the causal forces operating in our world and the realities of power without dismissing people's actual beliefs and values as ideological distortions, masking some deeper "reality" hidden from view, or obstructing a common, substantive moral vision. Dorian Gray-style realism entails greater sympathy, a more scrupulous attention to the emotional matrix and experiences of agents. It distances itself from Marx's (1975, 246-51) characterization of philosophy as a 'weapon of criticism' moved by 'denunciation'; it neither renounces individuals' aspirations and ideals *tout court*, nor is it tempted by final solutions. Rather, Dorian Gray-style realism is a form of reminding people of that which lies on the surface of experience, from which they may well have been distracted – that, 'no theory of life', as Dorian Gray remarks, is 'of any importance compared with life itself' (Wilde 2007, 115). The Dorian Gray realist critic begins neither from the sunlight nor the depths of public life, but from the surface of human life; she arms herself not with an external theory – her preconceived superficial, substantive moral sympathies –, but with *fantasia* and the evidence of history, anthropology, and experience 're-affirmed in every age and in every written history and in every tragedy and fiction' (Hampshire 1989, 90).

her 'liberalism of fear' which 'puts cruelty first' (Shklar 1984, 1989), and which compels us to shift our attention from abstract visions of the *summum bonum* to an exploration of the concrete realities of the *summum malum* – the 'full, complex, and enduring character of injustice as a social phenomenon' (Shklar 1990, 9). On the liberalism of fear, see also Williams (2002), and Freyenhagen (2011).

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