The Politics of “Realism”

Rough Draft, please don’t dream of citing

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Realism in political philosophy is typically viewed either as the articulation of a set of methodological constraints on political thinking or as a substantive thesis about sources of normativity according to which there are non-derivative sources of political normativity. These are generally taken as competing views of realism. Thus, for example, Rossi and Sleat argue that ‘while realism is politically indeterminate, and in that sense not a substantive political position, it would be mistaken to characterise realist thought as simply a set of methodological concerns directed towards correcting any overly unrealistic political theory’ (2014: 9). The target of this remark is what we may term a ‘moralised’ conception of realism found in the type of standard view of realistic and idealistic approaches classically sketched by, for example, Joseph Carens (1996), according to which realism is a set of methodological concerns oriented to determining the feasibility constraints under which practical reflection operates. In dismissing this methodological view of realism, however, Rossi and Sleat inadvertently lend support to what we may call the *rival conception view* of political realism in which it is either a methodological view about constraints on practical action-guiding theorizing or a substantive thesis about sources of normativity. In this paper I will reject this *rival conception view* in favour of a *dual aspect view* of realism. The pivot on which this rejection turns is the articulation of a ‘non-moralised’ methodological conception of realism as a *discipline of mind* and of the relationship of this view to realism as substantive thesis about sources of political normativity.

The argument proceeds as follows. I begin by sketching a non-moralised account of realism in practical thought as a discipline of mind. I’ll then turn to consider the sources of normativity view before indicating how that account of normativity relates to the methodological view.

**The Methodological View: Realism as a discipline of mind**

Realism as a discipline of mind involves a philosophical approach to human beings that is, as far as possible, non-moralised. In recent philosophy, this view has been most developed by Bernard Williams (it is central to Williams’ account of naturalism in ethics[[1]](#footnote-1) and his appreciation of Nietzsche’s genealogical mode of inquiry.[[2]](#footnote-2)) Williams’ appreciation of this relationship and its wider significance is beautifully drawn out by Geuss in what is the finest essay in *Outside Ethics*: ‘Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams’. Here Geuss notes that Nietzsche raises the novel question of whether Plato or Thucydides is the better guide to human life and offers two reasons in support of the claims of the latter. The first is that Nietzsche ‘held that Thucydides had an unprejudiced theoretical sympathy for, and hence understanding of, a much wider spectrum of possible human motivations than Plato had.’ (Geuss, 2005:221) or, as Williams more subtly reformulates the point in *Shame and Necessity*: ‘Thucydides’ conception of an intelligible and typically human motivation is broader and less committed to a distinctively ethical outlook than Plato’s; or rather – the distinction is important – it is broader than the conception acknowledged in Plato’s psychological theories’ (Williams, 1994:161-2 cited in Geuss, 2005: 221). The second is that Nietzsche takes Thucydides, like Sophocles, to offer ‘a pessimism of strength’ (a phrase adopted by Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* to characterise his own preferred outlook) as an alternative to the ‘optimism’ of the philosophical tradition. In which alternative, as Williams notes in *Shame and Necessity*, we acknowledge that we have no reason to think that the world is, even in principle, fully intelligible to us nor that it is receptive to our ethical purposes and interests. Guess offers the following sketch of the optimism to which the Thucydides-Nietzsche-Williams position is opposed:

This optimism has several related aspects. First of all, traditional philosophers assumed that the world could be made cognitively accessible to us without remainder … Second, they assumed that when the world was correctly understood, it would make moral sense to us. Third, the kind of “moral sense” which the world made to us would be one that would show it to have *some* orientation towards the satisfaction of some basic, rational human desires or interests, that is, the world was not sheerly indifferent to or perversely frustrating of human happiness. Fourth, the world is set up so that for us to accumulate knowledge and use reason as vigorously as possible will be good for us and will contribute to making us happy. Finally, it was assumed that there was a natural fit between the exercise of reason, the conditions of healthy human development, the demands of individuals for satisfaction of their needs, interests and basic desires, and human sociability. (Geuss, 2005: 223)

The modesty of Williams’ realism appears bleak, as Geuss rightly notes, only in contrast to this optimism.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is part and parcel of this tragic vision that human beings are constitutively vulnerable to a range of threats to our ability to engage in practical judgement. Four prominent types of threat are represented by the phenomena of wishful thinking, cognitive biases, ideological captivity and aspectival captivity. In order to clarify the conception of realism as a discipline of mind, and I’ll focus on each of these briefly.

To address wishful thinking, it is worth recalling an argument of Bernard Williams from his final major work *Truth and Truthfulness*. Williams’ argument begins with the thought that, contra to the moralised view of Plato, the image of the mind as composed of an assembly of internal agencies must be viewed as an achievement and not a starting-point: ‘in the typical case, as Diderot recognized, the agent is awash with many images, many excitements, merging fears and fantasies that dissolve into one another.’[[4]](#footnote-4) This non-moralised picture can, Williams contends, offer a deeper account of desire that Plato’s picture and he attempts to establish this point by noting a complication in the idea ‘that if one knows that one cannot possibly bring about or affect a certain thing, then that thing can be matter only for a wish.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The complication is that what is practically possible for an agent is in part a function of the agent’s desires, that is, the constraints constructed by the agent’s other cares and commitments. The implication of this complication in the context of Diderot’s picture of mind is elucidated by noting that, in the context of practical deliberation, the distinction between desires (as states the content of which can be seen as being potentially satisfied on the basis of actions that follow the process of deliberation) and *mere* wishes (as state that cannot be so satisfied) is fuzzy because ‘since the process of deliberation itself decides what can and cannot be satisfied within that context, there will be some states that start in deliberation as desires but end (for the time being, at least) as wishes.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, while there will be other desires and mere wishes that remain, respectively, desires and mere wishes throughout the process of deliberation, there will also be ‘states of mind that have neither been definitively advanced as candidates for satisfaction [desires] nor definitively dismissed [mere wishes], and these too can be called “wishes,” but without the implication of a *mere* wish’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Deploying this broader sense of wish, Williams offers the following argument:

A state of affairs, an outcome, or a process may come before the agent’s mind, either on the way to being assessed, or, perhaps, merely as passing through, and since it comes through in the context of desire and deliberation, it will very probably carry with it an attitude; indeed, its coming before through is likely to be explained by an attitude. If the attitude is favourable, such a content seems itself to be indistinguishable from a wish. If this is right, it seems that the wish can play a role both in the register of desire and in the register of belief. To put it more accurately, a content, relating to an outcome or a process which is relevant to the deliberation and to the affective state in which the deliberation is conducted, comes before the mind, carrying with it an attitude that is part of the affective state. This … is not yet either a belief or a desire. *But it may be on the way to becoming either*. As a result of one kind of process, this picture may come to embody a belief of the agent’s about an outcome, for instance, that it is genuinely possible’; as a result of another, it will come to express a desire that the outcome occur. … There are two routes, leading respectively to committed belief … and to clear-headed desire … and the boundaries between the two are not sustained merely by conscious process, still less simply given in advance.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If right, this argument carries with it the important implication that maintaining this boundary and being able to distinguish between desires and beliefs is an achievement that requires the disciplines needed to combat wishful thinking, that is, ‘we can recognize that the virtues we need in considering what to do coincide at deep levels with the virtues that we need in inquiring into anything, the virtues of truth.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, the fact that first-person deliberation requires the virtues of truth helps to explain why deliberating about what I should do with another can be useful since the fact that this other does not have my wishes means that ‘we can help to sustain each other’s sense of reality, both in stopping wishes becoming beliefs when they should not, and also in helping some wishes rather than others to become desires.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

The immediate importance of this argument is to illustrate the deep connection between realism and the virtues of truth, that is, the sense in which realism is a disciplining of mind by the virtues of truth. It is also of note, however, that this implication of Williams’ argument makes clear the importance of salient forms of diversity to sustaining a culture of realism. In this regard, the attitude of acknowledging and, as far as plausible, accommodating human diversity adopted by much realist thought is both, as an outlook, an expression of its non-moralised stance and, as a practice, a support for the conditions requisite to maintaining this stance.

The commitment to truthfulness that is expressed through the virtues of truth is not limited to the case of wishful thinking. Rather this ‘intellectual conscience’, as Nietzsche calls it, extends to encompass the threat to one’s capacity for practical judgment posed by one’s judgment being systematically led astray in virtue of cognitive biases, ideological apparatuses or conditions of aspectival captivity. In each of these cases, although through different processes, the test is whether a reasonable person could continue to grant the same authority to the belief, worldview or perspective in question in the face of a truthful account of how they have come to accept it. As Wittgenstein put it:

One must start out with error and convert it into truth. That is, one must reveal the source of error, otherwise hearing the truth won’t do any good. The truth cannot force its way in when something else is occupying its place.

To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the path from error to truth. (Wittgenstein, 1993: 119)

Let us briefly consider each.

In the case of cognitive biases, we can illustrate the point with Elizabeth Anderson’s recent argument concerning the role of segregation in supporting black-white inequality in the USA through the unconscious formation of stigmatizing racial stereotypes that encourage the reproduction of segregation and its attendant inequalities (Anderson, 2010: 44-66). It would be naïve and inaccurate to suggest that America lacks overtly racist agents who are powerful, but an important part of the central role of segregation is that it generates mechanisms that support the durability of black-white inequality even in the absence of widespread individual racism (conceived as self-endorsed racist attitudes). By attending to the social psychology of attribution biases which come into play when explaining another’s behavior in terms of dispositional causes (characteristics of the person) or of situational causes (the environment in which they act) and focusing on stigmatizing racial stereotypes that account for the behavior of a racialised group in terms of negative characteristics of those identified as members of that group, Anderson is able to demonstrate that spatial segregation (predominantly black neighborhoods and predominantly white neighborhoods) and role segregation (predominantly black jobs and predominantly white jobs) support a range of stigma-reinforcing attribution biases that ‘naturalise’ black inequality by encouraging ascription of its causes to the characteristics of African-Americans. Once established such stereotypes can be self-supporting in that they filter perceptions to pick out confirming evidence and may also induce those whom they stereotype to conform to them. It is an important point here that those who exhibit these attribution biases and stigmatizing stereotypes need not be aware that they are doing so and need not (and often would not) endorse these stereotypes at a reflective level. The role of social science is to bring the virtues of truth to bear on such contexts in order to demonstrate that the mechanisms through which such stereotypes are forms is not truth-supporting and to engender conscious reflection on one’s susceptibility to such biases.

Turning now to ideology, we can note that the primary feature of ideological captivity can be elucidated by reference to the concept of 'false consciousness'. This concept refers to the condition of holding beliefs that are false (or held on false grounds) and compose a worldview which legitimatizes certain oppressive social institutions, where this condition is a non-contingent product of inhabiting a society characterized by these social institutions (Geuss, 1981: 59-60). As Raymond Geuss has pointed out, it is not difficult 'to see in what sense the "unfree existence" from which the agents [characterized by false consciousness] suffer is a form of *self-imposed* coercion.':

Social institutions are not natural phenomena; they don't just exist of and by themselves. The agents in a society impose coercive institutions on themselves by participating in them, accepting them without protest, etc. Simply by acting in an apparently 'free' way according to the dictates of their world-picture, the agents reproduce relations of coercion. (Geuss, 1981: 60)

Hence, ideological captivity is characterized by self-imposed coercion because the agents concerned are subject to 'a kind of *self-delusion'*, where the power of this coercion 'derives *only* from the fact that that the agents do not realize that it is self-imposed' (Geuss, 1981: 58). In this context, ideology-critique has the following basic structure:

a critical theory criticizes a set of beliefs or world-picture as ideological by showing:

1. that the agents in the society have a set of epistemic principles which contain a provision to the effect that beliefs which are to be sources of legitimation in the society are acceptable *only if* they could have been acquired by the agents under free and uncoerced discussion;
2. that the *only* reason the agents accept a particular repressive social institution is that they think that this institution is legitimized by a set of beliefs embedded in their world-picture;
3. that those beliefs could have been acquired by these agents *only* under conditions of coercion.

From this it follows immediately that the beliefs in question are reflectively unacceptable to the agents and that the repressive social institution these beliefs legitimize is not legitimate. (Geuss, 1981: 68)

Ideology critique is an exercise of the virtues of truth designed to demonstrate that we would not hold these legitimizing beliefs under conditions that are truth-supporting.

The case of aspectival captivity contrasts somewhat with the case of ideology since the issue concerns how a particular perspective (Nietzsche) or picture (aka system of judgments, Wittgenstein) becomes hegemonic such that it is taken to be, or presents itself as, *the* rational form of reflection in respect of the issue in question (for example, morality as the rational form of ethics). This can be drawn out by reference to the concept of being held captive by a picture (Wittgenstein) or a perspective (Nietzsche/Foucault). We can elucidate the sense of this concept in four stages.

First, the concept of a picture and the concept of a perspective (in the technical senses with which I am concerned) are co-extensive in that the former refers in a passive mode to what the latter refers in active mode. A picture refers to a system of judgments in terms of which our being-in-the-world - or some feature of it - takes on its intelligible character; a perspective refers to a system of judgments *as* a system of judging in terms of which we make sense of ourselves (or some features of ourselves) as beings in the world. Thus, a picture or perspective refers, in Foucault's terms, to a way of conceptualizing the real. Expressed through and embodied in practices, 'they open up a field of experience in which subject and object alike are constituted' ("Florence", 1994: 318).

Second, there are two necessary features of such systems of judgment/judging. On the one hand, such systems govern what is intelligibly up for grabs as true-or-false. They do not determine what *is* true or false, but rather what statements or beliefs *can count as* true-or-false. This is why Foucault characterizes such systems as 'games of truth (jeux de verité)': 'the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought.' (Foucault, 1986: 6-7). Or, as Wittgenstein puts it while making essentially the same point, a picture 'is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.' (Wittgenstein, 1969: s94). On the other hand, such systems are "partial" in the sense that they involve pre-judgments (i.e., judgments which act as principles of judgment), which are themselves not grounded in more basic judgments but, rather, in (nothing more or less than) our ways of acting in the world. This is why Foucault takes pains to focus his accounts on 'the *problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought - and the *practices* on the basis of which these problematizations are formed' (Foucault, 1986: 11), where 'problematizations' refer to the specific ways in which a topic is constituted as an issue for reflection and action within particular systems of judgment.

Third, the value of a picture or perspective is dependent on its capacity to guide our reflection such that we can make sense of ourselves in the ways that matter to us. In Foucault's terms, this is the question of the extent to which the self-problematising of subjects (that is the actual practices of self-understanding in which a form of subjectivity is grounded) exposes or occludes the forms of power to which they are subject. The crucial point to note here is that a picture or perspective formed under, and in response to, one set of conditions of worldly activity may cease to be a good way of orienting our thinking under different conditions of worldly activity. Ways of problematizing ourselves as agents that were appropriate, for example, to enlightening us to the operation of certain forms of power may come to occlude the exercise of other forms of power. Hence the importance of being able (a) to free oneself from captivity to the picture or perspective in question by seeing it as one picture or perspective among many possible pictures or perspectives and (b) to assess the *value* of this picture or perspective in relation to, and through a process of comparison with, other pictures or perspectives.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Fourth, to be held captive by a picture or perspective is to be captivated such that one cannot re-orient one's reflection and, hence, one ‘thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.’(Wittgenstein, 1953: s114). This is a state of unfreedom. The exercise of our capacity for self-government *qua* agency is blocked by our captivity to a picture or perspective because the exercise of our capacity for self-government *qua* judging is obstructed by our captivation by this picture or perspective: we are enslaved because we are entranced. In such cases, we are subject to the picture or perspective as a limit in either of two senses:

A 'limit' can mean either the characteristic forms of thought and action which are taken for granted and not questioned or contested by participants in a practice of subjectivity, thereby functioning as the implicit background or horizon of their questions and contests, or it can mean that a form of subjectivity (its forms of reason, norms of conduct and so forth) is explicitly claimed to be a limit that cannot be otherwise because it is universal, necessary or obligatory (the standard form of legitimation since the Enlightenment).(Tully, 1999: 93)

Thus, to repeat, what matters in this context is (a) our capacity to free ourselves from our captivation to the ways of thinking in question – to recognize and loosen the grip that the picture or perspective expressed by these ways of thinking has on us - in order (b) to evaluate the value of this picture or perspective relative to other possible pictures or perspectives. Hence, as Foucault remarks, the point of his philosophical work consists in 'the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently' (Foucault, 1986: 7).

The role of genealogy is, then, is best conceived as an exercise of the virtues of truth designed to undermine the claim to authority of a picture/perspective by demonstrating both that this perspective is not the sole rational form that reflection may take in respect of the issue in question and that the foundation of its current authority derives not from any rational superiority to alternatives but rather from grounds that have no relation to truthfulness (e.g., in the case of Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality, the desire for revenge). At this stage, it should not be difficult to see that the "unfree existence" to which those held captive by a picture or perspective are subject is a form of self-imposed constraint on their capacity for self-government. It is a constraint on their capacity for self-government because it prevents whose subject to it from exercising their powers of judgment concerning the value of such and such a picture or perspective by presenting this picture or perspective as the only way of reflecting of the topic in question. This constraint is self-imposed because it is held in place by our practices - and, more generally, the relations of power and domination that govern our ways of reflecting and acting in the world.[[12]](#footnote-12) To adapt Geuss' remark concerning false consciousness, we might say that simply by acting in an apparently 'free' way according to the dictates of their world-picture (where 'picture' refers here to a system of judgments), the agents reproduce their condition of subjection and that the power of the subjection to which agents are subject derives solely from the fact that they do not realize that it is self-imposed.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Realism as a discipline of mind is thus primarily concerned with countering our vulnerability to our capacity for practical judgment being led astray and cautions us against investing confidence in the claims of forms of reflection that leave themselves relatively unprotected, for example, practices of reflection that simply invoke (what are liable to be parochial) intuitions. This is not to argue that the claims advanced through such practices are false but rather to argue that we should be wary of treating claims justified in this way with confidence unless and until they survive a more rigorous critical investigation.

**The Substantive View: Realism and Political Normativity**

The second view of realism takes it to be a thesis concerning non-derivative sources of political normativity. Political norms and values on this view are neither founded on, or reducible to, moral norms and values; rather they are grounded in distinctive features of politics as a practice, as a specific form of human activity that is integral to the human form of life. So, for example, on this view, freedom and equality as political values are both temporally prior and logically distinct from freedom and equality as moral values. It is important to note two points here. The first is that we can distinguish between the critical and abstract norms of politics as a distinctive human activity and the concrete normative expressions of these norms in any particular *jeu de la politique* such as, for example, the modern constitutional state. The second is that the kind of rationality involved in identifying the critical and abstract norms of politics is historical and involves reflection on, and hence also identification of, the diverse *jeux de la politique* that are constitutive of the political history of humanity. One attractive model for this form of historical rationality has been sketched by Brandom through an analogy with common law reasoning. He writes:

The model I find most helpful in understanding the sort of rationality that consists in retrospectively picking out an expressively progressive trajectory through past applications of a concept, so as to determine the norm one can understand as governing the whole process and so project into the future, is that of judges in the common law tradition. Common law differs from statutory law in that all there is to settle the boundaries of applicability of the concepts it employs is the record of actually decided cases that can serve as precedents. ... So whatever content those concepts have, they get from the history of their actual applications. A judge justifies her decision in a particular case by rationalizing it in the light of a reading of that tradition, by so selecting and emphasizing particular prior decisions as precedential that a norm emerges as an implicit lesson. And it is that norm that is then appealed to in deciding the present case, and is implicitly taken to be binding in future ones. In order to find such a norm, the judge must make the tradition cohere, must exhibit the decisions that have actually been made as rational and correct, given the norm that she finds is what has implicitly governed the process all along. Thus each of the prior decisions selected as precedential emerges as making explicit some aspect of that implicit norm, as revealing a bit of the boundary of the concept. ... Telling a story of this sort - finding a norm by making a tradition, giving it a genealogy - is a form of rationality as systematic history.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These points are important for three reasons. First, it sustains a distinction between the abstract norms of politics as an activity and particular expressions of that activity and, hence, maintains the possibility of criticism of any particular *jeu de la politique*. Second, such a reconstructive process is a way of protecting one’s reflections on the character of politics as a distinctive human activity with its own non-derivative norms from historical/cultural parochialism. Third, it is pluralist in the sense that there can always be rival reconstructions: the reconstruction of politics is, in this sense, political.

If we engage in such a reconstructive endeavor, I propose that two fundamental norms of politics as a practice emerge: civic order and civic self-rule. Civic order, understood as a contrast to war, and civic self-rule, understood as a contrast to alien dominion, appear as basic conditions of the practice of politics. (In the contemporary constitutional democratic state, these political grundnorms are most directly manifest as the norms of the rule of law and popular sovereignty respectively.) While both of these norms are grounded in the fact of human plurality (Arendt) and circumstances of politics (Waldron) to which this gives rise (disagreement about what to do and the need for collective agreement about what to do), the question of the relationship of these two norms is an open one in contemporary political realism. Thus, for example, Williams takes the (Hobbesian) problem of order to be the first question of politics, while in contrast Tully takes order and self-rule to be equiprimordial. In both types of case, however, the legitimation of political power is (a) contextually bound up with the circumstances of the particular *jeu de la politique* in question, where (b) these practices are open to context-specific forms of political contestation in terms of alternative constructions of the norms of politics as a human activity.

This view of realism need not deny that non-political values and norms play a role, even an important role, in political life, rather it is only committed to the claim that political reasoning is distinct from, and non-derivative of, other forms of practical reasoning. It is this distinctive and non-derivative character that is disclosed in the ‘paradoxes of political ethics’ such that the relationship of politics and morality (or in the ‘paradoxes of political aesthetics such that the relationship of politics and aesthetics) is shown to be disjunctive. Politics, on this view, may make legitimate demands that involve forms of conduct that are immoral or ugly. (It should be noted here that the relationship between politics and morality at stake in the debate concerning this form of political realism is analogous to the debate between art and morality at stake in a central debate in aesthetics concerning whether a work of art can be immoral.)

*A Dual Aspect View of Political Realism*

How are we to understand the relationship of these two views of political realism? Rather than taking them as rival conceptions, It is, I propose, more plausible to take them as distinct aspects of, and as jointly composing, a realistic orientation to the world that stands in contrast to a ‘moralistic’ orientation to the world, where the notion of ‘moralistic’ refers to a view of morality as involving two claims: a claim to be *comprehensive* with respect to the domain of ethical value (i.e. as monopolising that domain) and a claim to be *normatively authoritative* with respect to that domain. Morality’s supposed hegemony in turn renders unintelligible, and hence serves to suppress, the thought that there may be a viable ethical outlook distinct from morality.

The realistic stance is an attempt to show that if we adopt a non-moralised view of human agency, that is, if we attempt to explain morality in terms that do not presuppose a view of human agency informed by morality, then we have good reason to be suspicious of morality’s claim to be comprehensive and its claim to be normatively authoritative.

We can illustrate this point by reference to Williams[[15]](#footnote-15) who characterises morality in terms (partly) of a commitment to what he calls ‘reasons externalism’, according to which at least some reasons satisfy the following schema:

*(RE) A has a reason to φ even if A has no motive that would be served by φing*

Since he attributes to morality the claim that moral obligations entail reasons satisfying RE, and since he denies that any reasons satisfy RE, he thereby denies morality’s normative authority.[[16]](#footnote-16) Consider a style of question markedly Nietzschean in spirit: ‘*What is the point* of morality’s insisting that people do have reason to do what it demands?’. To get to Williams’ (Nietzschean) answer, we need to first introduce his plea for a ‘psychologically realistic’ model of practical reason.

Williams suggests that “There is some measure of agreement that we need a ‘naturalistic’ moral psychology”.[[17]](#footnote-17) By ‘moral psychology’ he means an account of those capacities by which we come to the practical decisions and normative conclusions we do (not just narrowly *moral* decisions and conclusions), and which explains how we become motivated to act in light of them. Well aware of vexing issues about the ambit of ‘naturalism’, though eschewing any “fiercely reductive” version of it, naturalism in Williams’ hands plays the role of a guiding heuristic, by which, through piecemeal testing, one attempts to interpret human experiences in a way that is “consistent with… our understanding of humans as part of nature”.[[18]](#footnote-18) In offering some further direction to this endeavour, Williams finds in Nietzsche “a general attitude […] that can be a great help”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The attitude has two relevant dimensions. It manifests suspicion upon whichever aspects of moral psychology are at odds with psychological explanation more generally; and it calls on us to enquire whether “what seems to demand more moral material makes sense in terms of what demands less”.[[20]](#footnote-20) In response to the question “How much should our accounts of distinctively moral activity add to our accounts of other human activity?”, Williams replies:

as little as possible […] the more that some moral understanding of human beings seems to call on materials that specially serve the purpose of morality – certain conceptions of the will, for instance – the more reason we have to ask whether there may not be a more illuminating account that rests only on conceptions that we use anyway elsewhere.[[21]](#footnote-21)

If we can understand human capacities in terms of psychological materials we use anyway elsewhere – rather than appealing to models of deliberation and agency that resist such integration – then we should.

This methodological heuristic in turn imposes a constraint on how to understand the capacities by which people come to normative conclusions and act in light of them. Williams himself endorses a common ‘sentimentalist’ thesis.[[22]](#footnote-22) According to it, practical reasoning – understood as deliberation the outcome of which is some pro-attitude or disposition to act (a sincere normative judgement or intention, say) – must either start from or otherwise engage one’s antecedent motives. As a result, the contents of the practical conclusions one is motivated by are (necessarily) shaped and constrained by one’s antecedent motivational repertoire – i.e. by those desires, aims, ends, interests and evaluative commitments familiar to the kinds of psychological explanation ‘we use anyway elsewhere’. In contrast, numerous moral theorists – for example rational intuitionists, moral sense theorists, Kantians – posit some additional faculty by which specifically moral truths may be apprehended. Kant, for instance, held that the demands of morality are revealed through, and justified by, reasoning that is *pure* – ‘pure’ in that it need neither start from, nor otherwise engage, one’s subjective motivational repertoire but nonetheless arrives at substantive moral truths which any rational agent could recognise and be motivated by. This requires not just a capacity by which one can abstract from, and remain uninfluenced by, a specific motive at a given time – but a capacity to abstract from, and remain sufficiently unmoved by, any and all (subjective, non-moral) motives at any one time: a will that stands behind and is capable of remaining uninfluenced by any such motive, yet a will that motivates one to act for the sake of specifically moral duty. To make sense of this, and to thereby justify the demands of morality as both motive-independent and universally applicable, Kant ended up *positing* (or *presupposing*) a radical conception of freewill, one common to all rational beings, that stands outside (but nonetheless causes action in) the natural world – a conception in tension with even a very broad naturalism and about which, Williams therefore supposes, one should be suspicious.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Grounds for suspicion are amplified, however, by the thought that such conceptions of agency may be far from ideologically innocent. As Williams puts it, a “second helpful thought to be recovered from Nietzsche is that such a peculiar account must have a purpose, and that the purpose is a moral one”.[[24]](#footnote-24) The *point* of positing some such conception is to guarantee that people are capable of both recognising moral reasons and freely doing – or freely violating – whatever morality demands. And the point of *that* is to vindicate practices of moral *blame*.[[25]](#footnote-25) Williams makes explicit several steps and assumptions Nietzsche doesn’t. His thought goes as follows.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Morality is committed to values like justice; so moral blame must also be just, such that those to whom it is attributed are legitimate targets of blame, i.e. *blameworthy*. For an agent A to be blameworthy for φing, it must be the case that (i) A had reason not to φ, and (ii) A could have not-φed. However, to ensure (i), A’s reasons cannot depend solely on his motives, since he may lack suitably moral motives. Hence one pressure within morality to insist that people do have reason to do what it demands, whatever their motives – i.e. to present itself as normatively authoritative. Concerning (ii), the moralist who endorses RE faces a dilemma. On one hand, if he accepts a naturalistic moral psychology in which deliberative possibilities are circumscribed by agential motives, he may be committed to an *unjust* conception of moral blame – since it would be unfair to blame A for φing if, given A’s motives, A could not have become motivated not to φ or could not have reached the conclusion that he had reason not to φ. On the other hand, and to avoid that conclusion, the moralist may be tempted to represent the agent as someone who could indeed appreciate relevant moral reasons, whatever his motives, and who could have freely chosen not to do what he is blamed for doing. But this encourages the very conception of the will (like Kant’s) that is in tension with a sensible naturalism and that Williams thinks problematic on theoretical grounds – a conception which, moreover, if indeed no one actually possesses such a will, does nothing to attenuate the *de facto* injustices of blame predicated on it. Either way, morality’s commitment to an externalist view of reasons makes agents more susceptible to moral blame than they really are.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Furthermore, though, Williams like Nietzsche thinks that moral blame may be objectionable aside from these theoretical misgivings. In particular, they both think that blame can function as a mechanism of control or power. There are many issues to explore here. But we shall conclude the section with one suggestion to which both Nietzsche and Williams seem sympathetic: that whatever legitimate applications blame may have, it can also be misappropriated – by promoting an unhealthy ethical outlook in which specifically moral considerations come to dominate a person’s life at the expense of his realising significant non-moral values.[[28]](#footnote-28) For given that being blamed (by others or, as in the case of guilt, oneself) is typically unpleasant, the desire to avoid blame may readily become internalised. And since a necessary means for avoiding moral blame is complying with morality, one way to ensure that one does avoid it is to internalise moral values. Hence blame may be used as a tool by which to ‘recruit’ people into morality. In turn, if moral values and the disposition to avoid blame come to govern one’s thinking, one may come to neglect and thereby fail to pursue all sorts of non-moral goods constitutive of a flourishing life.[[29]](#footnote-29)

This illustration is, of course, only an illustration but what I hope it helps to indicate is, first, that it is plausible to see the methodological and substantive views of political realism not as rivals but as aspect of the same orientation or stance and, second, that the stakes of the debate concerning political realism are rather wider than often appreciated.

**Conclusion**

Political realism is often taken to be a concern with issues of feasibility, with the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, and it can legitimately so be taken within a moralistic orientation to practical reasoning. However, the more interesting and important sense of political realism is an expression of a realistic (aka non-moralised) orientation and one which has no real interest in the ideal/non-ideal distinction – rather it focuses on the character of political reasoning and on threats to our capacity of engaging in political judgment. Primary among such threats is the peculiar institution of morality.

1. See Williams, 2000: [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Williams, 1995: 65-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Geuss draws his own, characteristically shrill, conclusion concerning the directive of realism:

We can … try to be as truthful and truth-loving as possible in developing an alternative to the deceitful, hypermoralised views of Plato, Aristotle, Kant and the other major figures in the history of Western ethics. (2005: 230) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Williams, 2002: 195 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Williams, 2002: 195 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Williams, 2002: 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Williams, 2002: 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Williams, 2002: 197 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Williams, 2002: 198 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Williams, 2002: 198 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Such an assessment will include, but not be reducible to, reflection on the truth value of 'principles of judgment' that compose the picture in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It may seem slightly strange to characterise both ideological captivity and aspectival captivity as 'self-imposed' in that both conditions are tied to the prevalence of asymmetrical relations of power but in respect of our collective social condition of being subject to either of these forms of captivity, they are held in place by our ways of reflecting and acting, and in this respect are 'self-imposed'. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We might be tempted to say that in a certain respect this kind of self-imposed captivity does, like ideological captivity, involve a false belief but that it does not involve a false first order belief, rather it involves a false second order belief (i.e., a false belief about one's beliefs). This way of reflecting on aspectival captivity would lead us the following claim: aspectival captivity involves the agents holding the false belief that the range of possible beliefs (whether true or false) open to them are the only possible range of beliefs open to them. But to accept this conceptualization of aspectival captivity would be misleading and mistaken for the following reason: an agent held captive by a picture cannot have such a second order belief about the range of first order beliefs available to him or her; there is, as it were, no logical space for such a belief to arise for the agent. The point can be put this way: it is a necessary condition of the agent having such a false second order belief that the agent recognizes the possibility of such a second order belief being true-or-false but to be held captive by a picture or perspective is just to fail to recognise this possibility as a possibility. This is why it is appropriate to refer to this condition as one of 'restricted consciousness'. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brandom, 2002: 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This section of the paper draws heavily on Owen & Robertson (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although Williams attributes to traditional *morality* a commitment to RE, he defends a demoralised *ethical* ideal consistent with its denial (1985: ch.10). For more on Williams’ ‘moral-ethical’ distinction, and its significance for Nietzsche, cp. Clark 2001: 101-5, Robertson forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Williams 1995c: 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Williams (1995c: 67). Cp. Nietzsche’s well-know remark that we should “translate man back into nature” (*BGE* 230). For contrasting recent accounts of Nietzsche’s naturalism, cp. Leiter 2002: ch.1 and this volume, Acampora 2006, Janaway 2007: ch.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Williams 1995c: 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Williams 1995c: 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Williams 1995c: 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *HA* 39-40, 56; *D* 3, 103, 119; *GS* 5, 301, 345, 347; *Z* “Of the Thousand and One Goals”; *BGE* 5, 6, 11, 46, 187, 199; *GM* P3, II 6, III 12; *TI* “Errors” 3; *A* 11; *WP* 590. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Nietzsche’s opposition to such conceptions of freedom is of course rife; see e.g. *D* 116, 129; *GS* 333, 335; *BGE* 15, 17, 21; *GM* I 13; *TI* “Errors”. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Williams 1995c: 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Thus Nietzsche writes: “the concept of ‘freewill’… is the most infamous of all arts of the theologian for making mankind ‘accountable’… that is to say for *making mankind dependent on him*… Everywhere accountability is sought, it is usually the instinct for *punishing and judging* which seeks it… the doctrine of will has been invented essentially for the purpose of punishment, that is of *finding guilty*… Men were thought of as ‘free’ so that they could become guilty: consequently, every action *had* to be thought of as willed, the origin of every action as lying in the consciousness… Christianity is a hangman’s metaphysics” (*TI* “Errors” 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On blame and freewill, see 1995a: 14-6 and 1995c: 72-4, and, on their connections to reasons, Williams 1995b: 40-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. There have, unsurprisingly, been many responses to Williams’ anti-externalist arguments, many of which are directed against the sentimentalist moral psychology he presupposes. See esp. Korsgaard 1986, McDowell 1995, Millgram 1996, Parfit 1997, Scanlon 1998 and Skorupski 2007 – the latter also providing a level-headed externalist defence of moral blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Note that Williams doesn’t disavow blame outright: he allows it an important role in disciplining ethical life and accepts that people may be legitimate targets of blame if they had reason – in his own preferred internalist sense – to do what morality demands. It is less clear whether Nietzsche affords blame, or other punitive sentiments, *any* positive role. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For other dimensions to Williams’ Nietzschean criticisms of blame, especially the way in which the *act* of blaming can be an expression of *ressentiment* that produces in the blamer various misconceptions of both others and himself, see Williams 1995c: 72-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)