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Realism in political theory

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Abstract
In recent decades, a 'realist' alternative to ideal theories of politics has slowly taken shape. Bringing together philosophers, political theorists, and political scientists, this countermovement seeks to reframe inquiry into politics and political norms. Among the hallmarks of this endeavor are a moral psychology that includes the passions and emotions; a robust conception of political possibility and rejection of utopian thinking; the belief that political conflict – of values as well as interests – is both fundamental and ineradicable; a focus on institutions as the arenas within which conflict is mediated and contained; and a conception of politics as a sphere of activity that is distinct, autonomous, and subject to norms that cannot be derived from individual morality. For political realists, a 'well-ordered society' is rarely attainable; a modus vivendi without agreement on first principles is often the only practical possibility. Not only will 'full compliance' never be achieved, but also it is an assumption that yields misleading accounts of political norms. While realists offer a number of compelling criticisms of ideal theory, there are some lacunae in their stance. It is not yet clear whether realism constitutes a coherent affirmative alternative to idealism. Nor have realists clarified the extent of conflict that is consistent with political order as such. And because both sides accept 'ought implies can' as a constraint on the validity of political norms, much of the debate between realists and idealists revolves around deep empirical disagreements that are yet to be clarified.

Keywords
conflict, ideal theory, institutions, moralism, moral psychology, realism

Introduction: Realism as an alternate to ideal theory

During the decades-long reign of what some have called 'high liberalism' (exemplified by John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, among others), a countermovement has slowly been taking shape. While at first glance it appears a ragtag band, I hope

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to show that, considered as a whole, it represents a coherent and formidable dissenting position. Its charter members include: British theorists such Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, John Dunn, Glen Newey, Richard Bellamy, Geoffrey Hawthorne, Raymond Geuss, and John Gray, who are critical of what they regard as the moralism, legalism, and parochialism of American liberal theory; 'left Nietzscheans,' mainly American, such as William Connolly and Bonnie Honig; Machiavellians such as Chantal Mouffe and (in a different register) Mark Philp, who appeal to Max Weber and Carl Schmitt as well as the Florentine himself; some scholars influenced by Quentin Skinner and the 'Cambridge historical school'; Judith Shklar, and her many admirers who endorse her anti-utopian skepticism and claim that we should orient ourselves toward fear of the worst case rather than hope for the best; majoritarian democrats such as Jeremy Waldron who believe that American constitutionalism seeks, wrongly and to some extent futilely, to diminish the scope and dignity of the eminently political legislative process; and finally, a small embattled band of American political scientists, Stephen Elkin chief among them, who are seized of the traditional concerns of political theory but believe that the Madisonian response to these concerns is far more relevant and useful to politics than what they regard as the top–down theorizing of today's academic liberalism.

In casting about for a rubric to summarize this dissenting movement in political theory, I can find nothing better than Williams's preferred term, 'realism'. The principal purpose of this essay is to connect the dots so as to cast the realist position in higher relief. As much as possible, I will allow leading realists to speak for themselves, giving my text an air of *bricolage*. While I will venture some conclusions, my effort is mainly to identify the principal points of disagreement between realists and their adversaries, and to catalyze serious engagement between rival camps that today are mostly engaged in parallel play.

In this paper, realism will emerge as a kind of community stew where everyone throws something different into the pot. There is however a theme or sentiment that unites realists at the threshold – the belief that high liberalism represents a desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics. Three quotations, selected from dozens, reveal the flavor of this critique: 'the major project in modern liberalism is to use ethics to contain the political' (Glen Newey); 'politics is regarded not only as something apart from law, but inferior to law' (Judith Shklar, characterizing what she called 'legalism'); and the concern of recent political philosophy was to state 'the principles of an ideal liberal constitution'. The real subject of this effort, according to John Gray, 'was not political. It was law.'[1]

Honig offers a succinct summary of this line of argument. She points to a 'mysterious phenomenon' – namely, 'the displacement of politics in political theory', especially though not exclusively contemporary political theory:

> Those writing from diverse positions – republican, liberal, and communitarian – converge in their assumption that success lies in the elimination from a regime of dissonance, resistance, conflict, or struggle. They confine politics ... to the juridical,

> administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, maintaining agreements, or consolidating communities and identities. They assume that the task of political theory is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over, and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangements [from] political conflict and instability.[2]

Realists reject this account of political theory on the grounds that it is utopian in the wrong way – that it does not represent an ideal of political life achievable under even the most favorable circumstances. Tranquillity is fleeting at best; conflict and instability are perennial possibilities. The yearning for a world beyond politics is at best diversionary, at worst destructive. As Elkin insists,

> There is no substitute for politics – if by politics we mean the various ways in which we arrive at collective, authoritative decisions in a world in which people legitimately hold different views about the purposes of government and the manner in which it should be carried on.[3]

I devote the bulk of this essay to laying out what I take to be the major differences between these two ways of theorizing politics. In the final portion, I shift gears and weigh the competing claims concerning a key question – the utility of ideal theory. I conclude that there is more to be said for realism, and less for ideal theory, than most US theorists believe. I leave it to sociologists and intellectual historians to explain why realism appears to be more robust in the UK.

Political moralism and political realism

Bernard Williams's distinction between political moralism and political realism offers the best point of entry into my topic. By political moralism he means theories that 'make the moral prior to the political'. In Williams's view, both utilitarians and modern social contract thinkers give particular moral theories priority to politics, the former directly, the latter implicitly, by building moral premises into the stylized choice situation.[4] A well-known declaration of Immanuel Kant offers the clearest example of this approach:

> Though politics by itself is a difficult art, its union with morality is no art at all . . . The rights of men must be held sacred, however much sacrifice it may cost the ruling power. One cannot compromise here and seek the middle course of a pragmatic conditional law between the morally right and the expedient. *All politics must bend its knee before the right*.[5]

By contrast, Williams states, 'political realism' encompasses approaches that give more autonomy to 'distinctively political thought'. This is not meant to imply that politics is amoral or immoral; rather, appropriate standards of

evaluation arise from within politics rather than from an external moral standpoint. Williams insists that 'political philosophy is not just applied moral philosophy . . . Nor is it just a branch of legal philosophy . . . political philosophy must use distinctively political concepts, such as power, and its normative relative, legitimation.'[6]

Williams offers these propositions as a critique of Rawls, among others. This creates a puzzle, because Rawls also denies that political philosophy is applied moral philosophy.[7] The context of the denial clarifies what he means by it: justice as fairness is not a comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine that covers all values and applies to all subjects. It rather applies to the special case of a modern democratic society. And to the extent that justice as fairness deploys moral principles, it draws them from the 'public political culture of a democratic society'.[8] (I will set aside Rawls's suggestion, which seems to me mistaken, that these features of justice as fairness characterize, *mutatis mutandis*, the whole of political philosophy.)[9]

To the extent that Rawls accurately describes his own theory, then Williams's critique must be understood as subtler: even if the moral conceptions that Rawls deploys are drawn from rather than imposed upon politics, they nonetheless relate to politics in the wrong way so as to distort the reality of political life. At the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls famously declares that

> Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant or economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.[10]

Williams denies this; in his view, the first virtue of politics is order, not justice, and justice purchased at the expense of order is likely to prove self-defeating. Sometimes the demands of justice should trump competing considerations, sometimes not; justice enjoys nothing like an absolute priority over other valued features of political life.[11] Rawls views modus vivendi arrangements as 'political in the wrong way'.[12] Again, Williams demurs; rather than being drawn from the implicit morality of political life, Rawls's rejection of the modus vivendi represents represents a dangerously utopian distance from the requirements of real politics.[13]

This is not to say that Williams straightforwardly plays Hobbes to Rawls's Kant. The idea of legitimacy is central to Williams's account of distinctively political standards. There is, he says,

> . . . an essential difference between legitimate government and unmediated power: one of the few necessary truths about political right is that it is not merely might. Those who claim political authority over a group must have *something* to say about the basis of that authority, and about the question of why the authority is being used to constrain in some ways and not others. Moreover, there is a sense in which they must have

> something to say *to each person* whom they constrain. If not, there will be people whom they are treating merely as enemies in the midst of their citizens.

Williams calls this internal requirement of political morality the 'Basic Legitimation Demand' (BLD).[14]

Williams anticipates the objection that this demand is a thinly disguised version of an external moral requirement. It may be asked, he remarks, whether the BLD is itself as moral principle. If it is, he replies, '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.'[15] Specifically, Williams argues, the situation in which one group of people simply dominates and terrorizes another is not a political relation. Rather, it is the problem to which politics is supposed to offer a solution. The demand for legitimation is in effect an effort to prevent the supposed solution from becoming another version of the problem. Put more conceptually: the core difference between power relations and political relations is the distinction between unlimited and warranted power; legitimation is part of the concept, and the reality, of politics.

Williams leaves open the question of what counts as an adequate response to the BLD. He makes one thing clear, however: the content of an acceptable BLD will vary with circumstances, as will the number and type of individuals whose assent to the proferred legitimation claim is required.[16] In particular, it is not the case that only liberal democracies can be legitimate in all circumstances – for example, when some form of authoritarianism may be needed to prevent civil war and genocide. It is not even clear that liberal democracy moves closer to becoming the sole legitimate regime as underlying conditions become more favorable. It may well be the case, however, that for Williams the impulse toward liberal democratic legitimacy becomes more powerful in the context of 'modernity' – whatever one happens to think about the ensemble of processes and attitudes that constitute modernity.[17] (As we have been forced to learn during the past decade, global opinions on this score differ more deeply than we believed or wished in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War's end.)

Mark Philp offers a similar argument, phrased more bluntly. Political rule, he says, is a

> ... conditional good that can be put to good purposes or bad, but making such judgments is not simply a case of standing outside politics and adumbrating the standards we expect politics to meet ... Those judgments of political conduct will often have to concede much that a more universalist picture would be reluctant to concede; such as acknowledging that for generations war was considered a glorious activity, or an acceptable and justifiable instrument of policy in relations between states, or recognizing the extent to which the social and cultural system of a polity makes the integration or protection of foreigners unthinkable.[18]

Legitimation is not wholly open-ended, however; our conception of the point of politics constrains what counts as an acceptable response to the BLD. This comes out clearly in Williams's discussion of human rights:

> Our conceptions of human rights are connected with what we count as . . . a legitimation; and our most basic conceptions of human rights are connected with our ideas of what it is for the supposed solution, political power, to become part of the problem. Since – once again – at the most basic level, it is clear what it is for this to happen, it is clear what the most basic violations of human rights are.[19]

The use of political power to torture, terrorize, or oppress citizens contradicts the point of politics and can never meet the BLD. This suggests, Williams concludes, that we should minimize the extent to which our views about human rights depend on disputable theses of liberalism. We should instead focus on that 'central core of evils' that is recognized as such always, everywhere, by most if not all human beings.[20]

The distinctiveness and autonomy of politics

The threshold distinction between political moralism and political realism raises some obvious questions. What is it that defines or secures the autonomy of politics? What are the features that make it a distinctive mode of human activity? While answers supplied by realists are not always as clear and convincing as one might like, it is possible to use their raw materials to construct a more satisfactory account.

Aristotle offers a useful point of departure. Humans are social animals, but unlike other social animals (bees or ants) the terms of social coordination are not hard-wired. The basic structure of political life is thus *unscripted sociality*; while we cannot escape the necessity of coordination, its terms somehow must be constructed and made effective.[21]

The classic liberal solution is to achieve coordination through consent: the terms on offer must be acceptable to all in circumstances where consent is neither compelled nor deformed by gross asymmetries of power. Political realists deny that this is possible; at the end of the day, coordination will require coercion or the threat of coercion. This does not mean that we cannot distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate terms of coordination, only that the presence of coercion is not a sufficient condition of illegitimacy.

There are limits, of course. Without something in common among members of a potential political community, politics (as opposed to war) is impossible. There is disagreement about how robust this zone of sharing agreement must be. In Aristotle's view, agreement on avoiding force and fraud and enforcing contracts is not enough. The minimal state doesn't qualify as a political community. Because politics is for the sake of 'living well', a well-ordered community must embody some agreement about what that is.[22] In Rawls's view, modern pluralism

(and perhaps also the limits of human reason) put agreement on living well beyond reach. Nonetheless, he insists, the denizens of well-ordered state must share a conception of justice, agreement on which can be reached despite unending disagreement on the substance of the good life.

Political realists reject both these positions. To be sure, Rawls is partly right: under conditions of pluralism, agreement on living well is not to be expected. But shifting focus from the good to the right doesn't help: agreement on justice is not to be expected either. (Even if abstract individuals shorn of the features that divide them in real life can reach agreement, they believe, this tells us little about the standards we should apply to politics here and now.) For realists, the agreement needed to launch and sustain politics lies on another plane entirely. First, members of actual or potential communities must prefer coordination to the absence of coordination; they must share the belief that the consequences of non-coordination are or would be wholly unacceptable. And second, they must agree that some ways of solving the coordination problem merely displace, without eliminating, the unacceptable features of uncoordinated human life. To put this in more familiar terms: individuals must agree that the core challenge of politics is to overcome anarchy without embracing tyranny. For if we do agree on this, we can create an arena of contestation over the terms of a common life that contains conflict short of war.

Jeremy Waldron distinguishes between the 'circumstances of justice' (Rawls's term) and what he calls the 'circumstances of politics'. This suggests a second way of defending the distinctiveness of politics: it represents a necessary response to conditions that other spheres of life do not encounter, at least not all at once and to the same degree. Waldron identifies deep disagreement as the core of the circumstances of politics and describes Rawls's project as addressed to a politically uninteresting question, namely: 'What would institutions look like if they were designed by people who were already agreed on a set of principles of justice?'[23] Elkin builds on this suggestion; the 'circumstances of politics' may be defined as a

> ... state of affairs in which there is a large aggregation of people who (1) have conflicting purposes that engender more or less serious conflict; (2) are given to attempts to use political power to further their own purposes and those of people with who they identify; (3) are inclined to use political power to subordinate others; and (4) are sometimes given to words and actions that suggest that they value limiting the use of political power by law and harnessing it to public purposes.[24]

Many realists embrace, as well, a third account of the autonomy of the political domain: politics requires the exercise of judgment, which is undetermined by any principles – economic, legal, moral – one may accept. This thesis is the sum of two propositions. First, it is the case that in many domains of life (not just politics), deciding what to do typically does not take the form of a practical syllogism. In deciding which of two competing moral obligations to honor, for example, one may have to engage in the moral version of a legal balancing test in which all

relevant considerations are weighed intuitively to reach a conclusion as to where the preponderance of good reasons lies. And second, the considerations relevant to the determination of political judgment cannot be reduced to reasons drawn from other domains. Indeed, many reasons that are legitimate within their own sphere would be inappropriate as bases of political judgment. While saintly individuals may sometimes sacrifice themselves in the belief that *fiat justicia, pereat mundus* is the defining principle of true morality, political leaders must act on the basis of very different considerations. A constitution is not a suicide pact, and *salus populi suprema lex* is a permanent polestar of political judgment – which is not to say that invoking the safety and security of the people is enough to justify any and all actions.

Realists broaden this point, insisting that political morality is not the same as individual morality and may often contradict it. The locus classicus of this thesis is of course Machiavelli, but one need not go all the way down his road to embrace it. One prong of the argument is the distinction between normal political situations, in which political agents can act in ways that converge toward individual morality, and extreme situations that require other forms of conduct. In circumstances of political fragmentation and disorder, restoring order and the possibility of decent, fear-free lives for citizens will often require leaders to employ means that would be forbidden in other contexts. In some circumstances, for example, it may not be possible to build or secure democracy democratically. And thus, as Philp puts it,

> . . . the integrity of the good life in which ethics and politics are effortlessly linked seems a utopian aspiration . . . [P]olitical virtue is not only not rooted in the good life, it is in its nature exposed to demands that may compromise some of our most cherished commitments.[25]

There is a more modest, less Machiavellian path to the same conclusion. It is, simply, the contention that the basic point and structure of politics creates a qualitatively different set of challenges to which individual morality offers an inadequate guide. For example, Williams suggests, the decision to engage in international humanitarian intervention cannot be modeled on individual decisions made under the moral principle of rescue.[26] One reason is that, in private conduct, the underlying assumption is that many individuals could in principle engage in rescue; every bystander could have done something to assist Kitty Genovese, although none did anything. In the international context, vast asymmetries of power and capability suggest that only a few nations can intervene effectively; often only one. Another reason is that individual rescue typically leaves everything else as it was: throwing a rope to a drowning man typically does not require or produce reorganizations of social relations and responsibilities outside of the rescuer–rescued dyad. By contrast, effective humanitarian intervention typically requires the ability and willingness to exert powers and assume responsibilities that extend well beyond the original zone of catastrophe. Stopping ethnic cleansing in the Balkans required what has turned out to be an open-ended commitment to

police a truce and foster political reconciliation; direct American intervention in Darfur might well produce a cascade of new challenges in Sudan and throughout the Muslim world.

Williams offers a second example: we cannot reason directly from a private duty to tell the truth to governments' responsibility to be truthful. The latter may not be less stringent than the former, but its basis is different – in particular, the role of public truth in uncovering government abuse and warding off tyranny. Nonetheless, there is a legitimate role for government secrecy, the protection of which may require officials to go beyond silence to a form of obfuscation that is hard to distinguish from outright deceit. Sometimes this can be justified, sometimes not.[27]

Finally, realists put institutions close to the center of their understanding of politics, and they accuse high liberals, among others, of misconceiving the role that institutions play. Political moralists, they say, tend to view institutions simply as means for the realization of antecedently established principles and aims. To be sure, there is something to this means/ends thesis: a flat-footed reading of the Declaration of Independence ('to secure these rights') or of the Constitution ('in order to') tends to support it. But, say the realists, there is much more to institutions than their instrumental function. In the first place, institutions provide arenas within which abstract concepts of principles and aims (rights, the general welfare) are worked up into concrete conceptions. As such, they help define the community's purposes, rather than simply putting prior understandings into effect.

Second: while founders may have clear ideas about a political community, they in effect hand over their authority to the institutions they create. And once established, institutions take on a life of their own. Not only can they move in anticipated ways; through their symbolic role as well as their specific decisions, they participate actively in a process through which public understandings of fundamental aims and principles mutate.[28] As Marc Stears points out, this relative autonomy of institutions is morally ambiguous in all sorts of ways; extreme pessimists such as James Scott see modern political institutions as inevitably betraying even the most high-minded ambitions.[29] But whatever moral valence one may attach to this phenomenon, realists insist that it is a fact that we cannot ignore.

A third point, in a similar vein: there is no guarantee that institutions will remain fixed over time, or in the same relation to founding expectations. Once established, they are subject to all the vagaries of the circumstances in which they are enmeshed. As Philp puts it, 'the process through which institutions are created, interpreted, and progressively reworked is itself a political process, rather than a merely deductive one'.[30]

And finally, individuals who are divided over political ends may well be able to agree on institutions as the best of forging a common course despite their disagreements. Elkin speaks for most realists when he says that

> Rawls . . . invites us to conceive of political and social institutions as either embodiments of moral-political ideals or simply as the means to achieve them. We would do

> better, however, to focus on the fact that the political institutions of any good regime must somehow enable people with conflicting interests and political views to live together in productive ways and to avoid the evil of civil disorder.[31]

Coupled with the rejection of the priority of morality, this focus on institutions leads realists to recommend a shift in the agenda of political theory. Theorists, they insist, should spend less time debating the fine points of the Difference Principle and more on the contexts and processes through which leaders engage one another, and the citizenry, to address shared problems. Richard Bellamy suggests that 'Political philosophers have given too much attention to what seem to them desirable frameworks or outcomes, too little to the procedures whereby decisions are made.'[32] As Philip Pettit remarks with some asperity, 'Philosophers are happy to talk about democracy . . . without ever exploring the rival merits of the Washington versus the Westminster system.'[33] Whatever its flaws, Madisonian constitutionalism is far closer to a model for the future theory they recommend than are the articles typically published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. In many respects, their preferred future resembles the political theory of an earlier period of modernity, and of classical antiquity as well. To quote Pettit once more,

> Many of the classic texts in political theory, from Machiavelli's *Discourses* to Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* . . . to Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* deal with how institutions should be ordered in the real world of parochial bias, limited resources, and institutional and psychological pathology . . . [I]t is little short of scandalous that this area of work is hardly ever emulated by political philosophers today.[34]

Elements of political realism

I want now to focus on what appear to me to be the basic elements of political realism. I begin at the least surprising point – namely, realism's resolutely anti-utopian stance. While many (not all) realists are hopeful about the potential scope of political reform, realists never lose sight of the possibility for regress as well as progress. Preventing the worst is the first duty of political leaders, and striving for far-reaching social improvement makes sense only when doing so does not significantly increase the odds that some previous abated evil will reappear. In assessing the odds, leaders and citizens must never assume that a good once secured is secured for good. Disruption is always possible, and the task of shoring up the conditions of decency is never-ending.[35] By historical standards, Europe seems stable today. But realists insists on recalling that Communism died less than 20 years ago, that Iberia threw off authoritarian governments just three decades ago, that France with some difficulty averted civil war as recently as the early 1960s; not to mention that Nazism and fascism were defeated only 60 years ago. And they wonder whether today's global economic crisis will leave Europe's new

democracies unscathed. To the extent that people accept democracy based on performance rather than principle, extended hard economic times may threaten a repeat of the 1930s.

There is a second sense in which realism is anti-utopian: it insists that principles cannot serve as standards for political life unless their implementation is feasible in the world as we know it. At first glance, it seems that this point is not fundamentally at issue between realists and their adversaries. Rawls asserts that 'Justice as fairness is realistically utopian: ... that is, [it asks] how far in our world (given its laws and tendencies) a democratic regime can attain complete realization of its appropriate political values.'[36] But the appearance of agreement is illusory. Rawls focuses on 'strict' or 'full' compliance – what justice is under the assumption that everyone abides by agreed-on principles. Realists deny that this assumption is anything close to feasible, and they contend that this fact affects the way we should think about justice. As Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, 'many questions of justice only arise once people behave unjustly'.[37] And they will. In Philp's formulation: while we can imagine a just liberal state, we will never achieve it

> ... for the utterly prosaic reason that political conduct is driven by motives and desires that, while they can be contained, disciplined, and to some extent laundered through political procedures and institutions and through deliberation and debate, cannot every be expunged of personal desires and ambitions.[38]

(More on this motivational realism later.) These permanent realities affect not only the application of principles to circumstances, but also their content, for the simple reason that taking an unattainable standard as the polestar is likely to produce, at best, the frustration of political aims, at worst, destructive distortions of politics. If one supposes that a republic of virtue is within reach, then the failure to attain it reflects either inadequate effort or deliberate but remediable human perversity. Acting on this belief is bound to end in oppression, even terror.

Realists think and act very differently. Elkin speaks for many when he says that 'We do not best grasp the nub of partial compliance theory by focusing on ideal theory. Rather, we can best understand partial compliance when we understand just why there can only *be* partial compliance, and what we need to do to achieve even this modest state of affairs.'[39] This is partly a semantic point, of course. To be meaningful, political standards are bound to stand at some remove from existing realities. However we define these standards, reality will fall short – that is, represent partial compliance with them. But the nub of the matter for realists is this: political theory must not assume that the motivation or capacity to act in a principled manner is pervasive among all members of a political community. Some individuals are impaired in their capacity for justice, others lack it outright, a reality that no policies, no institutions, however wise, can change.

Combining these two senses of anti-utopianism – focusing on the worst case and denying the possibility of full compliance – leads to a style of political action that Williams dubs 'bottom–up' as distinct from 'top–down'. Realists begin from where

a given political community is, they assess the strength of the bulwarks against the great evils of the human condition that community has erected, and they formulate the next steps based on that assessment. Realism 'does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances' and then apply that determination to every community.[40] This is not to say that the concept of universal principles makes no sense; basic human rights exist and apply to all. It is to say that general principles, however valid, do not specify right answers to practical problems and, if taken literally as guides to practice, are apt to do more harm than good.[41]

Realists see political conflict as ubiquitous, perennial, ineradicable, and they regard political moralists as being far too sanguine about the possibility of achieving either normative or practical consensus. A leading arch-realist, Chantal Mouffe, goes so far as to build conflict into her definition of the domain and tasks of the political arena:

> [B]y 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I means the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.[42]

Less definitionally assertive realists go pretty far in the same direction; Williams comments that 'the idea of the political is to an important degree focused in the idea of political disagreement . . . [and] political difference is of the essence of politics'.[43]

The realist focus on ineliminable conflict rather than reasoned consensus does not mean that political theory should go to the other extreme and valorize disruption and strife over settled arrangements, as Roberto Unger has sometimes done. Honig acknowledges that '[t]he perpetuity of conflict is not easy to celebrate',[44] and she does not do so. It is rather to say that politics is always and everywhere a tension between the drive for and goods of stabilization and consensus, on the one hand, and the drive for and goods of destabilization and conflict, on the other. To recognize this enduring duality is to acknowledge that the maxims of law, economics, and morality will never displace the need for political decisions, informed but undetermined by any intellectual discipline.[45]

Realists offer a number of accounts, not mutually exclusive, for the political centrality of disagreement. Many are value pluralists who believe that reason underdetermines, if not basic values themselves, at least their relative weight and priority when they come into conflict. And they will conflict: value pluralism defines an inharmonious moral universe.[46] Even when rational closure is possible, it usually won't be reached, in part because of the various burdens of reason, but mainly because the separateness and self-preference of individuals and affinity groups militates against agreement. And as Appiah reminds us, political disagreement is not only about values; individuals and groups may harbor fundamentally different pictures of how the world is configured and how it operates.[47]

Realists insist that political disagreement is very different from intellectual disagreement. Political moralists, Williams remarks, tend to construe conflicts in political thinking as 'rival elaborations of a moral text', an understanding that is explicit in Ronald Dworkin's work and implicit in many others. But this is 'not the nature of opposition between political opponents,' which 'cannot simply be understood in terms of intellectual error'. Our sentiments, our interests, our physical and cultural particularity are all at stake.[48] While we know that not all intellectual disagreements occur for the sake of finding the truth, it is at least possible to believe that truth-seeking is their telos. It is much harder to believe that political disagreements reflect a tacit orientation toward finding and enacting the common good. Politics, says Mouffe, is not an exchange of opinions but rather a contest for power. This means that there is an ineliminable element of 'hegemony' in even normal politics; otherwise put, that non-consent and therefore coercion or the threat of coercion enter not only into enforcement of decisions against the non-compliant, but also into the decisions themselves.[49]

This line of argument has an important consequence for our understanding of real-world political conflict. Williams spells it out: treating our adversaries 'as *opponents* can, oddly enough, show more respect for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers – whether as arguers who are simply mistaken, or as fellow seekers after truth'. Otherwise put, a political decision 'does not in itself announce that the other party was morally wrong or, indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that *they have lost*.'[50] We cannot straightforwardly reason from the procedure through which a political system reaches closure – even if it features deliberation – to the validity of the conclusion. (We may have reasons, however, for believing that, on average and in the long run, some decision-procedures map better than others onto empirically and morally justifiable outcomes.)

If conflict is ineliminable, it is natural to see the ordering and channeling of conflict as the core of politics from which the rest radiates. Williams identifies the first political question 'in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation. It is ''first'' because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others.'[51] How and how well different forms of political organization do this provides a key criterion by which they can be judged. Many realist liberals argue, with Locke, that Hobbes's 'solution' to the problem of conflict recapitulates the problem. Bellamy suggests that democracy enjoys an overall edge in 'mediating between competing ethics and rationalities' in the body politic.[52]

When conjoined to pessimism about the possibility of purely rational consensus, the need to abate conflict implies a more favorable stance toward coordination through modus vivendi than political moralists typically embrace. Indeed, rough and ready accommodation is often the best a community can do. (It is the only possible way forward in Iraq – which is not to say that the competing parties will pursue it.) Rawls disparagingly contrasts which he terms 'a mere modus vivendi' with the principled basis of his own constrained pluralism. This invites Williams's

retort: 'The very phrase "a mere *modus vivendi*" suggests a certain distance from the political; experience (including at the present time) suggests that those who enjoy such a thing are already lucky.' The fortunate ones should not imagine that their communities have solved the task of political stabilization once and for all; disorder is a perennial possibility, and it is important to reverse the breakdown of trust and social cooperation before the situation degenerates into wider conflict. To be sure, inequalities of bargaining power and threat advantage can always be adduced against modus vivendi solutions. But the simple fact that the parties have found a way to abate conflict counts for quite a bit in politics, and theorists should recognize this.[53]

In thinking more specifically about the requirements for sustainable order, realists emphasize the need for psychological and motivational realism. Some of their case is familiar: reason determines conduct to only a limited degree, and self-interest will always be powerful. But their thesis is more complex and interesting in two important respects. First, while political moralism sees a two-tiered psychology of reason and interest and believes that practical reason has the capacity to substantially constrain interest, the realist critique goes beyond doubting that reason is that efficacious. Moralists, say the realists, leave out an entire dimension of the human psyche – namely, the passions and emotions. Anger, hatred, the urge to dominate, the desire to destroy – these and many other impulses may not be rational, but they do not predominantly reflect interests either. We cannot understand politics without taking the passions and emotions into account.[54] While it is oddly comforting to believe that suicide bombers are moved by a kind of rational calculus, such as the hope of reward in the afterlife, it is just as likely that their rage is so intense as to make self-immolation acceptable in the service of a wider circle of destruction. As we see every day, violent antipathy can blind parties to the fact that some possible agreements would serve the interests of all.

This account of psychology has important consequences for the construction of stable and decent political orders. The centuries-old effort to replace the passions with the interests, realists believe, is doomed to failure. Commerce may well soften the most destructive passions, as thinkers from Montesquieu on have argued, but these passions will never vanish. Indeed, we can observe a kind of 'return of the repressed' dialectic at work in modern history: sustained periods of peace and prosperity can lead to contempt for the softness and risk aversion of commercial societies and produce a yearning for the (alleged) nobility of armed conflict. (Historians have noted the joy with which many young men throughout Europe greeted the outbreak of the First World War.) Rather than hoping for the disappearance of aggressive impulses, theorists and constitution-makers need to accept, and channel as best they can, a host of morally ambiguous motives for public action. A modern democratic regime, says Elkin, 'not only controls such often unattractive, even dangerous motives, but also relies on them for producing the good that is republican government'.[55]

There is a second key difference between moralists and realists concerning moral psychology: even realists who endorse liberal democracy as the best regime under

modern circumstances, and therefore accept the moral and civic equality at the heart of modern democracy, acknowledge important inequalities among individuals. These inequalities go beyond the 'unequal faculties of acquiring property' Madison famously emphasized in Federalist 10; they encompass, as well, differences in cognitive and moral capacities. As he declared in Federalist 57, 'The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, . . . to obtain for rulers men who possess the most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of society.' With Aristotle, Madison believed that the selection of leaders through election (rather than lot) was an aristocratic procedure that would, on average and in the long run, allow the wisest and most virtuous to rise.

Realists reject the assumption that human beings are equal in what Rawls identifies as the two fundamental moral powers. This does not mean that realists must reject (or that many do reject) the political arrangements of modern democracy. It does mean that the coexistence of empirical inequalities among individuals alongside their moral and civic equality is a fact that constitution drafters and policy-makers ignore at their peril. This thesis is less unfamiliar in practice than it may seem in theory. While Americans think of jury duty and military service as zones of civic equality, we acknowledge through our selecting procedures that some of our fellow citizens should not be jurors and soldiers. And we hope (sometimes against hope) that our convoluted process of electing presidents will bring to the fore individuals whose governing capacities are well above average and who will remain committed to constitutional governance.

The realists' view of moral and political life leads to deep skepticism about the extent to which democratic decision-making can be reconstructed along the lines of rational deliberation. They believe, with Aristotle, that real-world political deliberation is and will always be incompletely rational and that the theoretical presuppositions of deliberative democrats, whether inspired by Habermas or Rawls, are too demanding ever to be met in practice.[56] 'Under the pragmatic presupposition of an inclusive and noncoercive rational discourse among free and equal participants,' says Habermas, 'everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others.'[57] It is hard to imagine why we should take this requirement seriously, even as a regulative ideal. For his part, Rawls speaks of the need to assume a 'certain good faith' without which we cannot deliberate together. But should we assume anything of the sort? Put differently: rather than framing a conception of public reason around the assumption of mutual good faith, perhaps we should go the other way round, shaping deliberative theory and practice in light of the certainty that this presumption will not be equally true for all members of the community. It is from this standpoint, notes Bernard Yack, that Aristotle describes the appeal to character as the most effective form of public argument, 'especially when people are uncertain about which of a number of options to favor, a situation that is much more common than we like to think'.[58] If so, the American electorate's oft-deplored focus on the character of political candidates rather than on the details of their policy proposals is anything but diversionary.

Many political moralists endorse deliberation as the best mode of social coordination. To this realists offer a number of responses. First, an obvious but often-overlooked point: on its own, deliberation is not adequate to the task of coordination. At its best, deliberation can help inform the judgment of the deliberators, but moving from these judgments to a binding decision requires, in addition, a decision-rule. Unless deliberation yields unanimity, unlikely when serious and contested issues are at stake, the rule will involve an element of *force majeure*. And unanimity is not to be expected, especially when serious and contested issues are at stake; value pluralism and the diversity of views under conditions of liberty all but preclude convergence toward rational agreement. Second, the real world offers a number of models of social coordination that do not involve rational deliberation – among them, bargaining, manipulative persuasion, procedural and institutional arrangements, deference to authority, even coercion. Moralists must offer, say the realists, non question-begging justifications for excluding, as generically unacceptable, any or all of these possibilities. And third, to the extent that deliberation requires agents to be symmetrically situated, movement toward the situation in which discursive agents are equally empowered will require a range of non-deliberative political actions, including agitation and emotional story-telling. (This point is emphasized by realists who are also radical democrats, such as the late Iris Marion Young.[59])

This is not to say that there are no standards for public discourse. But realists insist that these standards must be drawn from within – from the inherent structure of political relationships – and not from external norms such as public reason or the ideal speech situation. Yack spells this out most fully. Because politics pursues the mutual advantage of citizens, public speakers cannot appeal to their own advantage as justification for a collective decision. Nor can they justify a course of action that might bring disaster to the community on the grounds that it comports with some abstract moral norm. And finally, the structure of politics constrains the kind of character or public face the speaker can present. While judges are supposed to be disinterested, aspiring leaders cannot present themselves as neutral umpires among competing points of view. They must rather take a stand, propose a platform, and make people believe that they do so public-spiritedly, with the best interests of the community in mind.[60]

Idealists versus realists on political possibility and the nature of good theory

There is a political backdrop to what might appear a highly academic debate between ideal theorists and their realist critics. Many realists fear that what they regard as the excessively ambitious – in some respects impossible – demands of ideal theory provide a moral predicate for government coercion, even tyrannical tendencies, as change falls short of unattainable ideals. For their part, many reformists – especially those of a liberal stripe, fear that an experience-based

concept of feasibility will preserve an unjust status quo that could be changed through determined action. Each group rests its stance on incontrovertible evidence. Those who fear ambitious politics can point to any number of utopian revolutionary movement since the French Revolution; those who fear caution can cite the social movements of the past two generations, which were undertaken in the face of claims that radical changes in, for example, race and gender relations were impossible.

The art of reform is to locate the outer perimeter of the desirable possible and to use it as a guide for action in the here and now. And it is certainly plausible to suggest a division of labor, as Adam Swift does: social science takes the lead in identifying what's possible, and philosophy selects what's desirable from the feasible set.[61]

It is hardly a straightforward matter, however, to specify what's feasible. Some things are what Derek Parfit calls deeply impossible – violations of laws of nature. It is not unusual for politicans, at least in the United States, to propose policies that contradict what scientists know about energy and the environment. Others are technically impossible – that is, infeasible in particular circumstances. For example, today it may be impossible to forge majority support for a particular legislative initiative in the US House of Representatives. That is not to say that it would be impossible in the Senate, or in the House next year. Nonetheless, a leader would be foolish to try in the House right now – that is, unless he has an aim other than immediate victory.

The real difficulty comes in the grey zone between these two types of infeasibility. Consider claims based on human nature. Some people believe that core aspects of human nature are fixed, others that they are historically influenced or even socially constructed. Some socio-biologists who embrace a fixed core of human nature go on to claim that group-based prejudice and gender hierarchy are hard-wired. The evidence of recent decades lends little support their view.

In my lifetime, the civil rights movement transformed relations among racial and ethnic groups, and the women's movement created what can only be called a revolution in gender relations. Those who argued that this change wasn't possible turned out to be wrong, and the United States would be a worse society today if their doubts had prevailed half a century ago. But (to state the obvious), the fact that some change is possible doesn't mean that all change is, and theorists must try to parse the difference.

But hard as we try, we can never be sure. If we must lean in one direction or the other, history does suggest a preferable course. Over the two centuries, anyway, theories of politics that expect too much of human beings have done even more damage than have those that expect too little. Theories that preach the total malleability of human nature have proved counterfactual and disturbingly open to excess. Faced with resistance, power-holders are wont to assume, not that their goals are unattainable, but rather that they haven't pushed hard enough. So they go further, eventually disregarding all limits. The Republic of Virtue begins in hope, proceeds through oppression, and ends in tyranny. By contrast, James

Madison's nuanced pessimism (if men were angels, no government would be necessary, etc.) may have slowed reform, but it has also prevented the extreme concentrations of power that enable tyranny.

Four decades ago, in 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality',[62] Peter Singer created a stir by arguing (among many provocations) that social proximity makes no moral difference. It doesn't matter whether the child is your own, your neighbor's, or 'a Bengali whose name I shall never know'; the obligation is assist is the same in all cases. Our reluctance to admit and act on the moral equivalence is both 'psychological' and open to change because a product of malleable social norms. In a society that regards tithing as the height of generosity, a proposal that we should give away half of our income or more will be regarded as unrealistic; in a society organized around the principle that 'no man should have more than enough while others have less than they need', the same proposal might seem niggardly.

But human history is not irrelevant. It is no accident that we have never seen a society that embraced Singer's principle, and I can say with utter confidence that we never will. What are we to make of this? One possibility is to deny, with David Estlund, that 'ought implies reasonably likely'. Unless we know that an otherwise attractive maxim is impossible, we should think and act as though it were possible. Another possibility is to acknowledge the obstacles human nature throws up but to regard them as either original sin or incorrigible selfishness and lean as hard as we can in the other direction, knowing full well that our efforts cannot wholly succeed. But there is a third possibility: we can pause at the threshold to ask whether our reluctance to give precisely the same weight to an unknown Bengali as to our own child is mere moral myopia or rather evidence of an essential feature of the moral world we actually inhabit. From that standpoint, our inability to comply with Singer's prescription suggests that something is wrong with the prescription, not with us.

I'm happy to grant that if I can rescue an unknown child from drowning in a pond at the cost of getting my clothing wet, it would be monstrous of me to turn my back. But if I see two children drowning – my own and someone else's – and can save only one, does it follow that I must be indifferent as to which one? Those who assert the moral insignificance of particularist ties have a heavy burden of proof, and I'm skeptical that they can discharge it.

Let me now move from these informal comments to a somewhat more organized reflections on the nub of the difference between ideal theory and its critics. It is useful to begin by clearing away some underbrush.

I agree with Swift on the following: it perfectly reasonable to say that political theory can have what I would call a theoretical objective – seeking the truth about politics, including political norms such as justice. While such truths typically have a bearing on practical life, it is not essential that the theorists have a practical end in view. I further agree that a truth-seeking political theorist may ask how human beings would or should act in circumstances very different from those that actually exist.[63] The difficulty arises, I believe, in determining when the deviation from the world as we know it becomes so significant – quantitatively or qualitatively – that it

becomes the political theory equivalent of science fiction – an act of imagination that may illuminate what is distinctive about the world we actually inhabit but that offers no guidance about how we should function in that world. A theory of justice for a parallel world has no necessary application to our world.

If the science fiction analogy leaves you cold, here's another: certain contrary to fact assumptions may frame closed, internally coherent systems of inference that are disconnected from the real world, in the way that certain mathematical systems refer to nothing except themselves. The truths mathematicians discover are truths about, and for, those systems – period. (This is to be contrasted with types or uses of mathematics that help inform theoretical physics and generate hypotheses subject to empirical testing.)

Or consider the case of contemporary neoclassical economics. At least in the United States for most of the past half century, scholars built theories on key contrary to fact assumptions, including full information and perfect means-ends rationality. These assumptions permitted the construction of elegant theoretical structures whose connection with the world became increasingly remote. Knowing what good policy would be if economic actors were completely informed and fully rational said almost nothing about good policy in the real world. Not surprisingly, economists who questioned these assumptions and proposed alternatives resting on evidence and experience ended up winning Nobel prizes.

Consider *Animal Spirits*, a book, inspired by Keynes, written by two outstanding contemporary economists. Toward the beginning they remark that

> The economics of textbooks seeks to minimize as much as possible departures from pure economic motivation and from rationality . . . The economics of Adam Smith is well understood. Explanations in terms of small deviations from Smith's ideal system are thus clear, because they are posed within a framework that is already very well understood. But that does *not* mean that these small deviations from Smith's system describe how the economy really works.

And they continue, 'In our view economic theory should be derived not from minimal deviations from the system of Adam Smith but rather from the deviations that actually do occur and that can be observed.'[64] That does not mean taking human beings just as we find them. The authors evidently hope that laying bare the often-unsought consequences of the motives that drive us can create, to some extent, both self-awareness and self-correction. But it does mean that *homo economicus* will always be a fiction, and not a particularly useful one.

So how do we conceptualize and locate the line in political theory that corresponds to the distinction between scientific inquiry and science fiction? (Theories that violate the canons of logic or rest on laws of nature other than the ones we now have good reason to accept are on the fiction side – or so I will assume.) Let me begin with some clear examples on each side.

Define poverty any way you want. Even though no society has ever been wholly free of poverty, it would be perfectly sensible for theorists to ask what justice would

be (is?) in a society without poverty. One reason for this is that it's reasonable to expect that such a society not only can but will come into existence, in much the same way that certain diseases have been eradicated in many societies (and a handful throughout the world). A zero-poverty community is counterfactual, but not in the wrong way. On the other hand, while it is possible to imagine the human species as immortal, a theory of justice in which the assumption of immortality played a significant role would be counterfactual in the wrong way. That does not mean that it is useless to explore the implications of that assumption: as a theoretical matter, it would be of some interest to understand which aspects of our intuitive conception of justice refer back in some way to the fact of our mortality.

With these polar examples in mind, let's turn now to a contested case: the assumption of 'full compliance'. Like no poverty, we've never seen such a society; unlike no poverty, we never will. Zofia Stemplowska argues that 'the assumption of full compliance guards us from making our demands too permissive towards those who are simply unwilling to comply with reasonable limits on the permissibility of their actions'.[65] The obvious retort is that it is possible to be too demanding as well as too permissive, and it is not at all clear that the norm of full compliance locates the point of moral equipoise between these extremes. To progress beyond this *tu quoque* impasse, we must consider the substance of what people are being asked to do. In my view, the expectation that some people won't comply should be built into the substance of what all people are expected to comply with. Consider laws regulating the manufacture and operation of automobiles. We have every reason to believe that, however strict the enforcement regime may be, some people are going to drive recklessly and too fast, generating accidents that could main or kill others. In this context, it makes sense to have laws imposing safety standards for automobile design (e.g. shock-absorbing bumpers, side air bags), and also laws that require drivers to act in ways that will protect them against the consequences of accidents (mandatory wearing of seat belts). This is reasonable, because we know that manufacturers and drivers are capable of complying with these demands, even though they may be jarring at first. (In response to regulations, cars have become much safer, and seatbelt use in the United States has gone from almost nil to near universality over the past three decades.)

This example points to a deeper reason why full compliance may lead to substantive distortion: the propensity to act justly is distributed unequally in the human species. The question is not whether some people are capable of compliance, but whether all are. That I deny. Consider an American sports analogy (if you don't like it, plug in something similar from your own national sport). It is possible that some player will repeat the feat – getting four hits in every ten at-bats through an entire season – last achieved by the great Ted Williams nearly 70 years ago. It is impossible that every player in the league will, because innate batting skills are distributed along a bell curve whose right-hand tail is barely tangent with four hits in ten at-bats. As you lower the threshold, the percentage of players expected to reach or exceed it will increase, of course, but not everyone will unless you reduce it to near-zero, in which case it ceases to function as

a standard. Of course, the distribution of specialized skills is one thing, the distribution of moral motivations quite another. But the basic point remains: the assumption of equality contradicts observation and experience.

So – to return – when we assume full compliance, what do we learn about justice that has action-guiding force in the world as we know it? The first – obvious – point is that large portions of the domain of justice as understood for millennia simply disappear – criminal justice and, more broadly, what Aristotle called corrective justice. No crime, no criminal trials, and no punishment, and therefore no need for theories of just procedures or just sentencing.

But what about distributive justice? Full compliance makes a substantive difference here as well. It implies zero costs of enforcement, making more available for other individual and social functions and raising new distributive issues. It implies no negative incentive effects, so tax rates can be very high with no consequences for either work effort or tax receipts. Most important, it means that there's no need to take into account differential propensities to contribute to economic and civic life, with the result that an entire category of desert drops out.

So the assumption of full compliance alters the content of what we believe to be just. Full compliance means, inter alia, equal compliance, which means that distributive decisions that reflect moral differences of behavior fall away. And similarly for other matters: we can design a system of compensation under the assumption that everyone works equally competently and conscientiously. But the fact is that they don't, and this inequality is relevant. It's not the only consideration, of course, but leaving it out would change (I believed distort) our conception of justice.

Is this the right way to think about justice? Is the differential propensity to act justly simply a constraint on the implication of ideal justice, or is it a relevant difference to be taken into account in conceptualizing ideal justice? An analogy: suppose we wanted to know how to design shoe production under the assumption that everyone wears the same size. Although we might come up with intellectually interesting proposals, they would have no action-guiding force, because the contrary-to-fact assumption is central to how we think about the shoe production process.

The argument can be conducted at a higher level of generality, however. To judge from texture of the current debate, G. A. Cohen's essay 'Facts and Principles' functions as an ur-text.[66] Put simply, Cohen's claim is that the most basic normative principles (including principles of justice) must be principles that don't reflect facts, in the sense that facts constitute no part of their justification. Consider an example that he provides of the general relation between principles (Ps) and facts (Fs). If we believe that we should keep our promises (P1) because only when we do can promises successfully pursue their projects (F), then we also believe (P2) that we should help people pursue their projects. But if asked why we believe that, we will respond with something to the effect that people's happiness should be promoted (P3), a proposition that may depend on no fact. And even if we can regress beyond P3, we will eventually reach a P that is fact-independent.[67]

The difficulty with this entire line of argument should be obvious: the alleged self-evidence of P3 rests on a broad fact about the human species: while we may value happiness, there is a gap between that feature of our species-nature and others, such that we lack some or all of the happiness we crave. Given standard theological conceptions of God, it would be ridiculous to aver that such a being 'pursues' happiness. The God of the philosophers (e.g. Aristotle's) may enjoy happiness, but as a sign of plenitude rather than lack. Indeed, if God is understood as perfect and complete, then such a being by definition encompasses everything, needs nothing to achieve completion, and therefore pursues nothing. To repeat: if humans were God or god-like, we would not affirm Cohen's proposition. So while it may true in some technical sense that P3 is not 'grounded' on any F, its validity does depend on the ensemble of Fs that helps define its meaning.

Consider another of Cohen's examples: beings with nervous systems should be treated with caution (P1) because such beings are liable to pain (F1). The connection between P1 and F1 is a further principle (P2): 'absent other considerations, one should avoid causing pain' or equivalently, 'if a being is liable to pain, you ought not to cause it pain'.[68] I find this equally unpersuasive, in part for reasons packed into the phrase 'absent other considerations'. We can all think of perfectly good reasons why causing pain in a being capable of feeling it may be the right thing to do in specific circumstances. If there is a clash of principles, it does not follow that there must be a higher principle in light of which we can resolve the conflict, or a lexical ordering among principles, or a common measure of value into which we may convert them.

Consider a third example. Cohen considers the argument that 'ought implies can' (a proposition he does not deny) may disqualify a proposed P as a binding principle if in fact some or all agents cannot act in accordance with that principle (F). But, replies Cohen, anyone who rejects P on the grounds that it is impossible to do P is committed to a fact-insensitive principle: one ought to do P if it is possible to do P.[69]

Maybe so. But (a) when we inspect P, we will encounter the kind of fact-relatedness we saw in the previous two paragraphs. And (b) in every sense that matters for practical norms, 'ought implies can' brings human nature and circumstances squarely into the picture. If one ought to do P if possible, but we have good reason to believe that most of all human beings cannot do P, then P loses its normative force *for us*. While it may be in some sense instructive to discover that we would stand under different obligations if our species were constructed otherwise, I fail to see how that discovery moots the normative importance of facts. Otherwise put: as soon as considerations of possibility enter the calculus – not ad hoc, but via a generally accepted principle linking possibility and obligation – then human nature and circumstances become central. If Cohen intends his thesis to be relevant to our world, it's false; if not, why should we care?

So where does all this leave ideal theory? On the one hand, few would accept a conception of political theory that merely ratifies the status quo. If theory cannot diagnose and criticize the imperfections of current arrangements, most of us would

lose interest in it, and rightly so. The real issue is the basis on which theory separates itself from the actually existing world of politics. Ideal theory is free to explore the implications of alterations in our beliefs, motives, and circumstances, all of which can (and have) changed dramatically in human history, or even in recent decades. In many places, age-old prejudices about race and gender have faded, while nations mired in poverty and oppression have moved toward prosperity and liberty.

But the observation that human affairs can change significantly along some dimensions is not to say that they can change limitlessly along all dimensions. For example, most human beings will never give the same moral weight to all members to their species without regard to particular ties. A theory that assumes we can do so will be ideal in the wrong way. (Nor is it clear that we should do so even if we could, but that is another matter.) A theory is ideal in the right way if its assumptions and expectations are challenging but feasible in its specified domain of application. Norms advanced as generally binding should be broadly feasible. Assuming that exemplary moral powers are widely shared and that exemplary moral accomplishments are broadly feasible makes about as much sense as assuming that all of us can perform at the level of professional athletes. This is not only a theoretical point: if most of us undertook a training regimen designed for professionals, we would be more likely to experience bodily harm than development. It would be an odd sort of 'ideal' theory that would make matters worse if we took it seriously as a guide to action.

There is a final point that I offer tentatively, as a speculation. It is my impression that practitioners of ideal theory believe that apparent conflicts among values can be resolved, either by dissolving heterogeneous moral considerations into a common quantifiable metric (as most utilitarians do), or by arguing that values don't conflict when properly understood (as Ronald Dworkin does), or by claiming that key values can be lexically ordered (as John Rawls does). But in what sense can Berlinian value pluralists propound ideal theory? They cannot say that justice (or anything else, for that matter) is the first virtue of social institutions, full stop; in some circumstances, other considerations may take priority. And within a broad range, they cannot say that one resolution of value conflicts is preferable to another, regardless of circumstances. There would appear to be a deep compatibility between value pluralism at the level of moral theory and an account of politics that looks to institutions that resolve value-based conflicts through negotiation and bargaining, appealing to mutual accommodation and modus vivendi rather than principles that yield premises of action binding on all.

Conclusion

I would not have organized and presented the realist position if I did not believe that it constitutes a significant challenge to the dominant way of doing political theory. While I haven't offered a full analysis of the debate, it may nonetheless be useful for purposes of discussion to draw up a very preliminary balance-sheet.

In my judgment, four building-blocks of the realists' view are particularly strong: the injunction to take politics seriously as a particular field of human endeavor; the proposition that civil order is the *sine qua non* for every other political good; the emphasis on the evaluation and comparison of institutions and regime-types, not only principles; and the call for a more complex moral and political psychology.

On the other side, there are at least three areas in which realists have for the most part failed to respond to obvious lacunae in their stance. First, it isn't yet clear whether realism is essentially critical and cautionary, a warning against liberal utopianism, as opposed to a coherent affirmative alternative. As Stears points out, the realist program of accepting conflict while preserving order has thus far led in three quite different directions: first, to *agonism*, which accepts robust conflict among competing hegemonic programs, cabined by institutions and procedures and protected by enforced exclusions at the margins; second, to *limited government* as the effort to manage conflict by reducing the scope of binding public decisions in favor of markets and civil society; and third, to *Madisonian strategies* for domesticating conflict by dispersing it among factions, national institutions, and levels of federalism.[70] More generally, if realists want to maintain 'legitimacy' as the dividing-line between acceptable and unacceptable regimes, they will have to say more about the kinds of public claims that count as satisfying this criterion.

Second, realists want to preserve the distinction between war and political association. Even the most fervent agonists draw a line dividing adversarial relations from all-out enmity – dividing, that is, conflicts they regard as a source of political health from those that risk blowing up the polity altogether. As Mouffe puts it,

> Conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association. This means that *some kind of common bond* must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated . . .[71]

If so, it is not enough to invoke abstract concepts such as 'the adversarial'; realists will have to say more about the nature of the 'common bond' that distinguishes the state of politics from the state of war. Arguing that this bond is merely imposed by the stronger parties verges on begging the question. The issue is whether politics can be understood as conflictual and hegemonic 'all the way down' or, on the other hand, whether it must incorporate some idea of agreement and endorsement. And if the latter, how should realists understand this idea? (As we've seen, Williams's account of legitimation – his account of minimal agreement – raises as many questions as it answers.)

And finally, realists and moralists do not ultimately disagree about the nature of misguided or irrelevant utopian thought. After all, the most stringent moralist who ever wrote invoked the principle that ought implies can; if a political proposal simply cannot be realized, it loses normative force, even as a regulative ideal; all the more so if it is infeasible, not just here and now, but in the most favorable

possible circumstances. In this respect, the dispute comes down to competing ways of distinguishing between what is possible and what isn't. Many realists take the view, for example, that certain features of human psychology are fixed, at least until evolutionary forces transform the human species, and that these features restrict the range of feasible political structures. Many moralists believe either that human beings are more malleable than that or that a more favorable upbringing and social circumstances will reinforce the positive elements of human psychology while muting self-interest and aggression. Although this dispute is largely empirical (in the broadest sense of the term), its theoretical consequences are profound. While it is not yet clear how we can move the issue closer to resolution, political theorists must engage it more directly than they have in some time.

Notes

1. All quoted in Stephen L. Elkin (2006) *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic: Constitutional Design after Madison*, pp. 358–9, n. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. Bonnie Honig (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 2. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
3. Elkin (n. 1), p. 257.
4. Bernard Williams (2005) *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, pp. 1–3. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
5. I. Kant, 'Perpetual Peace', appendix 1, in Kant (1970) 'On the Disagreement between Morals and Politics in Relation to Perpetual Peace', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. H Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Williams argues that the later Rawls of *Political Liberalism* did not transcend this schema: 'it still represents the political conception [of justice] as itself as moral conception . . . ; the solution to the central problem of the stability of a just society, for instance, is worked out in terms of the moral powers of its citizens'. Ibid. p. 77, n. 1.
6. Ibid. pp. 3, 77. See also Mark Philp (2007) *Political Conduct*, p. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Richard Bellamy in Morten Ebbe Juul Nielsen (ed.) (2007) *Political Questions: 5 Questions on Political Philosophy*, p. 20. London: Automatic Press.
7. John Rawls (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly, p. 14. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
8. Ibid. p. 5.
9. Equally mistaken is Rawls's contention that moral philosophy, unlike political philosophy, can ignore the limits of practical possibility: '[A] moral conception may condemn the world and human nature as too corrupt to be moved by its precepts and ideals' (ibid. p. 184). Sure it can; but should it? Unless one believes, with Kant, that morality simply reflects our rational nature and therefore applies to all rational beings as such, the fact that other permanent features of our species' physical and psychological makeup render a particular moral conception unworkable counts as a decisive objection against it. Rightly understood, morality is designed to secure the highest possibilities of the kind of beings we are and reflects our limits as well as potentialities. A morality that asks more of us than we can deliver makes us miserable to no good purpose.
10. John Rawls (1971) *A Theory of Justice,* p. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

11. Williams (n. 4), p. 3; see also Raymond Geuss (2009) *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 82–4. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
12. Rawls (n. 7), p. 188.
13. Williams (n. 4), p. 2, n. 2. I return to this point below.
14. Ibid. p. 135.
15. Ibid. p. 4.
16. Ibid. pp. 135–6.
17. Ibid. pp. 9, 94.
18. Philp (n. 6), p. 74.
19. Williams (n. 4), p. 63.
20. Ibid. p. 74.
21. Months after drafting this paragraph, I encountered a similar argument, better expressed, by Geuss (n. 11), pp. 21–2:

    The members of a human group are not parts of a single organism, like the hands or feet of an animal, who have no will of their own, nor are we like bees, ants, or even herd animals whose strong natural instincts can be counted on, at least in some areas, to be powerful enough to assure more or less harmonious coordination. Rather, human, even in the most repressive societies we know, grow up to be individuated creatures who are separate centres for the formation, evaluation, and revision of beliefs, attitudes, values, and desires, and for the initiation of action that puts these beliefs and desires into effect. So coordination of action in our societies, either of a negative kind (that I don't act so as to thwart your plans) or of a positive kind (that I act so as to maximize the attainment of some goal that can be reached only by joint effort) is always a social achievement, and it is something attained and preserved, and generally achieved only at a certain price..
22. *Politics* 1280a25–b40.
23. Quoted in Elkin (n. 1), p. 359, n. 6.
24. Ibid. 254–5.
25. Philp (n. 6), pp. 34, 38–9, 89, 94.
26. Williams (n. 4), p. 148.
27. Ibid. pp. 157, 159.
28. Philp (n. 6), p. 240.
29. Marc Stears (2007) 'Review Article: Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion', *British Journal of Political Science* 37: 543.
30. Philp (n. 6), p. 239.
31. Elkin (n. 1), p. 256. See also Philp (n. 6), p. 235.
32. Nielsen (n. 6), p. 24.
33. Ibid. p. 116.
34. Ibid.
35. Williams (n. 4), p. 3; Philp (n. 6), p. 182.
36. Rawls (n. 7), p. 13.
37. Nielsen (n. 6), p. 9.
38. Philp (n. 6), p. 111.
39. Elkin (n. 1), p. 255.
40. Williams (n. 4), p. 61.
41. Williams (n. 4), p. 72.
42. Chantal Mouffe (2005) *On the Political*, p. 9. London: Routledge.
43. Williams (n. 4), pp. 77–8.

44. Honig (n. 2), p. 14.
45. Ibid. pp. 4, 211.
46. John Gray (1995) 'Agonistic Liberalism', *Philosophy and Social Policy* 12(1) (Winter): 111–35;
47. Williams (n. 4), pp. 115–27 (arguing against Dworkin's claim that liberty and equality, rightly understood, cannot conflict).
48. Nielsen (n. 6), p. 7.
49. Williams (n. 4), pp. 13, 78.
50. Mouffe (n. 42), pp. 17, 51; Philp (n. 6), 189. Stears (n. 29) is a superb summary of this strand of realism.
51. Williams (n. 4), p. 13; emphasis in the original.
52. Ibid. p. 3; see also Philp (n. 6), p. 9.
53. Nielsen (n. 6), p. 20.
54. Williams (n. 4), pp. 2–3.
55. Pierre Manent (2006) *A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State*, pp. 75, 163–4. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Elkin (n.1), p. 255. Mouffe (n. 42), p. 24.
56. Elkin (n. 1), p. 267. On this theme, see generally Albert O. Hirschman (1977) *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
57. For some of the best empirical evidence bearing on this point, see Diana C. Mutz (2006) *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
58. Quoted in Robert Goodin (2003) 'Deliberation Within', in James S. Fishkin and Peter Laslett (eds) *Philosophy, Politics and Society 7: Debating Deliberative Democracy*, p. 76, n. 48. Oxford: Blackwell.
59. Bernard Yack (2006) 'Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian Understanding of Political Deliberation', *Political Theory* 34(4) (Aug.): 429–30.
60. Iris Marion Young (2003) 'Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy', in Fishkin and Laslett (n. 58), pp. 102–20. See also Lynn M. Sanders (1997) 'Against Deliberation', *Political Theory* 25(3): 347–76.
61. Yack (n. 59), p. 423.
62. Adam Swift (2008) 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances', *Social Theory and Practice* 34(3) (July): 364.
63. Peter Singer (1972) 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(1) (Spring): 229–43.
64. Swift (n. 62), pp. 366–79.
65. George A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller (2009) Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why it Matters for Global Capitalism, p. 5. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
66. Zofia Stemplowska (2008) 'What's Ideal about Ideal Theory?', *Social Theory and Practice* 34(3) (July): 332–3.
67. G. A. Cohen, 'Facts and Principles', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31(3): 211–45.
68. Ibid. p. 216.
69. Ibid. p. 225.
70. Ibid. p. 231.
71. Stears (n. 29), pp. 545–7. 72.Mouffe (n. 42), p. 20; emphasis added.
72. Mouffe (n. 42), p. 20; emphasis added.