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The a-theoretical core of political realism

by Zoltán Gábor Szűcs

Abstract

This paper aims to advocate a Williamsian approach to political realism and contends that contemporary realist political theory is built on an 'a-theoretical core' that the paper will call 'political realism' in the broader sense (for a very different approach to Williams, see Hall, 2013). The central tenet of this thesis is that contemporary realist political theory fundamentally differs from mainstream political theory not only in its political outlook, but also in its views about the tasks and prospects of theorizing. In other words, 'political realism' imposes severe constraints on theorizing in a realist key and makes contemporary realist political theory especially vulnerable to criticisms coming from mainstream political theory. This paper contends, however, that the inherent limitedness of contemporary realist political theory is a fair price that is worth paying for a more realistic understanding of politics.

The argument of the paper is built on the Williamsian assumption that mainstream political theory is ultimately a sort of 'applied morality' and that the fundamental problem with mainstream political theory as 'applied morality' is not so much its strong commitment to pre-political moral principles as its being fundamentally shaped by an ethical theory.¹

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams introduces a distinction between ethics and morality, and he vehemently criticizes mainstream moral philosophy because of its moralism. Williams argues that conceiving moral philosophy in terms of a so-called 'ethical theory' is fundamentally wrong because it fatally misunderstands (overestimates and misplaces) the role of reflection in ethical life and it necessarily reduces the richness of ethical life to only a handful of categories of 'morality'. As he shows in his *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, mainstream political theory as 'applied morality' commits the same mistake: it reduces the scope of political theory to a handful of moralized concepts that centre around the problem of justice and it also mistakenly assumes that what primarily needs to be understood about politics is how it can be justified by a rationally coherent set of moral principles. Although it is not often emphasized, the Williamsian critique of political moralism is not limited to moralist political outlook, but it also extends to a peculiar style of theorizing. Therefore, a Williamsian approach to political realism cannot stop at the critique of moralism as a set of assumptions about how politics looks like in reality, but it also must include a rethinking of the role of political theory.

Accordingly, this paper draws on a distinction between political realism in the broader sense which is the counter-piece of the Williamsian concept of ethics on the one hand and, on the other, contemporary realist political theory as a flourishing movement within the discipline of contemporary political theory. The end of this distinction is to highlight the actual stakes of the realist critique of mainstream political theory as 'applied morality'. The debate between moralism and realism is not just about the relationship between moral and political normativity (as is too often assumed in the literature), but about the role of

reflection in politics. Political realism is for politics as ethics for ethical life. Consequently, contemporary realist political theory is a somewhat ambiguous enterprise: on the one hand, it has to meet the requirements of a modern scientific discipline, but, on the other hand, it is based on a set of core assumptions that are, so to speak, hostile to the way of theorizing that the prevalent style of that discipline represents.

In the paper I will address three major issues. First of all, I offer a brief overview of the relationship between the Williamsian critique of morality in moral philosophy and the Williamsian critique of 'applied morality' in political theory. Here I will contend the relevance of Bernard Williams' distinction between ethics and morality for political theory. Second, I will seek to provide a complex approach to realism by making a distinction between political realism and contemporary realist political theory. This distinction will help us to clarify some common misunderstandings concerning realism. Third, I will analyze certain characteristics of the style of theorizing in a realist key that are encouraged by political realism, i.e. the a-theoretical core of contemporary realist political theory and that fundamentally shape how a realist political theory should look.

Bernard Williams and his critiques of morality

Along with a posthumously published collection of his essays about political theory, *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Williams, 2005), *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory* is one of the key texts of contemporary realist political theory and it would seem quite reasonable to contend that its primary goal is to revisit the prevalent views about the role of moral considerations in politics. The main target of Williams is called 'moralism' by him and he more or less clearly identifies it with two major strands of moral philosophy (utilitarianism and deontology), although he calls them in this essay the 'structural model' and the 'enactment model'. In addition, he sometimes describes 'moralism' as 'applied morality' which immediately rings a bell with anyone familiar with Williams' moral philosophical views, especially his scathing and sweeping criticism of mainstream moral philosophy as 'morality' (that includes various forms of eudemonism, utilitarianism and deontology) in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Williams, 2006).

This interpretation undoubtedly can draw some support from the literature on Williams and his realism. A great analysis of Williams' (and Geuss') realism in the context of his moral philosophy was published recently (Hall - Sleat, 2017) that persuasively argues for the central importance of the relationship between moral and political norms in contemporary realist political theory. It is not surprising at all, therefore, that the critics of realism also often take aim at the so-called anti-moralism of contemporary realist political theory (Estlund, 2017; Cross, 2017; Erman - Möller, 2013). On what the divergent criticisms of realism appear to agree is that contemporary realist theory's anti-moralism, including Williams', is fairly tenuous and that its arguments for excluding moral norms from politics are obscure and unsatisfying at best (Leader, Maynard & Worsnip, 2018).

This paper contends, however, that the opponents of realism who build their criticism on what they perceive as the anti-moralism of realism actually miss the point of Williams' critique of morality. Williams' main target is not the place of moral considerations in politics, but the limits of philosophy in ethical life. From this perspective, what deserves more attention is not the problem of the relationship between moral and political norms, but the utter failure of a certain - prevalent - style of theorizing to provide appropriate answers to the fundamental questions of politics. If Williams is right and mainstream political theory is essentially 'applied morality' then we should look for the explanation of this failure in his critical discussion of 'morality' in moral philosophy.

Williams has multiple objections against what he calls 'morality'. He disapproves,

for instance, morality's strict separation between 'moral' and 'non-moral' and also facts versus values. He also thinks that 'morality' unnecessarily reduces the richness of real-life ethical reasons to a handful of abstract and not particularly helpful moral categories (notably, obligations). Morality, Williams contends, wrongly focuses on justifications instead of ethical reasons. It also vainly pursues a general point of view and universal rules instead of realizing that ethics is always practical and it always raises first-person questions. The underlying mistake of these features of morality is that morality seeks to provide an 'ethical theory' derived from the basic principles of rationality and fails to understand the limited (partly positive, but partly destructive) role of reflection in ethics.

With this influential, but fundamentally wrong moralistic outlook, Williams contrasts 'ethics' which is an important (albeit not exclusive) ingredient of our everyday, first-person reasoning about what should be done, everything considered. Williams argues that most certainly there are non-ethical reasons shaping our conduct and they should not be superficially separated from ethical reasons. Our ethical reasons, he contends, are strongly context-dependent (albeit not entirely arbitrary) even if 'moral relativism' is not the best way to describe how our ethical reasons are determined by the world around us in a particular historical moment and its social practices. Our ethical conceptions, argues Williams, are also mixtures of evaluative and descriptive elements, but are not based on general prescriptions.

From all this, there emerges a genuinely non-philosophical understanding of ethics in which reflection plays a highly ambiguous role. On the one hand, Williams is convinced that we live in a culture of a unique level of reflectivity and this enhances the importance of reflection in ethical reasoning. But, on the other hand, reflection does not necessarily make ethical reasoning more robust: not just because certain forms of reflection undermine social practices underpinning certain ethical concepts as well as the beliefs behind them, but also because ethical concepts and their relations are ultimately not based on a coherent set of rational principles so they cannot be fairly judged by the court of rationality in every circumstance. Williams does not deny the role of criticism and reflection, but he carefully examines the numerous limitations on the capacity of moral philosophy to offer a compelling alternative to our everyday ethical concepts and practices.

This depiction of ethics by Williams is the key to his critique of mainstream political theory as 'applied morality'. Although he seems to argue that the main difference between moralism and realism is their contrasting approaches to identifying the principal problem of politics (justice vs. legitimacy) and he even appears to offer confusing answers to the question of whether what he calls Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD - which is, according to Williams, the sufficient condition of providing an acceptable answer to the first question of politics) is a moral principle, Williams merely extends his critique of morality to the domain of politics. This is why he states very clearly that BLD well might be a moral principle, but 'it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics'. (Williams, 2005: 5) What is important here is not the 'priority' issue in the sense that Williams does not speak about the priority of political over moral considerations so much as about the priority of political reasons over justifying political authority in terms of an 'applied morality'.

There is a striking similarity between ethics and political realism in Williams' thought and it is hard to escape the conclusion that they share a similarly non-philosophical fundamental character in Williams' view. Accordingly, throughout his posthumously collected essays Williams repeats the themes of his Ethics book, including the critique of Rawls, a balanced understanding of Wittgenstein, and his dealing with the problem of tradition.

It is not to say that ethics and political realism are the same in Williams' thought.

Quite the contrary, he repeatedly emphasizes that political reasons might be different from and sometimes even in conflict with ethical reasons; and he also contends that the ethics of politics is a particular form of ethics what he calls, following Max Weber, the ethics of responsibility (Weber, 2004). But, on the other hand, it is no less obvious that Williams conceives of political realism as an essentially non-philosophical understanding of politics on which it is impossible to build a political theory of the same kind as on applied morality. In other words, Williamsian political realism is 'realist' not simply because it sees politics as it looks like in reality, but also because it looks at politics in a distinctive non-philosophical way.

Finally, it is important to underline a common mistake with regard to the Williamsian critique of 'applied morality'. His critique actually cannot be satisfyingly interpreted in terms of the ideal/non-ideal theory divide (but see Valentini, 2012). This, of course, is not a particularly innovative idea: Sleat (2013) has already pointed out that political realism is more than simply a non-ideal theory, but what I contend here is that we should take a step even further and assert that political realism is not a theory at all in Williamsian terms. Like ethics, political realism approaches its subject matter in a way that systematically undermines any efforts to offer a philosophical justification for a political order in terms of an ethical theory or 'applied morality'. Whatever someone may think about Bernard Williams' concept of 'Basic Legitimation Demand' (which might seem the obvious candidate for a moralistic idea lurking behind Williams' political realism), it is made quite clear by him that even that is not a moral principle in terms of 'applied morality': 'it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics: in particular, because it is inherent in there being first a political question.' (Williams, 2005: 5). In contrast, a non-ideal theory is just another theory that can be to some extent reconciled with the prevalent style of theorizing of ideal theories. The Williamsian critique of 'applied morality' intends to cut much deeper than that.

The distinction between political realism and contemporary realist political theory

What follows from Williams' twin-critiques of 'morality' (versus ethics) and of 'applied morality' (versus political realism) is the need for distinguishing between political realism in the broader sense and contemporary realist political theory for at least three reasons. First, political realism, properly understood, is the way people generally live their political lives so it would be a mistake to identify it with a certain movement within a scientific discipline existing at a certain historical moment. Second, political realism is rarely attributed to someone's thought by virtue of their self-identification with the label 'political realism', especially because that label of realism was invented only in the mid-19th century while many of the realist thinkers identified lived well before the dawn of modernity. Furthermore, those whom we like to call realist thinkers of the past such as Thucydides, Chanakya, Chinese legists, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume and Max Weber, could not be realists in this second - narrower - sense. Many of them were not even philosophers and they usually did not compose abstract theoretical works, but simply offered narrative accounts of history. Instead, it is a very common practice and one not limited to political theory, to call someone a political realist on the basis of the presence of a set of certain characteristics or recurring themes in their thought. From a Williamsian viewpoint, these themes do not represent one particular approach to politics among many others, but is one that, unlike others, tells us how politics actually works. Third, the distinction between political realism and contemporary realist political theory is justified because contemporary realist political theory emerged in the English-speaking academic world as a critical response to the prevalence of what they

perceived as a Rawlsian and high liberal style of theorizing and therefore they have had particular concerns closely connected to the state of affairs in modern political theory that most certainly never bothered most of the classical theorists of realism - let alone people living outside the academia today.

Some might object at this point that not every contemporary realist theorist would necessarily prevalence of what they perceived as a Rawlsian and high liberal style of theorizing and therefore they have had particular concerns closely connected to the state of affairs in modern political theory that most certainly never bothered most of the classical theorists of realism - let alone people living outside the academia today.

Some might object at this point that not every contemporary realist theorist would necessarily agree with Bernard Williams' claim that realism is essentially a-theoretical and therefore the distinction between political realism and contemporary realist political theory is not a defining characteristic of realism. If it were - so might the objection go - then contemporary realist political theory is a rather heterogeneous movement within political theory emerging from many different sources, drawing on a wide variety of political traditions and using various terms to describe the world of politics and many of Williams' views are widely debated within this movement (for an example, see Newey, 2001). It is quite reasonable to think, therefore, that Bernard Williams' approach is just one among the many shades of contemporary realist political theory and that it is far from obvious that we should take his critique of 'applied morality' with all its philosophical implications as representative of contemporary realist political theory.

While it is true that not every contemporary realist theorist would agree with Williams' particular formulation of his critique of political moralism, nonetheless his is far from being an isolated position within the ever-growing body of contemporary realist theory. To mention just a few examples, Glen Newey attacks political theory as part of a strategy to defend the true mission of political philosophy from any unsubstantiated claims for offering action-guiding principles. As he put it, "What is needed, in my view, is more political philosophy, and less political theory. The contrast is intentional. It countenances the possibility that political philosophy may be practised without purveying theory, where 'theory' is interpreted as a rational construction intended to guide practice or provide a more systematised understanding of it. The best to be hoped for may be merely a better understanding of why a credible philosophical theory of politics is unavailable. Even within a broadly normative style of theorising, however, the assumptions informing current theory are questionable" (Newey, 2001) Although Newey approaches the problem of realism from the opposite direction to Williams, in the sense that he emphasized the importance of philosophizing in contrast to Williams' stress on practice, these differences in their personal preferences should not hide from our sight that on which they agree: that a more realistic understanding should resist the temptation to offer a 'theory', exactly of the kind that Williams calls 'applied morality'. Raymond Geuss (2008), John Dunn (2000), Chantal Mouffe (2013), John Horton (2010), Mark Philp (2007), Andrew Sabl (2002), Matt Sleat (2013) etc. offer very similar (even if slightly different) approaches to realism: they all criticize mainstream political theory for its excessive reliance on a rationalistic view of politics and its ambition of identifying a coherent set of principles on which a normative political theory could be grounded. The wording and to some extent even the philosophical implications of these contemporary realist political theoretical approaches might differ, but it is quite clear that the Williamsian critique of morality is far from being isolated or alone in the literature of contemporary realist political theory.

Moreover, we can find very similar claims in the works of the classics of realism as well. In their case, of course, the main target could not be the rationalism of mainstream

modern political theory, but, at best, the assertion of an underlying moral consensus or the idealization of the conditions of human coexistence. Thucydides (2009), for instance, mercilessly unmask the common moral justifications in political debates and stresses the importance of lust for power, interests and fear in political considerations instead. Likewise, Machiavelli (1998) not only highlights the role of morally dubious means in grabbing and preserving political power, but he also provocatively claims that the actual truth about politics (*verita effettuale*, as he calls it) cannot be reached through imagining never-existed kingdoms and republics. Finally, it seems worthwhile to note that Hans Morgenthau, a founding father of realist international political theory wrote a whole book about the contrasting understandings of the world of politics of the "scientific man" and the "statesman" (Morgenthau, 1947). What is especially important here is that these assertions go beyond the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning because they do not merely claim that practical reason has to deal with individual cases and that general rules cannot be easily applied to them, but rather that there is something fundamentally wrong with the ambition of providing a set of highly abstract and generally acceptable moral rules of action in politics. This is simply not how politics works - or at least this is what realists say about politics.

In sum, it appears that the Williamsian critique of morality is not just not an isolated position within contemporary realist political theory, but also it is a political theoretical recapitulation of one of the recurrent themes of political realism in the broader sense, figuring prominently in various texts from Thucydides to the representatives of contemporary realist political theory.

That is why I think that political realism in the broader sense can be rightly called 'a-theoretical'. It is a-theoretical because it does not make a theoretical claim about the status of theory in political thought (so it is not anti-theoretical), but simply asserts a strong conviction that the actual knowledge about politics is not a set of principles on which a rationally coherent theory and/or a moral consensus can be built.

Some might object at this point that I simply mix up two different problems: the consensus on moral principles and the consensus on the principles of rationality. While it is quite possible that Williams or Geuss were really against a peculiar view of morality that seeks to provide moral justifications in a rationalistic way, other realists like Thucydides were most probably critical about what they took as a mere illusion of a moral consensus. Although this objection has its point, we still have reasons to refute it. It might well be that the target of Thucydides' critique of a certain way of justifying political conduct (as we know it, for instance, from the so-called Melian dialogue of his work) cannot be described as a kind of morality, but it undoubtedly has many striking resemblances to it. Both Thucydides and Williams share a deep suspicion against any view of moral consensus that assumes that our conduct needs to be justified in moral terms and that justification should be provided discursively (Thucydides, 2009: 302 and Williams 2006: 18) and, also, that it should appeal to a moral consensus (Thucydides, 2009: 302 and Williams, 2006: 100). Moreover, what both Thucydides and Williams contrast with the moralist view are the sometimes harsh necessities of politics and so highlight the primacy of political practice over any general (philosophical) knowledge. In sum, it appears that realists - both classical thinkers and contemporary realist political theorists - share an understanding of politics that is a-theoretical in nature.

It is not the only defining characteristics of political realism in the broader sense, however, that it is a-theoretical. There are other recurring themes of political realism as well including at least a conflictual understanding of politics or, as Matt Sleat put it, the importance of 'ineliminable disagreement' for politics, and the inherent fragility of political

order in the first place; a moral psychology that is incompatible with any political theory that emphasizes the predominantly rational character of human individuals; a focus on the role of agency in the understanding of politics; the context-dependence and historical variability of moral values and ideals; the endogeneity of political norms and the need for the exploration of what constitutes a genuinely political ethics.

These themes play a decisive role in classifying a work or an author as politically realist and they provide the core around which contemporary realist political theory as a movement within political theory was built. A brief enumeration of these themes is of course an indispensable part of every article and book about contemporary realist political theory, but - and this is of utmost importance - these themes became the defining characteristics of contemporary realist theory only because they had been associated with the label 'realism' long before the birth of contemporary realist political theory - and not the other way around. Actually even today it is very common to call writers, historians, politicians, journalists political 'realists' because certain realist themes describe their conduct rather well or figure prominently in their political views, but those who use the label 'political realism' are rarely interested in and even less familiar with the developments of contemporary realist political theory. Not surprisingly, even contemporary realist political theory was in part constructed retrospectively and somewhat arbitrarily in the 2000s selecting certain thinkers of a larger pool based on the presence of realist themes in their work despite the fact that these thinkers did not or could not identify themselves with the not yet existing contemporary realist political theoretical movement (Galston, 2010).

It leads to interesting ambiguities in the use of the term 'political realist' if we identify political realism with an essentially a-theoretical approach to politics. To begin with, realist themes are often described as the distinctive features of a group of classical thinkers as opposed to moralists. For instance, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes are supposed to have fundamentally different political views to those of Locke, Rousseau or Kant. But, on the other hand, political realism is quite reasonably supposed by realists to describe how politics actually works, and that it is not just a desirable state of the political community, thus it is equally often assumed that realism is much more widespread than suggested by the sheer number of consciously realist thinkers. From this perspective, anti-realists appear to represent an effort of certain thinkers to escape from the realities of politics through providing a fatally wrong political theory while realism must be the actual - albeit silent - mainstream if not in theory, but at least in practice. It is no mere coincidence that realism is often associated with seasoned politicians like Thucydides or Machiavelli who are sometimes depicted as the leakers of some eternal secrets of power. Actually this is exactly what seems to be suggested by Machiavelli himself who stated that *The Prince* is not written for everyone, but only to those who 'understand' (Machiavelli, 1998: 53). What is at stake here is that 'political realism' in the broader sense is not supposed to be just one of many views about politics, not even the only morally right view of politics, but the only one that does not fundamentally misunderstand the nature of politics just like Williams' critique of 'applied morality' implies.

Another ambiguity arises from the fact that, on the one hand, someone can freely identify themselves with contemporary realist political theory as a movement and still disagree with other realists on certain issues. On the other hand, it is the presence or lack of realist themes in their work that eventually decides whether they are a true representative of political realism in the broader sense. In other words, it is theoretically possible - albeit very improbable - for a representative of contemporary realist political theory not to accept a typical realist view as true.

Actually, this latter ambiguity is probably the single most important issue with

respect to the distinction between political realism and contemporary realist political theory because this is the point where the inherent limitations of theorizing in a realist key becomes crystal clear. For realist political theorists, the recurrent themes of realism are not simply intuitions or principles on which a theoretical argument can be built, but more or less self-evident truths that cannot be replaced without giving up being a realist.

Perhaps some might object that actually every political theory is built on a similar set of unquestionable commitments, but this objection, albeit not entirely baseless, misses the point about the significance of the realist themes for contemporary realist political theory.

What fundamentally distinguishes contemporary realist political theory from mainstream political theory in this respect is not so much its commitment to a certain set of principles as the kinds of operations it thinks to be allowable for political theory. A very similar point was made about moral philosophy by Bernard Williams in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and I contend that this is the key for his critique of 'applied morality' as well. In contrast to the Rawlsian reflective equilibrium method that is a theory-building strategy that seeks a mutual fit of theory and judgments through iterative steps of testing the implications of the theory and refining it accordingly (List & Valentini, 2016), contemporary realist political theory cannot submit its realist core to any test or revision of this kind because it would threaten its self-identity as political realism. At this point it becomes significant once again that political realism in the broader sense is a-theoretical: contemporary realist political theory cannot submit its core assumptions to the test of rationality as is the case with any political theory that is a kind of 'applied morality' because political realism is not based on a theory and does not fit the criteria of a theory. Just as ethics is not morality because it looks for answers to first-person questions, political realism's constituency is not universal and it does not seek to be impartial and generalizable thus it is not based on an ethical theory: realism is not 'applied morality'.

Consequently, there remain only two basic theory-building strategies for contemporary realist political theory: either contemporary realist theory can criticize mainstream political theory for its overly rationalistic approach or it can use political realism to conceptually chart new territories for theorizing. If the above analysis of the a-theoretical core of contemporary realist political theory holds true then it is not a mere coincidence that the first strategy seems to be more popular in contemporary realist political theory than the second. A charge which is often echoed both by reviewers and the opponents of realist theory as charge against contemporary realist political theory. However, since it is the single most important distinctive feature of contemporary realist political theory (in comparison with mainstream political theory) that it is built around an a-theoretical core, it is quite natural for realist theory to pay particular attention to what seems to be, from their viewpoint, the fundamental design flaw of mainstream political theory.

The style of theorizing in a realist key

One of the key effects of being built around an a-theoretical core on the style of theorizing in a realist key was discussed in the previous section: contemporary realist political theory is overwhelmingly interested in criticizing mainstream political theory. In the following I will seek to explore some further effects that all alike arise from contemporary realist political theory's connectedness to political realism in the broader sense.

To begin with, contemporary realist political theory shows a rather inimical attitude toward 'abstraction'. This has been extensively discussed by Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, among others, whose critiques of abstraction were, in turn, vehemently criticized by Alan Thomas (2015). The idea that mainstream political theory is fundamentally

wrong because it is abstract in the wrong way appears to be one of the central tenets of contemporary realist political theory. Indeed, it is an important issue for Williams who already in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* argues that 'morality' mistakenly seeks to find universal principles from which judgments concerning concrete situations can be derived in a rational way instead of using concrete and local concepts with inherently limited generalizability (Williams, 2006: 104). But Thomas is convinced that both Williams and Geuss fail to understand what abstraction actually means and therefore they launch a misconceived attack on Rawlsian political theory. According to Thomas, realist political theorists seem to think that abstraction leads to the loss of much relevant information and that is why they believe that abstract theorizing creates a distorted understanding of reality. In contrast, Thomas says, what scientific abstraction really filters out is simply the meaningless, irrelevant information, so-called white noise in order to develop a model consisting of only the really relevant factors.

I contend, however, that Thomas does not interpret the realist critique of abstraction correctly. At least Williams surely has a different ambition to that which Thomas attributes to him; and the Williamsian position looks to catch rather well the more general realist concerns about abstraction too. Abstraction, in Williams' sense, belongs to a theoretical mode of thinking and what he actually denies is that political realism (like ethics) would be theoretical. Indeed it is a rather demanding claim to assert like Williams does that theory is just one of the possible ways of reflecting on our world and on ourselves as part of the world; and inasmuch as someone could refute that claim as absurd, realist political theory is built on thin ice. But if it is not something entirely out of the question then the Williamsian critique of abstraction turns out to be much less obscure than Thomas suggests.

But someone might rightly ask what remains for contemporary realist political theory if abstract theorizing is regarded as fundamentally wrong? Besides criticizing 'abstraction', contemporary realist political theory can explore issues that are beyond the scope of mainstream political theory or are systematically distorted by the moralistic perspective of mainstream political theory.

Perhaps the issue of legitimacy is the most prominent example of discussing political theoretical problems in a distinctively realist way. It would be impossible to provide an overview of the details of the realist literature on legitimacy at this point and in this context, but it seems worthwhile to note that the concept of legitimacy is such a significant issue from a realist viewpoint for at least two major reasons. On the one hand, the idea that the problem of the need for political authority cannot be satisfyingly solved by justifying authority in terms of justice and other moralistic concepts predates the emergence of contemporary realist political theory. Thucydides was already deeply troubled by the fact that in politics there can exist many competing justificatory claims at once and it is impossible to decide which one is better than the others; and it was of course a central concern for Machiavelli and Hobbes as well. It is no surprise at all, therefore, that contemporary realist political theory undertakes to offer a normative account of political authority that does not seek to reduce it to the problem of justice as mainstream political theory appears to do. The realist account proposes a theory of legitimacy instead and seeks to explain in exactly what ways it differs from a moralistic approach. On the other hand, the realist approach to legitimacy seems to offer an excellent opportunity to show that realist 'anti-moralism' is not a refutation of the significance of moral considerations in politics, but rather how the characteristics of political necessity constitutes the normative foundations of political order and how ethical considerations can make their contribution to it.

Williams' 'Basic Legitimation Demand' (BLD), for instance, is a concept designed to show how genuinely political normativity arises from a problem - the so-called 'first

political question' - that cannot be properly understood from a justice-based moralistic viewpoint. The key to Williams' BLD is not so much its *prima facie* differences from a justice-based justification of political authority, but that Williams offers a radical alternative to the 'applied morality' of those justice-based justifications (for an argument that realism cannot do without justice see Nardin, 2017). Actually, there are some striking parallelisms between BLD as a measure of acceptable answers to the 'first political question' and justice as a set of principles by which the acceptability of political authority should be judged: all the more so since both offer criteria for which authority is acceptable and which is not. What fundamentally differentiates these two approaches however is that justice is seen in mainstream political theory as a coherent set of principles while Williams seeks to offer a criterion that works in an a-theoretical way. That is clearly not a rationalistic, theoretical approach to what it takes for a political authority to be legitimate because it roots legitimacy in the facticity of the social world. Williams, as in the case of ethics, highlights that, in the case of political realism, the fact-value dichotomy misses the point of political normativity. BLD is shaped by the social world around us: legitimation is what makes sense only in a given historical moment under particular social circumstances. There are no universal criteria for BLD and it would be futile to try to judge the legitimacy of political authorities of the past by the criteria we find acceptable to ourselves. But it is important that this is far from being a relativistic account of legitimacy as is obvious when we go back to the discussion of the fact-value dichotomy in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. There Williams contends that the fact-value dichotomy is based on a superficial distinction and that our ethical convictions are governed by social practices in which we are deeply embedded. It is possible to use reflection to question these practices and revise ethical knowledge, but it is not entirely in our power to replace them with other convictions. In sum, BLD is a concept of political theory, but one that does not rely on 'applied morality' and does not generate an abstract political theory in the same manner as mainstream political theory does, rather it is closely connected to sociology and history.

Finally, there is a sensitivity to historical examples in contemporary realist political theory that fits rather well with realist theory's adversarial attitudes toward mainstream political theory. To mention just a few examples, Andrew Sabl's *Ruling Passions* (2002) examines the role ethics of democratic offices through six case studies and the analysis of these cases is just one element of his deeply historical and institutional approach to democratic ethics: he shows how political ethics is connected to the character of a particular regime type (democracy), how political roles are defined by historically shaped constitutional purposes and principles of action and how they are performed in specific historical situations. Williams' idea that ethical reflection should start with local ethical concepts and then be generalized, but not derived from general principles is carried out by Sabl in an exemplary manner. Similarly, Rahul Sagar (2013) discusses regulatory practices concerning state secrecy and contends that they cannot be grounded on a coherent set of principles in a satisfactory way because every kind of regulatory effort will necessarily have unwarranted consequences that are actually inherent to that type of effort. Neither the executive branch nor Congress, the judiciary, leakers, or whistleblowers are fully equipped to solve all the major problems in relation to state secrecy and we should not expect them to do so. Sagar's political theory is based on the assumption (supported by his empirical analysis) that there is no theoretical solution to this problem and that it is only a series of special-purpose institutions designed in a specific constitutional context that can address its various aspects. What these examples show is that contemporary realist political theory has its own style of theorizing that comes from its close connections to its a-theoretical core.

Conclusion

As I sought to show in this paper, contemporary realist political theory is built around an a-theoretical core that imposes considerable constraints on theorizing and offers a distinctively realist style of theorizing as opposed to that of mainstream political theory.

In the first section I discussed Bernard Williams' twin critiques of morality as opposed to ethics and applied morality as opposed to political realism to lay the groundwork for a Williamsian distinction between realist political theory and its a-theoretical realist core. Here I contended that Williams' main target is not moral considerations in politics, but rather taking theory, this particular mode of reflection, as a model for politics.

In the second section I discussed some aspects of the Williamsian distinction. I argued that it is far from being unique in contemporary realist political theory and it has antecedents in the classical realist tradition as well. I also argued that political realism can be best understood as a set of recurring themes rather than a coherent set of principles and that the special status of these themes in realism prevents contemporary realist political theory from developing a 'reflective equilibrium'-like method to revise and adjust principles in the course of the theory-building process.

Finally, in the third section, I contended that the realist core shapes the style of realist theorizing to an extent that makes it quite distinguishable from mainstream political theory. Citing the example of legitimacy I sought to show that contemporary realist political theory faces a twofold challenge when trying to offer a theoretical alternative to mainstream political theory. It has to be faithful to its realist core which is why it has to significantly differ from mainstream political theory in its style of theorizing, but it has to have substantive theoretical content inasmuch as it wishes to be political theory. Theories like Bernard Williams' Basic Legitimation Demand strive to achieve this double aim with more or less success.

What lesson we can draw from all this is that doing political theory in a realist key is inevitably a very frustrating enterprise: it demands us to tone down our ambitions when theorizing and pay more attention to the variety and heterogeneity of reasons in politics than to the coherence of a simple and elegant political theory. If we need political theory at all it is not because we can hope to provide a simple answer to our questions, but despite the fact that we cannot.

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Endnotes

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