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# Political Philosophy and the Attraction of Realism

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In what follows, I want to examine the challenge of realism, but I want to do this by exploring the pathology of realism amongst political philosophers. In taking this line I am primarily interested in diagnosing the problem of realism rather than seeking to challenge, correct or cure it.

Although I retain a constitutional sympathy for the activity that the realists reject, and puzzlement at the attractions of the realist's position, my point in this paper is to try and set out what that challenge is. In effect I am concerned with laying out the structure of the realist position. This enterprise, I take to be a first step to an answer to the realist's critical challenge.

## 1. Political Philosophy and the Problem of Realism

The charge that political philosophy is either insufficiently realistic and should be abandoned or else transformed, is an increasingly familiar one.<sup>1</sup>

And as has been said, this call to realism is a difficult challenge to gainsay.<sup>2</sup>

Who could possibly disagree with realism? Well of course, the right response is that it depends upon what the reference to realism involves. Is it a metaphysical claim about the nature and ontology of values? Or is it a practical claim about the character and object of enquiry? What political theory does

not have, but which its sister sub-discipline of international relations does, is a clear target in the form of realism. Apart from its very early years, when international relations was more akin to what is now often practiced as Peace Studies, the subject has functioned with an idea of realism as its default position. The type of realism deployed in international relations has varied from classical to neo-realist positions and has drawn on classical political theories, such as those of Machiavelli or Hobbes, historical studies and more recently game theory and other formal models of political behaviour. Despite being the default position of international relations realism and realist accounts of world politics have by no means been accepted as true. Much international relations theory and all of what is now described as international political theory, has challenged the realist paradigm for explaining and justifying international action (see Brown 2002). But at least international relations has the advantage over political philosophy, in possessing some clear sense of what the virtues or problem of realism is. Political philosophers do not have a clear default position or common enemy when confronting the realist challenge. Political scientists might challenge political philosophy with being unrealistic or idealistic, but that is not really the point. Authors, who claim that political philosophy has some kind of realism deficit, are not arguing that it should be replaced by a more empirically rooted political science, or if that is the case, they tend to disguise the claim. For philosophers such as Geuss, it is pretty clear that

positive political science fares no better than the supposedly applied ethics approach of normative political philosophy. If John Rawls is the problem, then it is pretty clear that Norman Schofield, Ken Shepsle, Gary King or Adam Przeworski do not offer the solution.

The perspective of international relations is different from that of political philosophy. In the former the nature and problem of realism is at the heart of the subject, whereas for political philosophy it is much less clear what the issue of realism is, and whether the many references to it actually have a common referent. A system of mutually antagonistic states with discrete interests competing for advantage over scarce resources explains why the realist's default position in international relations is one of, pervasive conflict or the permanent threat of war. It would be a considerable stretch of the imagination to claim that many serious political scientists claim that the background condition of politics is similarly one of persistent mortal conflict. Yet is this what is being claimed by political philosophers who have fallen under the spell of realism?

One of the claims I want to make is that there is a surprising similarity between the claims of many classical realist positions in international relations and some of the claims of realists in political philosophy. The one obvious difference is the absence of a state system as the main object of

enquiry, but perhaps even that seemingly significant difference can be finessed. As we shall see the idea of 'modus vivendi' does extend a similar view of group conflict and hostility into the realm of political compromise and the justification of norms. I do not intend to claim that there is a causal connection between classical realist theories in international relations and the appeal to realism in political philosophy, although I suspect that such a case could indeed be made. An adequate history of British political thought in the twentieth century would explore the connections between a generation of philosophers such as Stuart Hampshire and Isaiah Berlin whose experience of the breakdown of appeasement in the interwar period parallels that of critics of the idealism of interwar international relations such as E.H Carr. The relations are complex and indirect but they nevertheless have a bearing on the culture of post-war moral and political philosophy and its self-understanding. What does seem to be the case is that the supposed attraction of realism in political philosophy is derivative of the attractions of realism in international relations at least in its British variant.

International relations theory provides many parallels and insights in discussing the challenge of realism in political philosophy, and those who are suspicious of the challenge of realism can also learn much from the debates about realism amongst international relations and international political theorists. One such simple lesson concerns how one characterises

the nature of realism. In his excellent book Ways of War and Peace, Michael Doyle (Doyle 1997) provides a characterisation of aspects of classical realism by reference to a number of great thinkers whose works are seen as archetypal statements of realism. Thus he distinguishes Complex or Thucydidean realism from Fundamentalist Machiavellian and Structuralist Hobbesian realism. He also develops a further category of Constitutional realism associated with Rousseau. The point is that each approach brings to the fore certain dimensions as central to explaining the realist perspective. Hobbesian realism for example emphasises the structural context of interaction, whereas Machiavellian realism focuses attention on the nature and motives of the agent. The complex vision of Thucydides on the other hand intricately connects agents and structures in contingent historical contexts such that one cannot simply emphasise the primacy of agency or subordinate agency to the structure of interaction. Although designed to illuminate the problem of realism in international relations and drawing on thinkers who have a very distinctive position in the subject of international political thought, this sort of approach can illuminate what is at stake in the case of realism in political philosophy as well. The relevant thinkers might differ between the two approaches, as there is no similar canonical status for these three thinkers in political philosophy because the canon is much larger and the relevant representatives would vary depending on the conception of the fundamental problems of politics. That said, there is

something to be said for a fundamentalist, a structuralist and a complex view as ways of characterising the problem of realism in political philosophy.

Similarly, there is something to be said for Hobbes as the representative of the structuralist approach and Thucydides as the representative of a complex theory. The fundamentalist view is perhaps better represented for my purposes by a combination of Nietzsche and Lenin, although I will defer discussion of Lenin until the final section when Leninist fundamentalism is contrasted with Thucydidean complex realism.<sup>3</sup> In what remains of the paper I will use these organising categories to explain and analyse what is claimed, by various advocates of a realist approach to political philosophy. The thinkers I want to explore under these headings are Raymond Geuss, John Gray and Bernard Williams, I will also include Isaiah Berlin (although I accept that he is a much more equivocal advocate of realism in political philosophy<sup>4</sup>), simply because he is such an influence on Williams and Gray.

In most respects this essay is a response to Geuss – although the response only comes at the end. Secondly the two elements Nietzschean and Hobbesian lead to the third – in my case Thucydidean view as a critique of Geuss's view, whereas in Doyle's case the typology is purely explanatory.

## **2. Fundamental Realism –Nietzsche (an assault on foundations).**

There are two common features of the realist critique of political philosophy, the first is the claim that it is excessively moralistic and the second is the widely shared commitment to the truth of value pluralism. Geuss, Gray and Williams all share the view that modern political philosophy is excessively moralistic. Berlin is perhaps an exception but even he shares scepticism with the others, about political philosophy justifying a single unified moral vision and about the excessive defence and pursuit of ideals. Geuss is one of the more vocal critics of the narrowly ethical character of political philosophy accusing it of attempting to collapse the realm of politics into a version of applied ethical theory.

‘Politics is applied ethics’ in the sense I find objectionable means that we start thinking about the human social world by trying to get what is sometimes called an ‘ideal theory’ of ethics. This approach assumes that there is, or could be, such a thing as a separate discipline called Ethics which has its own distinctive subject-matter and forms of argument, and which prescribes how humans should act toward one another. It further assumes that one can study this subject-matter without constantly locating it within the rest of human life... (Geuss 2008, pp. 6-7).



It is clear that the targets of this criticism is philosophers such as Rawls who it is suggested, collapses the diversity of politics into the single ethical concern for social or distributive justice. John Gray makes a similar point but accuses modern liberal political philosophy of being in the thrall of legalism or the philosophy of law rather than of moralism as such. For Gray, philosophers such as Rawls and Ronald Dworkin see

...political philosophy [as] a branch of the philosophy of law – the branch which concerns justice and fundamental rights. The goal of political philosophy is an ideal constitution, in principle universally applicable, which specified a fixed framework of basic liberties and human rights. This framework sets the terms – the only terms – on which different ways of life may coexist. (Gray 2000, p. 14)

Williams, like Geuss, is also a critic of the ‘moralism’ of liberalism and sees this as one of the fundamental flaws of contemporary political theory. That said, Geuss and Williams’ emphasis on moralism should not be seen to contradict Gray’s critique of the legalism of Rawls and Dworkin. For the conception of moralism, or applied ethics as identified by Geuss and Williams is most closely associated with the legalist moral theory of Kant. Indeed it is primarily Kantian moralism that Geuss has in mind, and the same is true in the case of Williams.<sup>5</sup> Gray’s charge of the excessive legalism

of liberal theory is also closely related to the overtly Kantian style of Rawls' political philosophy.

But a further and perhaps more important feature of the critique of moralism concerns the conception of moral practice that is involved. The common feature shared by Gray as well as Geuss and Williams is the legalistic character of morality. That conception of morality is shared by natural law theorists such as Locke and Pufendorf, as well as Kant and his modern followers, and it is to be contrasted with virtue ethics. For Williams, who is the most important critic of this conception of morality or what he calls the 'peculiar institution' echoing the American euphemism for slavery, morality is a distinctive historical practice that develops to replace the decline in an authentically religious conception of principles of social order. The core ideas of morality such as responsibility, duty and obligation are derived from an earlier Christian world-view, but are recast in a way that is supposed to save them from the collapse of the basic foundation of this world view (Williams, 1985). The problem with this world-view is the absence of an authoritative law-giver. For Locke and Pufendorf the legalist conception of morality ultimately relies on the idea of an external law-giver, namely God. But the epistemology that is supposed to vindicate this conception of a divine law-giver actually undercuts it. Kant's response is to

seek an alternative basis for this legalist conception of morality in the nature of practical reason. Even arch opponents of Kantianism such as utilitarians, according to Williams, still employ a similar conception of morality based on obligation. The fundamental difference is merely their alternative naturalistic source of authority. What remains similar in both cases is the legalist character of morality and the search for an authoritative source of obligation. Much contemporary moral philosophy (with the exception of a few sceptics such as Williams himself) consists of defending ever more sophisticated attempts to vindicate the legalist conception of morality in the face of the criticism of Kantian and utilitarian arguments. Much can be said for and against Williams' particular arguments, but what is much more difficult to pick apart in the way much moral philosophy proceeds, is the underlying conception of the activity of morality itself. When the quest for an ultimate vindication is abandoned and replaced with an explanation of morality's nature and source, we end up with a very different approach to the practice of ethical theory and a perspective from which the practice of moralism and 'legislation for the world' seems not only naïve but impossible. This explanatory account can be given in a variety of ways. In Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Williams seems to acknowledge the power of Marxist explanations of the peculiar institution of morality as merely epiphenomenal. Critical theory, drawing on some version of dialectical materialism will therefore replace the moralistic practice of

legislating for the world. At best moral or ethical philosophers will be engaged in an analytical or diagnostic task very different from that advocated by most if not all applied ethics and in political philosophy. Geuss's sympathy for the analytic and explanatory side of critical theory also explains his similar conception of morality as simply one historically contingent social form of activity.

In William's later works he appears to move towards a greater sympathy for a Nietzschean and genealogical account of the peculiar institution as an alternative explanation and interpretation of the origin and nature of morality (Williams 2002). Marxian materialist explanations of the practice of morality can have some value but they tend to over-determine the peculiarities of the institution that Williams wants to interpret and explain. The chief consequence of this more Nietzschean understanding is the emphasis on morality's debt to Christianity, but with an acknowledgement of the 'death of God' and therefore an alternative interpretation of what that theological legacy is. In this way, William's approach to ethics shares much with Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor as he acknowledges (at least in the case of MacIntyre and Taylor) in the essay 'Liberalism of Fear' (Williams, 2006, p. 53). These Catholic thinkers all emphasise the need to respond to the Christian roots of morality albeit in different ways. As none of them share the Nietzschean view that 'God is

dead' the task of recovery, reform or moving forward in that tradition is an option that is not available to Williams and those who endorse the fundamental Nietzschean starting point. Yet as the choice to move back into or forward out of that world-view is ultimately not a philosophical matter, the ultimate vindication of the peculiar moral practice we confront is not going to be a philosophical question either. It is ultimately for this reason that the realist challenge is not a confutation of a particular philosophical problem or belief but a reorientation of the whole activity of thinking about politics, and one that reduces or even abandons the philosopher's traditional platonic preoccupation with truth. There is no truth to be had, unless we adopt the perspective of Jerusalem over Athens.

So far I have concentrated on the realists account of the nature of moral practices that underlie 'political moralism' or the attempt to reduce political philosophy to applied ethics. This account certainly resembles aspects of Nietzsche's complex critique of morality, but it might also seem to fit less well with Doyle's fundamentalist account of realism in international relations where the moral values and interests of individual agents is the source of international political conflict. However, if we turn to the second aspect of the critique of moralism the fundamentalist model appear to have a much closer fit to the realist's account of politics and ethics.

One consequence of the Nietzschean or genealogical account of morality is that it decouples the practice from the source of moral authority at the same time as undercutting that account of authority. The consequence of this is not the collapse of morality in the face of scepticism, but rather the pluralisation of morality, exemplified most strikingly in the widespread thesis of value-pluralism. Amongst the realist critics discussed so far, both Williams and Gray are value-pluralists and both take their lead from Isaiah Berlin. Geuss's position is more ambiguous and I will return to that later in the final section.

As mentioned earlier, Berlin is not obviously a realist critic of political philosophy and this is underlined in his account of value pluralism. Although he speaks of the plurality of values in many places throughout his writings, and is clearly sceptical about monistic moral theories such as Kantianism or Utilitarianism, it is not clear is the status of his account of value pluralism (Berlin, 1998). One could interpret it as an account of the fact of the diversity of moral belief systems or one could interpret his theory as an account of the best account of the 'good life' being plural in character (see Raz, 1985) as well as a number of middle positions. Realists such as Gray and Williams appear to interpret Berlin's theory as an account of the facts of moral experience, but they do not reduce this to the simple ethnographic claim that there is a variety of different moralities out there.

After all moral absolutists such as the Pope could accept that view, he would simply deny that the fact of diversity has any bearing on the true morality, unsurprisingly this is also the view of Alasdair MacIntyre. Instead Gray and Williams, suggest that the facts of the matter, and the genealogical account of those facts have transformed the nature of morality such that the thesis of value pluralism is the only credible account of moral practice. Given what we now know we just cannot pretend that there is a single authoritative account of morality. This view is captured in a passage from Berlin's The Crooked Timber of Humanity, where he says:

... we are doomed to choose, and every choice must entail an irreparable loss. Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and brook no possible doubt ... those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.(Berlin, 1990, pp. 13-4)

Although Berlin presents this conception of moral experience without much defence or justification, it is clear that it fits with the realist's account of the problem of moralism and with the conception of the practice or morality that underlies it. Hence Berlin's suggestion that non-pluralistic accounts of moral life and value might well be choices that people make: but it is just not the case that these can be seen to have an unchallengeable necessity in the modern world. One can close ones eyes to difference and diversity, but it is a relevant fact of moral experience that cannot be avoided, and in this the modern world differs from the apparently more integrated pre-modern moral world that we have lost. The Nietzschean genealogy that Williams, Gray and Geuss all broadly accept, provides the explanation for that fact. Berlin's claim that this confrontation with radical choice is simply a fact of what it is to be human, also supports the realist analysis of the failings of political moralism as the variety of possible responses to conflict and diversity undermines the claims of the moralist to any kind of authority. Again the point is not merely to allude to the incompleteness of the quest for an authoritative account of morality. This incomplete quest model could indeed underlie a commitment to the primacy of philosophy over politics and experience. Indeed this is the model of political philosophy that Leo Strauss asserts in the face of the realist challenge, and which he associates with the character of Socrates. The quest for truth is the regulative idea of political philosophy and it is that which is denied by modernist and



postmodernist political theories. For the realist the question is not open but unresolved: the question is resolved, and the answer is that there cannot be a single authoritative decision about right or wrong in moral and political life.

The fundamentalist account of realism sees the problem of political philosophy in terms of the irresolvable diversity of ethical and moral beliefs and the ineradicability of conflict between them. The flaw in the practice of political philosophy that the realist objects to is explainable in terms of the ineradicability of ethical conflict thus rendering moralism or the attempt to reduce political philosophy to applied ethics as groundless. Whereas political philosophers present their activity as part of a quest for the truth, the Nietzschean realist argues that it can only ever be a clash of will. This leaves a question about the character of the political philosopher – whether he is merely dull or dishonest?<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Hobbesian or Structuralist Realism (the primacy of political experience).**

The second face of realism that I want to examine is the Hobbesian or structuralist. In international relations theory Hobbes' is seen as an obvious foundational figure because of his account of the natural condition being one of a war of all against all. Scholars disagree over the extent to which he

had the condition of international politics in mind when he described the state of nature in Leviathan (Malcolm, 2002, pp. 432-56). Hobbes's version of realism is also attractive to contemporary neo-realist international relations theories because his argument is easily rendered into game-theoretic terms. This common view is also somewhat paradoxical in that Hobbes uses his account of conflict in the state of nature to explain the origin of the state. If the international realm is similar to the Hobbesian state of nature, then it might be asked why we don't have an argument for a global state? That question need not however detain us.

The figure of Hobbes is also important for political realists because he asserts the fundamental priority of politics over ethics (Geuss, 2008 pp. 21-2, Williams, 2006 p. 2 and Gray, 2002 pp. 25-6). Hobbes saw the problem of politics in terms of conflict and the absence of order or stability. The task is to create stability and order as a precondition of any of the benefits of society. This involves explaining and justifying the origins of political sovereignty as the fundamental condition of order and using the sovereign's will and judgement as the basis for an account of authoritative ethical or moral principles. From this Hobbesian view we can identify three positions that are shared by Geuss, Gray and Williams.

1. The primacy of politics over ethics.

2. That terms of political agreement are primarily shaped by external conditions.

3. All political agreements that are arrived at in this way are *modus vivendi* and require coercion.

All endorse these three positions, but all reject or regard as irrelevant a Hobbesian state of nature theory as the explanation of the origins of the state. The problem all see as fundamental is the Hobbesian problem of order and legitimacy not the explanation of where the state came from. It is pretty clear that this was also Hobbes view, as the state of nature explains the emergence of legitimate political authority and not actual states as we can see from Hobbes' account of sovereignty by acquisition in Leviathan, chapter xvii. Williams for example writes

I identify 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. It is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again. (Williams, 2006, p.3)

Geuss also writes that

Modern political philosophy begins in Europe in the seventeenth century when Hobbes attempts to find a solution to the problem his contemporaries have in living together without assuming either a divinely ordained and enforced order, or a naturally implanted, invariable, and irresistibly powerful human impulse toward one particular form of cooperative action. (Geuss, 2008, p. 21)

In both cases the account of the primacy of the political is connected with a rejection of contemporary political philosophy for its moralistic attempt to reduce politics to ethics. The account of the primacy of the political over the ethical draws in the accounts of the ethical discussed above. But the primacy could also be free-standing to the extent that any moralistic or ethical view of politics has to confront the problem of order and not merely disagreement. Without a response to the problem of order, the standard questions of justice, right and liberty could not even be asked. In other words they are all secondary values that depend upon the primacy of order and stability. It is not merely that we have to rely on political authority to originate and sanction artificial moral norms in the face of sceptical claims about the absence of natural law, rather the point is that these moral norms and beliefs will themselves apply to what Geuss describes as ‘contexts of action’. These contexts of action are the places where politics arises. Consequently the first question of political philosophy *cannot* be an ethical

question unless there just happens to be spontaneous political order and an uncontroversial source of political authority. Instead the first question of political philosophy *must* be about the conditions of political authority itself, and it is only then that we can then apply ethical criteria to it, if we think that is necessary. Geuss of course thinks that this is unnecessary as political authority has its own character and criteria of legitimacy. But even if one does not take that rigorous a view of the demands of a realist political theory, the key point remains that ethical criteria or moralistic approaches to politics are not just categorically distinct from political theories, they are also secondary. This forms the basis of the realist's impatience with so much contemporary political philosophy that almost never addresses the conditions of political order, but instead assumes that the only relevant questions are how the benefits of social cooperation are divided up. This was also how Harold Lasswell famously defined the problem of political science - who gets what, where, when and how. Williams is one of the few philosophers to actually address this fundamental political question, as opposed to merely pointing out that others ignore it.

The second feature of the realist position that is reflected in the Hobbesian approach concerns the emergence of the norms that regulate politics. For Hobbes the invention of politics is a response to the conditions of life in the state of nature. The conditions reflect individuals' motives and interests but

also the external conditions of action. In effect Hobbes' account of the state of nature is concerned with 'actions and the context of actions'. It is the latter that is most important as this explains the problem of conflict and the need to settle terms of peace and stability. If individuals, despite their appetitive and glory-seeking natures found themselves in a world of material abundance and limitless space, then however partial they turned out to be, there would not necessarily be a condition of conflict. It is the circumstances within which persons and groups find themselves that confronts them with the ever-present threat of conflict and with war or the fear of war. This perspective also captures the fundamental political question as understood by realist political theorists like Gray, Geuss and Williams.

For each of them the starting point is the circumstance of partiality and disagreement, all of which is explainable in terms of the fact of value-pluralism. However, the further important condition is the unavoidability of conflict through shared contexts of action. Again if each group of people who shared an exclusive value system were able to isolate themselves from others in a sustainable way there would be no need for politics or the quest for common norms. That is not the experience of politics. Instead it is one where the possibility of separation is distinctly limited and where the options therefore are, fight or seek terms. For realists such as Gray, Geuss and even

Williams, the possibility of conflict is always a real option. That we choose not to fight is therefore not the result of some external pacific norm, but a political judgement about prospects of success and the actual conditions of conflict. But that judgement is always shaped by the historical contingency of our experience. Unlike the idealised individuals in Hobbes' state of nature, who appear at least, to be creating a state, we are thrown into historically contingent political communities that we do not even as groups choose to make. The issue for us is always one of confronting and managing diversity within a specific historical context or managing the claims on one political community in the face of rival claims by other political communities. This is what Geuss means when he claims that '...politics is historically located: it has to do with humans interacting in institutional contexts that change overtime...' (Geuss, 2008, p. 13) Institutional facts pre-date our thought about politics, so again, action is prior to belief and thought, consequently non-realist political philosophy gets the problem the wrong way around. This is most obviously the case in idealistic and utopian political theories which when confronted with the problems of the institutional constraints of politics and political thinking just change the subject. John Gray, following Berlin and Popper, is a particularly scathing critic of this aspect of what he claims is contemporary liberal political philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Groups and collections of individuals confront one another in institutional contexts of action with different sets of beliefs interests and values. In the absence of a spontaneous and harmonious ordering of those beliefs, values and interests the problem and practice of either war or politics arises. If groups choose to fight then we have war, whereas if they choose to seek terms of agreement we have politics. For the realist there is no universally valid reason why they should seek peace over war unless they choose to value peace and security more highly than death and disorder. Of course, this is one point on which Hobbes' actual theory was anything but realistic. Far from fear of violent death as a universal basic motive, lots of people throughout history have preferred death, even particularly unpleasant deaths, to dishonour or denial of basic beliefs. Williams, Geuss and Gray therefore, outdo Hobbes in their realism as none of them finds this choice of death over dishonour a particularly problematic or incomprehensible anthropological or historical fact.

The basic political question is what are the terms of such an agreement or consensus that makes political society possible, and how do they arise. For Williams the answer to the first question is given in terms of the basic legitimation demand (Williams, 2006, pp. 4-7). However, his discussion shows that no simple substantive answer can be given to that question. Clearly, the basic legitimation demand rules out some forms of society as



legitimate political societies. Not everything counts as a legitimate political society, just because it can impose its will and demand obedience of those subject to its power. That said, Williams is keen to distinguish the basic legitimation demand from more substantive ethical principles such as those that make political legitimacy a consequence of justice. The basic legitimation demand is the terms that groups might accept and be prepared to accept as a condition of political society, and as a condition for any further ethical transformation of that society. At some level the basic legitimation demand will have an unavoidable ethical content and perhaps encourage critics to claim that Williams and the realists fail to provide a categorical distinction between the political and the ethical. But Williams' response is that the point is not to establish a simple categorical distinction between political and ethics, but to establish the priority of politics over ethical perspectives in political philosophy, by showing that a more substantive ethical account of legitimacy is not necessary to satisfy the basic legitimation demand, whereas satisfying the basic legitimation demand is necessary before one can aspire to just terms of social interaction between people who disagree about ultimate ends. If the basic legitimation demand involves a moral commitment it cannot be one that is prior to politics. Political morality, if such a thing is possible, is political first and morality second.

Whatever the terms that are agreed between groups in establishing the basic condition of legitimacy will be a *modus vivendi*. This is an agreement to coexist or to differ, between groups or individuals who disagree about values. Gray makes much of the idea of *modus vivendi* liberalism, whereby practices of liberal tolerance emerge as one contingent way of managing difference, rather than as a reciprocal duty of recognition. The point about *modus vivendi* is that they are both contingent on historical contexts of action, and that they are time-limited in that the parties have no special duty to maintain the agreement beyond their own interest. A minority might agree to tolerate a form of action it finds morally condemnable simply because it lacks the power and opportunity to impose its own will: if demography changes the minority into a majority than it would have no principled reason to continue with toleration of the condemnable acts. This was pretty much the view of the Vatican with respect to religious liberty until the mid 1960s (Courtney Murray, 1960). The *modus vivendi* approach also acknowledges the historical contingency of practices that liberal political philosophers wish to make universal, such as the ideal of toleration (Gray, 2000). This emphasis on historical contingency is a further feature that realists such as Williams, Geuss and Gray emphasize, for there are numerous possible ways in which the basic legitimation demand can be met in different sets of circumstances. Consequently, even if one does see the basic norms of cooperation as the result of an  $n$ -person iterated prisoner's dilemma, this tells us nothing about

the substance of the norms actually chosen in that idealised situation. For that, we need an engagement with the historical specificities of political life. But what that *n*-person iterated prisoner's dilemma and the specificity of the historical context both tell us is that the ultimate security of those norms of cooperation need to be enforced and sustained by coercion. In this way we return to the Hobbesian account of the norms of regulation as emerging from and being sanctioned by a sovereign power. The Hobbesian sovereign has the right to coerce, but it is also his ability to do so that makes him the response to the fundamental political problem. This is an ineradicable feature of any account of the basic legitimation demand and a further reason for maintaining the priority of the political over the ethical.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. Thucydidean Complex Realism versus Leninist Fundamentalism – the lessons or moral of realism?**

The analysis using categories from Doyle's account of realism in international relations, was been deployed to diagnose the peculiarities of the realist challenge to political philosophy and to link some otherwise diverse thinkers into a common position on the failings of political moralism or political philosophy as applied ethics. I have used two of his

categories to illuminate what is at stake. A still more nuanced analysis could have been deployed to provide a more detailed discussion of the realist position. I could also have ranged beyond the three main figures discussed as exemplars of realism. What I haven't attempted to do is provide a more critical assessment of this realist position. Part of this self-denial comes from the need to provide an adequate diagnosis of a serious challenge to political philosophy and its current practice, without resorting to caricature and easy dismissal.

By way of conclusion I want to turn to another of Doyle's exemplars of realism, the perspective offered by Thucydides or complex realism and use this to examine the consequences of the realist challenge to political philosophy. I want to contrast the Thucydidean perspective with another modification of the fundamentalist perspective, in this case the Leninist version. This contrast is intended to illustrate differing perspectives about the consequences of the realist challenge, or how the residual activity that continues under the title of political philosophy should be conducted.

Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War is the first attempt to describe, explain and theorise the realist perspective of war and the constant threat of conflict as the default position of international relations. For Doyle, the Thucydidean perspective explains the source of persistent fear

and the threat of conflict through the complex interconnection of individual beliefs, desires and interests and the contexts of interaction, where the balance of power is constantly changing through the quest for advantage. Thucydides' approach is also historical, drawing on cultural and ethnographic descriptions and analyses, especially through the emphasis on the 'national' characters of the different participants. It is for this reason that Thucydides' theory is considered a complex one. He does not rely solely on fundamental moral notions or merely on the structural constraints of action to explain international conflict. A further point to draw from Thucydides History' is that it is in the end a history and not a normative theory. One of the reasons it remains such a fascinating work is its analytical power and its normative ambiguity. And it is precisely this point that I want draw out to complete my diagnosis of realism in political philosophy. The Thucydidean perspective can be contrasted with the Leninist view that is to be found in Geuss. In particular I have in mind Geuss defence of the principle of partisanship. He writes

...[there] are incompatible global theories that constitute the respective correctly understood worldviews of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and they are irreconcilably at war with each other as are their respective hosts. *Every* theory to some extent takes a position in this war: every theory is 'partisan'. Therefore, intellectual honesty

requires that one reflect on the contribution one's theory makes...and acknowledge it openly. (Geuss, 2008, p. 29)

Geuss's point is not merely to identify one further fact about Lenin's thought but to use this as an illustration of the condition of the political theorist. Given all we have seen about the contingency of political beliefs as a historical response to contexts of action we are faced with a choice between endorsing those beliefs and presumably the context of action or criticising and rejecting those beliefs and again possibly the whole context of action. The realist political theorist cannot avoid being engaged in and making partisan interventions in real politics. Political philosophy is ultimately a way of acting politically and we are encouraged to face up to that unavoidable fact. Perhaps John Gray's persistent attempt to assert a liberal view of politics against the constraints of any particular theory falls into this analysis of the necessity of engagement.

In contrast to this Leninist perspective one might see Williams' view of the consequences of realism in a more Thucydidean light.<sup>9</sup> Williams' argument is much more nuanced in its consequences. He retains the features of the structural and foundational models as part of his explanation of the realist's predicament. And this is developed within the context of the historical contingency of all human experience. So far his approach fits this loose

Thucydidean model. Yet where he is most like Thucydides and least like Lenin is his ambiguity about partisanship, as this too becomes a kind of political moralism. This is illustrated in his subtle discussion of Habermas's approach to the connection between legitimacy, the rule of law and deliberative democracy and also the modification of his more strident rejections of Rawlsianism following the publication of Political Liberalism. Rawlsian Political Liberalism still retains too much of the Kantian aspiration to transcendence to qualify as an appropriately political theory, albeit that Rawls does seem to acknowledge the historical contingency of the conception of the political it embodies (Williams, 2006, p. 53). This acknowledgement of history does draw some of the sting of Williams's earlier criticisms of Rawlsian political moralism, but Rawls still tries to rest too much on this undertheorised aspect of his argument. What seems more appropriate in the Habermasian position is an attempt to ground the conditions of legitimacy in an adequate account of modernity. This involves both the recognition of the contingency of politics, but it also connects the residual ethical dimension of politics with an appropriate sociology. This critical theory approach does not abandon the normative ideal of political philosophy for a positivist political science or history. But it does aim to limit the excessively idealistic consequences of an ethical conception of political philosophy. Williams seeks to rein in the excessive aspirations of political philosophy, and indeed acknowledges that Rawls does too, but he

avoids the more partisan approach advocated by Geuss which asks us to take sides in political debates. Indeed it seems that his realist approach does not rule out theorising justice, democracy and equality. It merely requires us to acknowledge the contingency of the questions and the contingency of the answers, and to be more modest in the claims we make about these questions. Indeed, a realist political theory will allow us to continue to do much of what is currently done by political philosophers, it will just present that activity in a different light. More needs to be said about this conclusion but perhaps apart from a necessary deflation of the grandiose claims made by political philosophers, more of the practice of political theorists may survive than is often claimed.

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<sup>1</sup> As well as Geuss, we can identify Bernard Williams (Williams, 2005) John Gray (Gray, 2000), Glen Newey (Newey, 2001) and others as political philosophers with a realist orientation.

<sup>2</sup> Few philosophers seem to reject wholly the aspiration to realism. A possible exception is the robust position that G.A. Cohen takes in the debate between ideal and non-ideal theory, where he argues for a fact independent account of fundamental moral principles and values (Cohen, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci might well have challenged the idea of Lenin as a new Machiavelli. That said, one can, perhaps overstate his departure from an orthodox Leninist perspective on politics (see Femia 1981). Not much turns on this subtle interpretative issue.

<sup>4</sup> Berlin uses what he takes to be historical realism (particularism) to act a corrective to grand historical meta-narratives (Berlin 1996). However in 'The pursuit of the ideal' Berlin contradicts a basic premise of political realism by claiming that political philosophy is essentially a branch of moral philosophy (Berlin 1998, p.1.)

<sup>5</sup> Williams is also concerned about the legalist character of utilitarian moralism as well as the Kantian.

<sup>6</sup> The charge of dishonesty has indeed been made of Strauss's Socratic conception of political philosophy (see Drury, 1998, and Burnyeat, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, even liberals such as John Rawls are suspicious of utopianism on the grounds that it misses the point or changes the subject, hence his preference for what he calls realistic-utopianism (Rawls, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps surprisingly Kant also sees the right to coerce at the heart of political right and it is this fact that distinguishes his political theory from his moral philosophy. It is for this reason too, that some



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Kant scholars are determined to distinguish his political philosophy from the ethical theory attributed to him in light of Rawls' theory of justice (Flikschuh, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Geuss does of course draw a connection between Williams' work and Thucydides in his essay 'Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams' (Geuss 2005: 219-33), yet in his efforts to contrast the Plato's philosophy with Thucydides history he presents an interpretation of Thucydides which ignores much of his subtlety and ambiguity as Geuss's primary concerns are actually with Nietzsche and not Thucydides.

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