**Playing Kant at the Court of King Arthur**

There has recently been an increasing focus on the alleged inappropriateness of much of

the dominant paradigm of highly idealised theories of abstract virtues like justice in

contemporary political philosophy. There, the focus has tended to be on whether such

idealised theories provide appropriate concrete guidance about what we should do here

and now (Farrelly, 2007; Sen, 2006). Indeed, ‘ideal theory’ has been defined as theory

that does not provide that guidance (Stemplowska, 2008, p. 324).1 This debate,

however, has obscured another, related but not identical discussion that has also become

increasingly important in the past five or so years. What Bernard Williams called

‘realism’ not only criticises contemporary egalitarian liberals for failing to draw detailed

policy implications from their theories (Williams, 2005a: *Realism and Moralism in Political*

*Theory*, hereafter RMPT). Realists deny that the ideals articulated by what Williams

called ‘political moralists’ are appropriate because they deny that ideals, at least of that

sort, are appropriate in politics at all.

Participants in the more prominent debate over ideal theory have tended to understand

this critique as one of the feasibility of liberal egalitarian ideals, given actually existing

agents’ motivational sets (Stemplowska and Swift, 2012, pp. 379–81; Valentini, 2012, pp.

659–61).2 However, the problem is not that we do not know how to realise liberal

egalitarian ideals, though we may not. Instead, realists claim that thinking that what we

ought to do is realise them is a category mistake, misrecognising the problems to which

political philosophy must respond. As Williams put it, we can imagine ourselves as ‘Kant

at the Court of King Arthur’ if we please, but it is not clear what real problem this will help

us understand (RMPT, p. 10). Perhaps political moralism does get our moral ideals right,

but that is not what we should be doing in politics. Politics is about something else,

reflecting not the unforced force of the better argument but a monopoly on organised

violence. The ideal theory debate’s focus on achieving progress towards our ideals seems

different. Whatever else might be said about that issue, it is not the allegation that John

Rawls and his followers have misunderstood what politics is.

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The realist challenge so understood connects with a number of other debates in

mainstream Anglo-American political theory. The idea that political theory ought, in some

sense, to be political is central especially to Rawls’ later work and increasingly important

in its interpretation and assessment. Rawls begins *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* by

asserting that political philosophy has a role ‘arising from divisive political conflict and the

need to settle the problem of order’ (Rawls, 2001, p. 1: hereafter JaFAR). His further,

explicitly Hegelian requirement of reconciliation historicises meeting this need (JaFAR, p.

3). Even in *A Theory of Justice*, he argued that utilitarianism fails because it assimilates the

problem of the choice of principles for one person to that of the problem of the choice

of principles for the many different members of a society with all their conflicting ends

(Rawls, 1971, p. 29: hereafter ToJ). Like the realists, Rawls seems to insist that the

distinctiveness of the political ought to somehow constrain our theorising about how its

institutions should be arranged. This is despite Rawls being one of the main targets of

realists (see, e.g. RMPT; Galston, 2010).

In this article, I compare and contrast the way that one realist in particular – Bernard

Williams – demands that political theory remain political with the way Rawls does. In

doing so, I aim to understand the power of their different accounts as well as discovering

where, if at all, they overlap. In particular, I want to suggest that both have underestimated

some of the challenges they face. If realists are to dispel the allure of seeing society either

as an arena dominated by power or potentially a community transcending conflict, they

must say more about the value of the political and its distribution. Equally, though, their

work should remind Rawlsians of how their theories need to remain situated in the real

political dilemmas we actually face, rather than abstract moral questions without purchase

on our problems.

In the first section of the article, I locate Bernard Williams in the broader realist camp,

saying something about why I have chosen him to compare to Rawls. In the second, I

draw out the sense in which Rawls’ work is political, comparing and contrasting it with

that of Williams. I then use two examples to investigate these two authors’ accounts of

what it means to be political. First, I consider what those accounts have been and could be

used to say about G. A. Cohen’s advocacy of a particular norm of community as part of

the appeal of socialism. Second, I look at Rawls’ demand that a society governed by his

principles of justice be stable for the right reasons. In doing so, I show that both realists and

Rawlsians underestimate the difficulty of the task facing them in justifying their preferred

account of the political and its autonomy. I also, albeit indirectly, respond to those who

deny that political philosophy ought to be in any sense political.

**Williams and Realism**

To locate Bernard Williams within realism, we first need an account of what it is to be a

realist. Realism’s central theme is that political moralism’s alleged aspiration to apply moral

or ethical principles to politics is a utopian misunderstanding of politics’ point and purpose,

with all the dangerous consequences that implies. William Galston’s four related strands of

realist thought elaborate this theme. On his account, realists ‘take politics seriously as a

particular field of human endeavour’; hold ‘that civil order is the *sine qua non* for every

other political good’; emphasise ‘the evaluation and comparison of institutions and regime-

types, not only principles’; and demand that moralists acknowledge the limits of the

motivational power of reason and so develop a ‘complex moral and political psychology’

(Galston, 2010, p. 408).

This certainly makes sense of the realist idea that the problem with egalitarian liberals

like Rawls is the moralistic attitude they adopt towards politics. It explains why realists

emphasise the centrality of conflict to politics and so the importance of compromise as

opposed to the assumptions of agreement they see in much mainstream contemporary

political philosophy, for example (see, e.g. Horton, 2010). Civil order is the precondition

of all other political goods – and of many non-political goods too – because without it

conflict will destroy them. Of course, civil order is a matter of degree. At the limit, though,

the total absence of civil order is extremely destructive for agents who must share resources

of any significance. We disagree about how to use those resources, and not just because of

our different moral conceptions. Even if we could agree on a set of moral principles to

govern the use of the resources we must share, it is not clear that we could always abide

by these principles or that this would resolve the problem, given how limited and different

evidence creates difficulties of interpretation. Endemic and unavoidable conflict instead

needs to be confronted with an understanding of the motivations that generate it and how

it can be governed by partially redirecting, suppressing and isolating them. Politics is about

the coercive provision of order in situations of moral and other conflict, and our theorising

about it has to reflect that to have any purchase on it.

This fits with Williams’ critique of political moralism. Williams is insistent that the

normative standard we apply to politics must be political. The centrepiece of his realist

political theory – the Basic Legitimation Demand – is normative since it tells us which

states have authority over their subjects (RMPT, pp. 5–6). Its normative claim, though, ‘is

inherent in there being such a thing as politics’ because of its relation to the ‘first political

question’: ‘the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation’

so central to Hobbes’ work (RMPT, pp. 5 and 3). Answering Hobbes’ question

requires the exercise of power, but to count as an answer to that question, there has to be

something those who offer it can say about taking people from a situation where they lack

the benefits of order to one where they do not. Otherwise, the question has not been

answered (RMPT, p. 5). Political moralism’s failure is a failure to answer that question.

Anything it produces that we could envisage as an answer is not couched in the right terms

since it understands neither the goods politics produces nor the mechanisms it uses. More,

since Williams argues that answers to the Basic Legitimation Demand have to be contextual

and sensitive to the history of the people for whom they are answers, political moralism is

often misleadingly, if not dangerously, universalist (RMPT, pp. 7–9).

This makes sense in terms of Galston’s four strands. The Basic Legitimation Demand can

only be understood in light of the insistence on the autonomy of politics and the

ever-present first political question of the preservation of order. The requirement that

answers to it be contextual so that they make sense to those for whom they are answers is

typical of Williams’ consistent hostility towards principled, rationalistic moral theorising,

whether deontological or consequentialist. His rejection of Kantian theories of practical

reason sees them as reducing human agency to a mere rational will and so misunderstanding

the importance of being a particular agent with a particular history and set of beliefs and

commitments (Williams, 2011, pp. 71ff). Equally, the expanded notion of responsibility

that consequentialists use obliterates the boundaries between what we and others do and so

is massively destructive of our sense of self (Williams, 1988). The complexity and diversity

of agents inevitably situated in particular contexts, and so of the pointlessness of abstract

principles or theories that do not begin from actual human motivations, is a central theme

of all Williams’ work. He does not just share the realist emphasis on the autonomy of the

political then, but also on the need for theorising that is institutionally and psychologically

embedded.

Williams is also a good representative of the realist school because he is distinctive in two

ways. First, he is one of the few realists not contradictorily hostile to normativity as such.

Raymond Geuss is suspicious ‘about the normative standpoint as a whole’, for example

(Geuss, 2002, p. 330). If he really means ‘the normative standpoint as a whole’, then it is

hard to understand how there could be any measure of weight to his suspicions or why

anyone, including Geuss, should rely on argumentation to shape their views at all. In

contrast, Williams is quite happy to acknowledge that he is doing normative work. What

matters to him, and supposedly distinguishes his work from that of the political moralists, is

that that normativity is political. Second, Williams shares with Rawlsians a broadly social

democratic political perspective, limiting their disagreements to the methodological level. It

is difficult to imagine the same Williams who found it ‘a quaint local obsession of Americans

that they insist on defending on principle the right to offer any form of odious racist insult

or provocation so long as ... it can be represented as a form of speech’ defending the Amish’s

alleged right to remove their children from school on the basis of freedom of association

like William Galston, for example (Galston, 1995; Williams, 2005b, p. 19). Equally, his

involvement in the British Labour Party’s Commission on Social Justice in the early 1990s

is only comprehensible of someone on and interested in the broad centre-left.

The compatibility of Williams’ egalitarian liberal and realist commitments has been

questioned by Matt Sleat (2010). Williams repeatedly claimed that under conditions of

modernity the only available political legitimations were broadly liberal – at least in the

North Atlantic democracies (RMPT, pp. 7–9). Sleat argues that this is problematic in two

ways for a realist like Williams (Sleat, 2010, pp. 498ff). First, Williams interprets modernity

in a particular and not necessarily shared way. This is troublesome because, Sleat alleges, it

presupposes the kind of consensus that realists criticise political moralists for relying upon.

If politics is about finding ways to live together in spite of our disagreements, then our

disagreements about our historical situation will make it unavailable as a basis of our

political order. Second, liberalism cannot rest happy with that account of its foundations.

In order for liberals to endorse their political commitments coherently, they have to see

those commitments as generated by processes that are amenable to liberal justifications. If

we have been made into liberals by non-transparent or coercive means and are deluded

about the grounds on which liberalism rests, we face a kind of contradiction.

Matt Sleat is surely right that there is disagreement about the character of our historical

situation. However, if we look at the societies where Williams claimed only liberalism

could be legitimate, he seems to be roughly right. Of course their forms of governance are

not completely liberal, but at least for the past fifty years they have tended to be more or

less democratic, to publicly reject the idea of pre-determined roles based on ethnicity, class

or gender, and to respect the basic liberal freedoms of association, conscience and speech.

Given realism’s quasi-empirical, interpretive emphasis, it would be odd if Williams’ theory

did not take that into account. To remain realists, theorists must object to overly moralised

political theories that ignore the political conflicts we actually have. Although Sleat is right

that there is conflict about the character of modernity, legitimations have been liberal in

the way that Williams argued they must. Perhaps he was wrong in holding that this was

because of modernity, but some kind of consensus about something must be being drawn

upon to allow them to function at all. Unless enough people find liberal political orders at

least acceptable, they could not have survived.

The second of Sleat’s worries is I think more troubling. Williams’ problem is that he,

along with others, sees transparency as a particularly important value for liberals (Waldron,

1987). A justification of power cannot rest simply on its own exercise because of his

‘critical theory principle’ contending ‘that the acceptance of a justification does not count

if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being

justified’ (RMPT, p. 6). Because liberals tend to read ‘produced by’ comparatively

expansively, this makes the liberalising effects of roughly liberal political institutions

difficult for them to justify. It can be awkward for liberals to acknowledge that a significant

part of what makes someone liberal is the construction of their subjectivity by liberal social

and political institutions because of how important individuality and autonomy are to

them. One way of putting this would be to say that liberals can, for good reasons, be

perhaps too squeamish about taking their own side, even in a knife fight. Williams is aware

of this difficulty, and repeatedly states liberalism’s need for an error theory that explains, at

least in its own terms, why it has not always occupied its current, ideologically dominant

position in Western Europe, North America and the white Commonwealth, and why it is

not currently accepted elsewhere (RMPT, p. 9).

It seems any realist political theory is likely to be vulnerable to a variant of the same

problem. Williams’ dilemma here is that his explanation of the value of escaping the chaos

and uncertainty of the absence of political order also points to ends beyond that achievement

– ends which might threaten it. It is hard to imagine an understanding of the value

of stability that does not, upon reflection, suggest something more than that, or, alternatively,

collapse back into a justification of brute force. Yet the dilemma for a realist political

theory is to explain the value of political order while remaining political *and* able to

motivate obedience to that order from something more than fear of its coercive power.

Meeting that challenge may require going beyond straightforwardly Hobbesian concerns

with order and stability, and drawing upon the sort of moral resources realists criticise

moralists for relying on.

**Rawls and the Political**

At least from *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical* onwards, Rawls claimed that his

work was distinctively political. Here, I contrast what I take Rawls to mean by that with

what realists in general and Bernard Williams in particular have said about the problems

that political philosophy has to confront. I draw out the similarities and differences between

the two conceptions of ‘properly political’ political theory and so highlight the problems

they both face. Having done so, I will then be in a position to investigate the resources that

those two different conceptions give us, and so evaluate them as well as whether political

philosophy should be political at all.

*Political Liberalism* deals with the question of ‘how is a just and free society possible under

conditions of deep doctrinal conflict with no prospect of resolution’ (Rawls, 2005, p.

xxviii: hereafter PL). This is contrasted with views that are instead comprehensive in the

sense that they address a much wider range of questions and so do not concern themselves

only with the special case of the basic structure, and use a much wider range of material

to do so. This separation of political and comprehensive doctrines does not, Rawls claims,

have its origins in philosophy: it is rather the result of a democratic political culture whose

development began in the Reformation (PL, p. xxiff). In a way that strikingly mirrors

Williams’ understanding of our political situation, political liberalism’s problems are distinctively

modern and have their roots in the middle of the last millennium. Here and now

we need a freestanding political conception that draws upon ideas implicit in the public

culture to theorise the institutions we must share as citizens. The hope of a thicker, richer

justification of our political institutions is one we must give up on.

Obviously, Rawls and Williams respond to that problem in quite different ways. However,

it is useful to begin by observing how much their responses resemble each other. We

can then see the differences between them as in conversation with each other and raising

questions about the two accounts by pointing to their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Where, for example, Rawls claims political philosophy needs to be abstract to address the

breakdown of ‘our shared political understandings’ (PL, p. 44), Williams doubts that

abstraction will help. Even if we could typically expect abstraction to generate agreement,

which we cannot, it tends to erase conflict and so mischaracterise politics. On the one hand,

Williams’ response to the need for a legitimation of our political order risks leaving itself too

little to say to motivate political obedience properly. On the other hand, that of Rawls may

expect far too much and so nurture impossible hopes and consequent disillusionment.

This is only one of the important differences between Rawls and Williams. Others

include, for example, Rawls’ insistence on the primacy of justice contrasted with Williams’

demand that we focus on the more minimal requirement of legitimacy, however that is

complicated by Rawls’ interest in legitimacy and Williams’ in social justice. The central

difference, though, to which all others can be related, is between the demandingness of the

roles they require political philosophy to fulfil. The four requirements Rawls assigns to

political philosophy at the beginning of *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* involve it resolving

questions of political order, like those at stake in disputes over the relative significance of

the liberties of the ancients and the moderns; showing us how our status as citizens fits into

the broader set of commitments we have and so orienting us in our social world;

reconciling us to that social world, bequeathed to us by our history, by allowing us to see

it as having a development we can make sense of; and giving us realistic hope that our

society is not on a path of inevitable decline but can be, in its own terms, improved

(JaFAR, pp. 1–5). Williams does not reject these roles as such, but rather the extent to

which abstract philosophical reasoning will fulfil them.

The first of the four roles Rawls gives to political philosophy is, like the other three,

phrased more expansively than Williams would have been happy with. Williams thought it

ridiculous to attempt to end the dispute over the relative significance of the liberties of the

ancients and the moderns through the abstract considerations Rawls’ theory brings to bear

(Williams, 2001). Not only are those disagreements about our interests as well as our

conceptions of ourselves and our relations to each other, our self-understandings are much

more the product of history, upbringing and disposition than of rational reflection.

Philosophy therefore cannot resolve that disagreement because it is not just a philosophical

disagreement. Philosophy has done enough for Rawls, though, if the disagreement can ‘be

narrowed so that social cooperation on a footing of mutual respect among citizens can still

be maintained’ (JaFAR, p. 2). The idea of mutual respect’s invocation of Kantian ideas

about dignity and things beyond price would have still seemed excessive moralism to

Williams, but this is at least as much a difference about the tone of the response to the

requirement as about the requirement itself. The demand is that enough common ground is

found to legitimate a political order to those subject to it. Put like that, Williams could

hardly have objected to it. The difference is not in the role itself, but in what is conceived

of as fulfilling it.

Fulfilling the three remaining roles ensures that the legitimations offered by a political

philosophy are ones that make sense for the people they are legitimations for, and so could

hardly have been objected to as such by Williams. Meeting their demands locates those

legitimations in a broader set of commitments, hopes and expectations by fitting citizenship

into a network of other practices and roles, and into our social world’s development, both

as a society with a past and as one with a future. Williams was committed to philosophy

being richly contextual in this way *tout court*. Liberalism needs a theory of error to reconcile

us to the way our social world developed, for example. Williams claims that without a

theory of error, liberalism cannot explain why we should be liberals. We would be

alienated from ourselves and our social world in exactly the way that Rawls wants to avoid

through reconciliation. Again, the disagreement is not going to be over the demands

themselves but over what counts as meeting them.

For Williams, the problem is the way Rawls characterises appropriate responses to his

requirements. Although Rawls more than once refers to Isaiah Berlin’s claim that there is

no social world without loss (PL, pp. 57 and 197), Williams cannot think that he had

adequately absorbed its importance. For Williams, the comparatively unified account of

political values Rawls hopes for is impossible because of the extent of conflict between

values. Of course Rawls does not want a completely unified account of political values.

Even justice has to be endorsed from a number of different standpoints in Rawls’ later

work. However, Rawls’ work unquestionably does seek a greater degree and depth of

agreement than Williams’. That is why Rawls turns to abstraction to try to find a way of

controlling the disagreement he is well aware exists. This only makes sense if you think

there are higher-order, more abstract claims that people can agree on and that connect to

the first-order questions they are disagreeing over. Because Williams thought that value

pluralism was more extensive than Rawls did, he was less sympathetic to abstraction and

so to all of Rawls’ theory’s sophisticated philosophical apparatus.

**Before the End of History**

Understanding the proper content of the disagreement between Rawls and the realists

gives us the opportunity to adjudicate it appropriately. Rawls and the realists do not

disagree about *whether* political philosophy ought to be properly political, contextual and so

on, but about *how* political philosophy ought to be properly political, about the parts of the

context we should draw upon and so on. By looking at how appropriate the concrete

judgements their theories generate are, we can then evaluate them on the basis of their

performance of their role of giving us plausible beliefs about how we ought to act

politically. Which deals best with the challenge they both set themselves of legitimating

our political orders to their members? To do this, I draw on two cases. First, I look at

Williams’ realist response to G. A. Cohen’s advocacy of a principle of community as part

of the appeal of socialism, contrasting it with Miriam Ronzoni’s Rawlsian response.3

There, I suggest that Williams’ more concrete criticisms are more appropriate, although I

also point to some resources Rawlsians could have mobilised instead. Second, I discuss

Rawls’ idea of stability for the right reasons, and argue that it suggests that a more complete

realist political theory cannot skate over our moral disagreements in the way its advocates

imply. Here, I use discussions of characters from the HBO series *The Wire* to argue that

Rawls’ moral psychology responds to a demand realists have not yet confronted. Legitimating

our political orders will mean both abjuring some of the moral claims Rawlsians

sometimes make, and expanding those that realists are prepared to rely upon.

In his posthumously published *Why Not Socialism?*, G. A. Cohen argues that we lack the

social technologies to implement socialism rather than a moral case for it (Cohen, 2009:

hereafter WNS). Cohen argues that we ought to endorse socialism because it fulfils two

appealing and complementary moral principles. Here, I focus on the second principle – that

of community. This principle of ‘communal reciprocity’ demands that ‘I serve you not

because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you need or want my service,

and you, for the same reason, serve me’ (WNS, p. 39). Unlike market reciprocity, where

‘I am willing to serve, but only in order to *be* served’, communal reciprocity values being

served and serving together (WNS, p. 41). Cohen also advocated much the same principle

of community, again contrasted with characteristic market motivation, in a criticism of the

British Labour Party’s Commission on Social Justice, which Bernard Williams had served

on (Cohen, 1997).

In both cases, Cohen’s principle of community implies a commonality of purpose. I can

only be willing to serve someone because they need my service when I think what they are

doing is appropriate and does not ask too much of me. Where there is conflict, either of

our ends or our interests, Cohen’s principle of community must at least have its scope

reduced. When we help others in situations where what we want is not already aligned, we

do so not because we want them to succeed but for some other reason. Even if this does

not mean we must be motivated by the greed and fear that Cohen thinks characterise

market interactions, it does mean we cannot be serving them simply because they need our

service. The relations of mutual respect that Rawls believes his principles of justice would

create, for example, are not ones in which we serve others simply because they need our

service. They cannot be, because part of the point of that respect is to create the space for

us to pursue different conceptions of the good – conceptions which may conflict. Helping

anyone who needed our service would make that pursuit impossible. Neither Rawlsians

nor realists can think Cohen’s advocacy of an expansive principle of community is

appropriately political. Its suppression of difference cannot be suitable for agents who stand

in a political relationship. By looking at Williams’ response to Cohen’s criticisms as well as

a Rawlsian response to *Why Not Socialism?*, we can compare their relative success in

repudiating Cohen’s suppression of disagreement.

Williams replied to Cohen’s criticisms in his *Forward to Basics* (Williams, 1997: hereafter

FtB). There are two interlinked strands to Williams’ response to Cohen’s invocation of the

value of community. First, he attacks the way Cohen draws a supposedly universal norm

from a particular historical context without understanding that context, how it sustained

that norm, and what has happened to it. Second, and relatedly, he questions whether

Cohen’s demand that we act only from attractive motives can be political. Williams

acknowledges that Cohen’s advocacy of a principle of community has roots in the tradition

of the Labour Party. An ‘experience of a strong sense of community combined with class

solidarity’ and the hope that this could be generalised to all of society ‘so that there would

be a shared sense of fairness, social humiliation would disappear, and selfish motives would

be replaced by altruistic ones’ motivated many of its achievements and much of its support,

particularly in the post-war period (FtB, p. 54). However, that outlook was not only

deformed in various ways but also the product of deprivation that was partially made good

by the changes it itself brought about through mechanisms like the Labour Party and its

support and expansion of the welfare state. It is not just that the Labour Party cannot then

draw upon that outlook any more, but that given what the outlook was, wanting to do so

makes no sense. It would mean giving up on the liberalisation of what was then the

past fifty years and returning to a situation, the removal of which that very outlook

demanded.

In his broader second critique, Williams asks whether Cohen really has any understanding

of the range of motivations we can call upon in political theory at all. Williams

points out that Marx, whom Cohen invokes in his criticism, knew that political action

could not take place solely or even mainly on the basis of the sorts of ‘attractive’ motives

Cohen’s principle of community requires. Unless Cohen thinks history has ended, then

he had ‘better accept the Commission’s general definition of the problem of social

justice, that aspirations for equality and a sense of community must be applied, by

defensible political power, to a world which is significantly driven by other sorts of

motivations’ (FtB, p. 57). Indeed, in failing to see that politics must continue in all of its

grubbiness, Cohen is like one of the utopian socialists whom Marxists ‘tended to despise’

because they have not grasped the importance of either ‘a sound historical analysis’ or ‘a

firmly unsentimental picture of what ma[kes] people act’ (FtB, p. 57). Cohen’s political

principles fail *tout court* because they fail to understand what the political problem is. It

may be true that it would be better if we acted from Cohen’s highly solidaristic norm of

community, but since ‘our’ and any other political situation is partly constituted by the

fact that we do not, offering this as a diagnosis of how we ought to improve that

situation cannot be to the point.

Williams’ critique can be contrasted with Miriam Ronzoni’s attack on Cohen’s principle

of community in her *Life is Not a Camping Trip* (Ronzoni, 2011: hereafter LINACT).

Ronzoni also runs a more specific and a more general critique – neither of which are quite

as sharply political as are Williams’. First, she examines whether Cohen’s principle of

community is appropriate in another context marked, like the camping trip he uses to

illustrate and motivate it in *Why Not Socialism?*, by strong affective bonds – the family.

Second, she asks whether the ideal of the person it draws on gives up something we should

hold dear. In discussing Cohen’s principle of community and the family, Ronzoni stresses

the way that a camping trip is characterised by both being strictly limited in time and aimed

at a particular kind of solidaristic, frugal experience. Like Williams’ more specific critique,

her worry here is epistemic. She points to the difficulty of transferring a norm from one

context to another by observing that the particular norms appropriate for a camping trip are

inappropriate even in other small-scale contexts where norms of equality and community

are important, like the family. We have different purposes, which require a greater degree

of independence – in Virginia Woolf ’s phrase: ‘a room of one’s own’4 – as we can see if

we imagine having to live our whole lives on a Cohenite camping trip (LINACT, p. 181).

Its norms are appropriate for groups who share ‘a very specific, and significantly thick,

conception of the good life’ and so that independence does not matter (LINACT, p. 182).

Unless we ‘embrace community as a central and prevailing value in our lives’, we should

reject them (LINACT, p. 182).

This is an important way in which Ronzoni differs from Williams, who, other than some

asides about the moral costs of thick conceptions of the good life, simply denies that

Cohen’s norm of community could be appropriate not only for us in our particular

historical context, but for anyone living before the end of political conflict *tout court*.

Ronzoni, in contrast, defends groups where disagreement continues rather than pointing

out that assuming away the problem is no kind of solution to it, describing the kinds of

concerns Williams refers to as ones of ‘feasibility’ (LINACT, p. 183). Although she also

sees that Cohen is closer to utopian socialism than Marxism, she wants to dissolve the

appeal of utopias rather than observing that they are beyond our reach. The question of

whether we should embrace Cohen’s norm of community is open for her and so she refers

to what we might find ‘independently valuable about the creative, inventive, multifaceted,

and diverse nature of human undertakings’ (LINACT, p. 183).

Who, though, would this abstract justification of political relationships be for? This is

not an answer to the question of whether we, with all our disagreements and using the

means at our disposal, should suppress conflict so as to realise Cohen’s principle of

community. If it were an answer to that question, the suppression of difference and so the

legitimacy of different forms of political coercion would at least be relevant. Ronzoni

ignores those issues despite Rawls’ use of what he calls ‘the fact of oppression’ to describe

the problem with which his theory deals (PL, p. 37). Instead, she makes the appropriateness

of a Cohenite norm of selflessness turn partly on the appeal of competing and similarly

unrealisable moral ideals of free-floating Millian individuality and solidarism so perfect that

there are no goods we can know alone. The debate is then one about ultimate ethical ends

and so, in an important sense, beyond politics, which exists because we cannot resolve

those questions.

Ronzoni’s decision to present that argument is probably tactical, given that she wants to

respond to Cohen. General inferences from individual cases must be made carefully. Still,

the view that Cohen’s principle of community is problematic because it depends on the

wrong kind of abstract moral ideal is in line with the tone of a piece in which coercion

is barely mentioned, and then only to be set aside as irrelevant. What is at stake is the

attractiveness of a community united by the sorts of solidaristic bonds that are only

sustainable when all share the same thick conception of the good. Instead of all that we

know of the history of communities governed by such norms, and the hardship and

violence needed to sustain them, we get discussions of (ideal) families and the differences

between them and camping trips.

Ronzoni may well not have any problem with objecting to Cohen’s norm of community

more bluntly, but it is indicative of a difference between her and Williams that she

does not – one which is to Williams’ credit, at least in terms of clarity about what is wrong

with Cohen’s view. The greater confidence in the possibility of a philosophical resolution

of our conflicts of value and interest is a problem for Rawlsians here. It leaves them seeing

their disputes with their opponents in non-political terms that they cannot settle and which

do not matter for us or any other agents with political problems. Rather than focusing on

what might sustain a community united around a norm of almost complete selflessness for

creatures like us and how available or desirable those methods might be, Ronzoni’s

question is put in terms of ultimate moral ends and so beyond the realm of the political.

**Putting Your Hand in the Next Guy’s Pocket**

This search for deeper and more profound sources of agreement can also give Rawlsians

resources that realists like Williams lack, however. In particular, the requirement that a

society governed by Rawlsian principles would be stable for the right reasons incorporates

an important element of a political justification that realists lack. This requires that the

political settlement can be endorsed as binding from within reasonable comprehensive

doctrines and not merely because of the risks of destabilising it. Williams, like other realists,

has been scathing about its rejection of considerations about the balance of political forces,

saying it ‘suggests a certain distance from the political’ since anyone living in a stable order

is ‘already lucky’ (RMPT, p. 2; quoted in Galston, 2010, p. 398). However, stability for

the right reasons’ search for a deeper and more explicitly moralised source of agreement

provides a way of understanding complaints which undermine the legitimacy of a political

order for which realists currently struggle to account.

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls identifies two sets of

goods associated with his theory’s account of stability for the right reasons (JaFAR, pp.

200–4; PL, pp. 201–6). First, a society that is governed by his two principles of justice will

be good for its members in two ways: they will experience the exercise of the two moral

powers as good for them, and the public recognition of their status as free and equal gives

them the social bases of self-respect. Second, they will see their cooperation to live under

the two principles as a shared achievement, much like a successful orchestra performance.

What stability for the right reasons does is ensure the congruence of justice and the good

(JaFAR, p. 202). This is important even from the most minimal political point of view

since, as Samuel Freeman puts it, if a political doctrine is ‘destructive of what is best in

human character’, it is unlikely to command peoples’ allegiance in the inevitable times of

difficulty and so will not provide the necessary assurance (Freeman, 2007, p. 149).

Freeman’s discussion shows that the simply political cannot be separated from questions

about what is good for those who must live under its arrangements. That an armed peace

may be very little peace at all is not the only reason we have for caring about stability for

the right reasons. It is not just that without its goods, the goods of basic order may well be

threatened and diminished. It is also that, at least in Williams’ terms, a justification of the

authority of political power is owed to all those whose obedience it wants to claim – a

justification which, at least for us, cannot simply be the observation that we are no longer

in a Hobbesian state of nature but which must make sense in the context of our

judgements about what matters to us. The requirement that the political rules we live

under do not systematically frustrate our attempts to live the lives we want – at least when

we are prepared to allow others the same opportunity reciprocally – ought to be as

important to Williams and other realists as it is to Rawls. A political settlement we cannot

live with is hardly the one for us. Whatever demands we think of the citizens of North

Atlantic democracies as making, they are not the same demands as citizens of failed or

failing states, and so more sophisticated resources than those provided by the simple

provision of the goods of political order are going to be necessary. North Atlantic

democracies do more than not fail, and the extra they do needs to be made sense of.5

Rawls’ idea of the social bases of self-respect is particularly useful here. These bases are

the features of a social world that gives us ‘self-confidence as a fully cooperating member

of society capable of pursuing a worthwhile conception of the good over a complete life’

(PL, p. 318). Rawls doubts that without a guarantee of the social bases of self-respect, a

political conception can be stable for the right reasons. It is because utilitarianism cannot

be publicly affirmed without risking seriously damaging some peoples’ sense of their own

worth that it would be rejected as a political conception. Realists may scoff at Rawls’

excessive moralism here, but we can understand a number of contemporary political

challenges in terms of the social bases of self-respect. Not least of these is the disillusionment

generated by deindustrialisation – a disillusionment particularly vividly illustrated by

the fate of the Sobotkas in the second season of the HBO drama series *The Wire*.

*The Wire*’s unifying focus is the Baltimore Police Department’s attempts to deal with the

city’s drug gangs, but through that lens, it draws a broader picture of what it sees as the

moral and social collapse of an exemplar of the post-industrial American inner city,

attempting to understand that collapse by looking at the institutions that either failed to

prevent it or facilitated it. The plot of the second season concerns, among other things, the

stevedores’ union being used to bring drugs into the city. The union branch is headed by

Frank Sobotka, who orchestrates the collection and handover of the shipping containers in

which drugs and other contraband are smuggled. His son, Ziggy, and nephew, Nick, also

work on the docks. Over the course of the 13 episodes of the season, the Sobotkas’

involvement in smuggling and associated crime becomes more and more serious and more

and more dangerous, until, in the end, it destroys both Frank and Ziggy.

Frank and Ziggy are both presented, by the end of the season, as tragic figures corrupted

and eventually brought down by the limited and compromising resources their situation

provides them. The power of that narrative depends on being able to make the moral

difficulty of their position come alive for the viewer. Without a sense of the importance

of what they are struggling for and the sacrifices they have to make to try to get it, we

could not see them as corrupted by those struggles and sacrifices. I think we can helpfully

understand a significant part of what they are both so desperately trying to secure as the

social bases of self-respect. The importance of that idea for an account of political

justification is made clear by the lengths Frank and Ziggy are willing to go to try to secure

that sense of their place in the world. The world *The Wire* depicts is not one that offers

Frank or Ziggy Sobotka a robust sense of their importance in it. Its failure to value what

they want to achieve is obvious in its refusal to give them a fair chance to get it. As Rawls

puts it when discussing how the publicity of his two principles secure the social bases of

self-respect, ‘it is natural to experience a loss of self-esteem, a weakening of our sense of

the value of accomplishing our aims, when we must accept a lesser prospect of life for the

sake of others’ (ToJ, p. 181). Because their world requires them to constantly fight to avoid

that loss, any justification of the political authorities that organise it rings hollow for Frank

and Ziggy.6

Frank Sobotka arranges the passage of drugs and other contraband through Baltimore’s

port to fund a political campaign to renovate and expand the docks and so guarantee the

future of the dockworkers and their community. Although it is clear that the stevedores

have traditionally engaged in petty criminality to provide an additional income, Frank

knows he is doing something more even before the suffocation of trafficked women inside

a shipping container opens the season. He is acting against the norms of his community –

norms his compliance with gives a sense of himself and his place in the world – to ensure

that the community persists and is able to give others, who rely on him, an uncomplicated

sense of their place in it. Ziggy is also haunted by his violation of communal norms,

although in his case the violation is public. It is understood that he owes his place in a

community where others are losing theirs to his father. Because he has not earned his place,

nothing he gets from his work is properly his. The guarantee of his status makes it

worthless. Instead, he tries to find a sense of his own significance, that what he does

matters, elsewhere, and quickly finds he cannot. It is crucial for both him and his father that

the community they know flourishes so that they are not alienated by being stripped of the

only available basis of their self-respect.

There are a number of examples that illustrate Frank and Ziggy’s need for that particular

social basis of self-respect – Frank’s complaint that ‘we used to make shit in this country’ but

now ‘just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket’ when his lobbyist tells him the FBI

investigation into the union means his campaign to renovate and expand the docks is over,

for instance (Pelecanos, 2003). Perhaps the best though is a conversation between Frank and

Ziggy after the latter has been beaten up by drug dealers and has made a scene in the bar in

which the stevedores all drink (Simon, 2003). Frank catches Ziggy as he is leaving the bar,

dragging him down to the docks to talk some sense into him. However, Ziggy’s drunken

reminiscences of family arguments illustrative of the pride once available in manual labour

and of moments of communal solidarity provided by strikes and accidents derail him. Frank

gives up trying to set Ziggy onto the straight and narrow, and they leave. This only makes

sense because Frank knows how destructive it is losing what Ziggy makes him nostalgic for.

His behaviour is a response to that loss, and comprehensible in its terms. Frank has seriously

compromised himself by fighting to prevent things getting worse.

Of course, part of what Frank’s fight to sustain his community has done is to undermine

civil peace by making large-scale, profitable criminal drug dealing easier. This is not the only

reason why political justifications should take note of it though. Frank and Ziggy are

alienated from their political community through the difficulty of securing a sense of their

place in it, and so it will be very hard to justify its authority over them. Even if Rawls’

understanding of stability for the right reasons is too demanding, realists should not rest happy

with a *modus vivendi*’s avoidance of brute domination. Legitimacy seems to require a more

sympathetic approach to the hopes of the members of a political order, at least here and now.

In that sense, stability for the right reasons is an authentically realist requirement and thus one

that political realists like Bernard Williams should take much more seriously. If we cannot

prevent political orders from systematically frustrating their members’ hopes, then we need to

adapt our attitude towards those like the Sobotkas and, relatedly, the kinds of goods we

expect our political settlements to achieve. If their expectations cannot be met, then the

political order cannot be justified to them. Their demands are, in Rawls’ sense, unreasonable

– a failure to respect the free and equal status of their fellow citizens. In Williams’ starker

terms, they are ‘anarchists ... bandits, or merely enemies’ (Williams, 2005c, p. 136). Either

way, they must be contained – forcefully if necessary – and we can no longer see ourselves

as in even a thin kind of community with them, however justified our treatment of them is.7

**Conclusion**

One of the main targets of the realist critique of political moralism is John Rawls. He and

his followers are taken as being typical of the dangerous turn away from politics in

contemporary political philosophy. I have argued here that this is misplaced and that, in

fact, Rawls is a political realist of a sort. Particularly in his later writings, he offers a

historicised account that starts from much the same sort of questions as those more

conventionally grouped under the realist label do. There are differences between the

more straightforward realists and Rawls, differences I have tried to locate in Rawls’ more

demanding understanding of the role political theory has to fulfil. I have also suggested that

this sometimes leads Rawls(ians) to seek to resolve philosophical questions they would be

better to leave alone, but that realists ought to look more carefully at Rawls’ requirement

of stability for the right reasons. That requirement is one way of theorising the demand

that political orders do not alienate members who accept that its other members must be

similarly accommodated. Realists may not want to adopt Rawls’ version of this requirement,

but they need to incorporate something analogous of it into their accounts of

legitimacy unless they are to treat many members of political orders as threats to their

stability which need to be contained. In making these arguments about the respective

strengths and weaknesses of Rawls and Williams, I hope to have defended and illuminated

the requirement endorsed by both that political theory be properly political.

**Notes**

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1 For an alternative definition, and my own contribution to that debate, see Jubb (2012).

2 Stemplowska and Swift acknowledge, but do not really explore, the ‘applied ethics’ critique. The only exceptions I am aware of

are Sangiovanni (2008) and Gledhill (2012). I take myself to be extending Sangiovanni’s discussion, and find Gledhill’s use of the

ideal theory debate unhelpful for the reasons I outline.

3 Ronzoni has elsewhere defended Rawlsian methodological commitments against Cohen. See Ronzoni and Valentini (2008).

4 Ronzoni repeatedly refers to Woolf. See LINACT, pp. 178, 180 and 181.

5 Obviously, different considerations will be relevant in different times and places.

6 Indeed, Frank refuses to cooperate with the police precisely because of the authorities’ indifference to the slow death of his

community (Pelecanos, 2003).

7 Matt Sleat has recently claimed that political liberalism has no way of justifying its coercion of non-liberals. See Sleat (2013). This

seems to me false, because for political liberals, political power is a threat to freedom and equality which is to be justified in those

terms. Non-liberals who reject such a justification still have one available. The problem is, instead, how to live together despite that.

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