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Realism and metanormativity

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ABSTRACT

Political realists have argued that ‘the political’ is an autonomous domain with its own distinctive concepts, distinctive methodology, and distinctive ‘source of normativity’. I here explore the metanormative commitments of realism (of the *radical* realist branch, in particular) and question the viability of exploring the ontology of the normative altogether. I argue that the escape into the metanormative realm was something of a wrong turn within the realism debates – an intellectual error. My central argument, building on recent metatheoretical work on normativity, is meant to discredit the sheer possibility of metanormative distinctness. If realists can neither prove metanormative, nor traditional, nor methodological distinctness, there is a valid question as to its standing. I speculate, perhaps realism is little more than a new semantic label for ‘continental’ practices of social analysis as they leak into the analytic tradition. But then again it can be argued that most contemporary continental thought, and certainly much of what passes as critical theory these days, is thoroughly moralist, anti-positivist, and postmodern, and those sentiments are not shared by radical realists, who are, or so I’ll argue, far more faithful to the modernist tradition of social theory.

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1. Introduction

Political realists fight political moralists on several fronts: the role of legitimacy and justice in political theorising; the importance of facts and feasibility constraints; the historization of political theory; on genealogy as method; political key-values, and more besides. Those seem like substantive disagreements. However, at some point in the mid-2010s, the literature on realism and moralism turned towards metanormative claims to substantiate the sometimes ambiguous, often evocative rejection of the

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universal priority of the moral over the political, as suggested in Williams (2005), Geuss (2008), and associated acolytes.¹ Realists heralding this metanormative turn have argued that ‘the political’ is an autonomous domain with its own distinctive concepts and values, its own tradition, own method, and, most importantly for what concerns this paper, its own distinctive ‘source of normativity’.² Political realism, it was said, is defined ‘on the basis of its attempt to give varying degrees of autonomy to politics as a sphere of human activity, in large part through its exploration of the sources of normativity appropriate for the political’ (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 1). From there onwards, realists and moralists alike kept talking about a distinctively political normativity.³ What is the content of this elusive notion?

Despite its prevalence in the realism literature, the notion of metanormative distinctness has never been explored with adequate care. Sebastian Nye, as an early sceptic of metanormatively-defined realism, has expressed his dissatisfaction with the metanormative turn, saying that

it is natural to think that a methodological debate concerning a discipline, which (as realists and non-realists agree) is at root a normative and evaluative discipline, would overlap considerably with debates in metaethics. However, despite this, the debate between realists and their critics has been surprisingly quiet on questions of metaethics [or rather, metanormativity, which encompasses normativity beyond ethics]. (2015, 1084)

I submit that when this claim to distinctively political normativity is taken at face-value we are confronted with a disagreement about the ontology of the normative sphere; a Quinean controversy about existential quantifiers.

Given that the literature on realism keeps circling around unvoiced and suggestive metanormative commitments, it might seem like this

¹What makes the dispute between realists and moralist a metanormative dispute? That depends on how we define the term *metanormativity*. ‘First-order normative theories concern what things are right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust, rational and irrational, and so on, and why they are so’, says Vayrynen (2018, 2). ‘Metanormative theories concern the nature of first-order normative questions and claims’ (2018, 2). See also Scanlon (1998) for a similar definition. Others, like Finlay, have suggested that ‘metanormative theory explores fundamental questions crosscutting ethics, political and legal philosophy, aesthetics, epistemology, and more. It is described as the study of normativity, suggesting there is something, called ‘normativity’, that is the common object of the competing theories of the philosophers working in this field’ (2019, 187). I sympathise with the latter, but incorporate elements of the former definition, as will become clearer below.

²See Jubb (2019).

³Realists are partly to blame for this malaise. On closer inspection, it was the realists’ enemy, the moralist, who strongly reinforced the notion of sources of normativity and played it to their own advance. See Leader-Maynard and Worsnip (2018) and Erman and Möller (2021). Recently, other realists have grown sceptical of the viability of a *sui generis* political normativity.

shortcoming must be rectified.⁴ On the other hand, we may value the realist method and tradition as distinct without knowing much about its metanormative commitments. How to precede? I think, anticipating my conclusion here, that it is vital for the future of the realism debates to reiterate carefully and systematically⁵ that the focus of realism should never have been about the ontology and metaphysics of normativity to begin with. Realism's ambition, I will reiterate repeatedly throughout this essay, must be to arouse a sensation of angst about political power infiltrating the normative principles – especially the moral normativity principles – we (i.e. the moralists) use in theorising the political.⁶ I will double down on the central insight of contemporary realism being Raymond Geuss' line, that 'ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future' (Geuss 2010, 42). It is on the realist to explain what that means and what is to follow from ethics being dead politics. I suggest the Geussian line can be understood without indulging in the metanormative.

Some qualifications of the above are in order. First, realism is not a unified theory. There are several strands of realism; some overlap; each comes with their discrete issues and problems. Avid observers of the realism debates may remark that my definition of realism as concerned with the suspension of political power in normative political argument, following Geuss' dictum, coheres best with a singular sub-branch of realism and might not be applicable to realism *in toto*. I am referring to the 'radical' realist sub-branch.⁷ Whether the demand to qualify the scope of my metanormative analysis to radical realism (as opposed to realism as such) is warranted depends on what perspective we take on the debate. Let us explore.

Before Rossi introduced his nomenclature (2019), which familiarised a distinction (about which I will say more below) into ordorealists, contextual realists, and radical realists, the normativity-issue belonged to an unqualified *realism proper*. When critics of realism, such as Leader-Maynard and Worsnip (2018), attacked realism for its apparent

⁴Many will deny that it does, or ever did, and still, the terminology of 'distinctiveness', 'sources', and 'normativity' persists. If this is not meant to trigger metanormative debate, we are owed an explanation of the terminology.

⁵See Cross (2020) and Sleat (2022) for some tentative movements away from the metanormative sphere.

⁶A form of genealogical anxiety, perhaps. See Srinivasan (2019) and Queloz (2021).

⁷See Rossi (2019) for the original nomenclature. See Rossi and Argenton (2021), Aytac and Rossi (2022) and Raekstad (2021) for applications of the radical realist method. See Kreutz (2022b) and Kreutz and Rossi (2022) for some exploratory methodological remarks. I hope that as radical realism evolves further my terminological suggestion might take hold.

metanormative failures – there is no distinctive political normativity, they argued – they were after this unqualified realism, containing fragments of what are now considered sub-branches of the broader realist programme.⁸ Since this internal division of realism, the issue of normativity has been discussed largely under the umbrella of its ‘radical’ off-shoot. Yet, it must be noted that the boundaries between the different forms of realism are blurry. For matters of conceptual clarity, and because the conclusions I will draw from my anti-metanormative argument speak loudest to and about the radical realists, I will, from here onwards, limit the scope of my discussion to the radical realist sub-branch, unless otherwise noted.

The initial aim of this essay is to suggest ways in which the disagreement between moralists and (radical) realists can be understood as a metanormative disagreement. This is partly to satisfy the metaethical urge, engaging with Nye’s challenge, and partly to demonstrate the (unnecessary) complexity (and irrelevance) of rendering realism a substantive view about the ontology and metaphysics of political normativity. In detail, I aim to convince those engaged in the debate that the notion of ‘metanormative distinctness’ cannot be made intelligible. Realists, I show, both *fail to* and, what is more, *don’t need to* rely on metanormative distinctness to make their case: that ethics is dead politics, and that this should make us suspicious of morality-led political theory.

Might there be other ways, apart from the metanormative paths, in which realism can claim distinctness? As mentioned above, some authors understand realism as a distinct tradition in political thought (think Hobbes, Thucydides, and Machiavelli) with a distinct value-set and distinct understanding of the political.⁹ Crudely, those ‘traditionalist’ will argue that realism values social order and cohesion higher than (logically) secondary values, such as justice or equality.¹⁰ Rossi (2019) has labelled those realists *ordorealism*, because of their strong commitment to the value of social order. Because of this strong commitment to social cohesion and order, ordorealists have been frequently accused of an inherent status-quo bias.¹¹

⁸See Sleat (2022) and Kreutz and Rossi (2022) for a discussion and conclusive rebuttal of those antirealist argument.

⁹See McQueen (2017).

¹⁰Social order is logically prior to moral values, such as justice, given that without order there is no justice, argues Williams (2005). I am later concerned with a metanormative disambiguation of the idea of priority: an ought that overrides all other oughts in situations of normative conflict. See Section 7.

¹¹See Westphal (2022).

Contextualists have argued that an increased attention to the facts and feasibility constraints of real politics makes the realist methodologically distinct. Distinct, that is, as a comparative term. Realism, they say, pays closer attention to political contexts than other entrenched ways of practicing political theory. This sub-branch of realism we can call *contextual realism*. About the contextual approach, Adrian Kreutz (2022b) has argued that it risks tiptoeing on the borderline of plain descriptivism. As soon as normativity is involved, facts and feasibility-constraints – that is, the descriptive content – play a subordinate role in normative reasoning. The argument, crudely put, says that given a set of identical (descriptive) facts, for any argument or policy-proposal based on those facts, the normative conclusions will depend exclusively on the normative principles we put into the equation. The contextual approach thus finds itself at a methodological dead end. Increased attention to the facts and feasibility-constraints alone won't account for realism's methodological distinctness. What is more, descriptive approaches to politics are by no means unique. And within normative theories, any descriptive content must play a subordinate role, not as a matter of choice, but because of the Humean nature of normativity itself.

The *radical* sub-branch of realism is very much a work-in-progress. In its most developed form, it aims to introduce a genealogy-driven ideology-critique without, in doing that, availing moral normativity.¹² In its place, radical realists want to put epistemic laws, values, or commitments to serve as the normative yardstick of critique.¹³ Those epistemic norms, radical realists understand as not, or less, or, in any case, less likely tainted by political power.¹⁴ I will offer a critique of this epistemic approach below. In fetishising the epistemic, the radical realists commit themselves to a metanormative position. At the very least, it rests on an un-argued-for premise about epistemology's relative resilience to political power.

I will also, later in this essay, argue in a fairly speculative conclusion that the radical realist methodology suggests a counter-lineage for the traditionalist. Rather than Hobbes and Machiavelli, radical realists must look

¹²See Prinz and Rossi (2017), Rossi (2019); Aytac and Rossi (2022).

¹³The question of the law-like nature of epistemology will bother the radical realist. Are there epistemic laws, in the sense that the laws of nature or the laws of logic are law-like, or is epistemic practice a contingent (social) phenomenon, or could both be true? In what sense, if any, can a modus ponens be defied that the laws of nature, like gravity, cannot? I cannot address this question with sufficient care. The reader may be guided towards work on epistemic rules, such as Pollock's (1987) and Boghossian's (2008).

¹⁴The latter seems the more reasonable position, as held in Aytac and Rossi (2022).

up to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. As such, realism is likely to be neither unique in its tradition nor its method. Rather, I consider radical realism a continuation of modernist practices of social analysis, reminiscent of the great *masters of suspicion*.¹⁵ As such, radical realism stands in a well-established lineage and has acquired a methodology that can be called 'distinct' only from the perspective of entrenched, liberal, franco-phobe, Anglo-American political theory. Radical realism's methodological cornerstones – anti-normativism, the practice of genealogy as method of social analysis, and a commitment to epistemic practices of social analysis and critique – are alive and well in the, let's call it that, *continental* tradition: critical theory, large swathes of feminist theory, anti-colonial thought, and potentially even post-Kantian liberal ideas.

Are all these cases of realism? If everybody is a realist, then realism doesn't mean much. Take the Rawlsian 'original position'. Isn't the idea of assuming the original position a famous example of attempting to question or suspend political power in one's normative theorising about politics itself?¹⁶ Perhaps this epoché is what the original position is meant to establish. Then again it can be argued that most contemporary continental thought, and certainly much of what passes as critical theory these days, is thoroughly moralist, anti-positivist, and postmodern, and those sentiments are not shared by radical realists, who are, or so I'll argue, far more faithful to a modernist tradition of social theory. This modernist approach is metanormatively agnostic, it recognises norms as always already politicised, and highlights the method of immanent critique of justification-narratives¹⁷ as the only viable method of social analysis and critique.

Here's a road map through this essay: I commence by discussing what a (radical) realist metanormativity might look like. I then argue that the metanormative debate around realism is unintelligible for as long as realists (and moralists, for that matter) owe us, first, an ontological proof of sources of normativity, and second, a non-circular explanation of the ought-simpliciter (that ought which overrides all other oughts in situations of conflict between different normative interests, or, in other words, the metanormative priority of one distinct normative domain

¹⁵For the term 'masters of suspicion', see Ricoeur (1977), who coined the term, and Felski for renewed attention to the hermeneutic approach to interpretation.

¹⁶The question is – and most realists will deny this (see Raekstad 2021) – whether the veil of ignorance succeeds in suspending power or whether it indeed perpetuates a distinctive, substantial, and normative view about the nature of politics? On the question of Rawlsian Realism, see also Gledhill (2012), Jubb (2015), and Roberts (2022).

¹⁷See Jeaggi's work on critique (2019).

over another). In sum, I submit that realists must not rely on metanormative distinctness to make their case against the moralist.

Leaving the metanormative question behind, I urge the realist to return to the properly subversive diagnosis: that ethics (and all normativity, for that matter) is dead politics. We are talking about a project of uncovering hidden political power; uncovering what Nietzsche called the *pudenda origo* (the shameful origin) or flawed coming-about of the normative principles – morality, prudence, aesthetics, or other – by which we theorise politics. In essence, radical realists want a basis for critique that doesn't in turn justify the object of critique. But in that the realist shouldn't trust yet another metanormative sphere: epistemology might be dead ethics, too, after all.¹⁸ Radical realism is not a rejection of moral normativity as such, nor is it about replacing moral normativity with a different metanormative kind (such as political or epistemic normativity), but an invitation to discover and dissolve the political power trapped in our most cherished normative ideas about politics. As such, realism has a tradition (the modernist tradition) and a concise methodology (a modernist practice of social analysis and critique). It is not, however, metanormatively distinct.

2. Realist metanormativity: Nye's challenge

Let us commence by addressing Nye's challenge. Sebastian Nye has expressed his discontent with the metanormative turn, saying that 'the debate between realists and their critics has been surprisingly quiet on questions of metaethics' (2015, 1084). Advocates of radical realism, leaving the other two branches aside for present purposes, will, I assume, when interrogated, express commitment to a form of Nonnaturalist Normative Realism (NNR).¹⁹ Let me spell out the conditions of NNR²⁰ and offer my explanation of why radical realists typically support each. The subsequent argument will challenge the metanormative standing of radical realism.

Existence: Normative facts, properties, and relations exist. Without this existence condition, a metanormative debate seems futile or merely verbal. In any case, there exists at least a single source of normativity.

¹⁸Isn't it the case that, as radical feminist theories and postcolonial thinkers have always contended, political power affects epistemic normativity – the ways we think about the world? See Srinivasan (2019) for an example of politically encroached epistemic practice and King (2022) for a very succinct critique.

¹⁹See Huemer (2005), Wielenberg (2014), and Enoch (2017).

²⁰See Aklaghi (2022).

Radical realism's obsession with uncovering the *actual* normative foundations of our normative beliefs could, of course, be construed as making non-ontological claims about normative facts, properties, and relations (as I will defend below), but it seems more apt to say that contemporary radical realism grants them some advanced ontological status.

Cognitivism: Normative claims express truth-apt beliefs. Without a commitment to cognitivism, the Geussian line that *ethics is dead politics*, and that therefore it suffers from an alethic flaw, i.e. that what moral argument in politics purport, wouldn't track the truth. We must be able to tell normativist (where there's an alethic flaw) from non-normativist (i.e. where the normative source matches the normative verdict) situations, or else the radical realist method is baseless. '[M]ight the truth not happen to be aligned with the interests of the powerful, at least sometimes?', say Prinz and Rossi (2017, 352). That's one interpretation of Geuss. The other is agnostic with regards to truth-claims and centres on justification as the only politically relevant epistemic notion. On this alternative view, which I think contemporary radical realists prefer (see Rossi 2019; Aytac and Rossi 2022), the cognitivism is optional. The reasons for that appear to have something to do with the mode of critique elaborate by radical realists. Touched on towards the end of this essay, we find my diagnosis that realism sits somewhere between post-modern distrust of truth-claims and a modernist emphasis on epistemic suspicion as a mode of critique. Given that the postmodern condition has destroyed Truth as a target, but any viable critique is considered the critique of knowledge (or that lack thereof) radical realists zone in on the justification of knowledge-claims, rather than their truth.

Non-Error-Theory: If we want to follow the cognitivist path, radical realists will hold that some normative claims are true. Radical realists tend to believe that at least some of the critique they offer tracks the truth about political power (see above).²¹ If the radical realist method where *not* to track the truth of at least some ways in which political power permeates other normative domains, we could question the aptness of the realist method as a method of political theory. The status of normativisms 'is peculiar in so far as they are at the same time true and false', say Prinz and Rossi (2017, 356), referring to what they call 'flawed or pejorative ideologies'.²² That chimes with the second interpretation, which focuses on justification rather than truth, because

²¹ See Rossi and Argenton (2021).

²² I here resist the equivocation of normativisms and ideologies in both their descriptive and pejorative from.

truth, in ideological constructs (from which, perhaps we cannot escape, as famously declared by Adorno), has become elusive and slippery.

Nonnaturalism: Normative facts, properties, and relations are not fully explained by or reducible to natural facts, properties, and relations. This implies, according to Parfit (2017, 60) that ‘when we make irreducibly normative claims, these claims imply that there exist some ontologically weighty non-natural entities or properties’. Radical realists have ardently defended themselves as more than descriptivist historicists of the political.²³ This suggests nonnaturalism. It is not clear, however, whether this ontological commitment is necessary to sustain the realist mode of critique (see below).

This brief breakdown of realism’s metaethical commitments I hope (at least partly) soothes Nye’s frustration with the lack of metanormative engagement within the realist literate. I agree that more work could be done on the metanormative foundations of realism’s claim to normative priority, if only it were an important aspect of realist scholarship. As I’ll demonstrate below, it isn’t. In any case, those metanormative commitments explain the two axes of the often insinuated but rarely systematized metanormative dispute over realism’s take on morality, which I discuss now.

3. Metanormative dispute

For the realist, there are two axes of metanormative debate. The first is ontological, asking whether political normativity *exists*. The second is metaphysical, asking how, if political normativity exists, it *relates* to other sources of normativity (assuming one isn’t a monist about normativity who holds that there are no other kinds of normativity, such as prudential, epistemic, aesthetic, etc.).²⁴ The former question, the one on the ontological axis, I call the *distinctness question*. It asks whether there is distinct political normativity – distinct, that is, from other sources of normativity, especially the moral source of normativity. Distinctness implies existence. The latter, the metaphysical axis, interrogates the relationality of different normativities. I call this the *priority question*. The priority question asks about the metaphysical relation of the political (assuming it is a distinct source of normativity) to other sources of normativity. In

²³See Kreutz (2022b) on the perils of descriptivism in contextual realism. See also, Prinz and Rossi (2017).

²⁴The existence of those axes, especially the ontological axis, has been disputed in many discussions with advocates of political realism. If not an ontological claim, I wonder how else to disambiguate talk about ‘sources of normativity’.

particular, it asks if in a situation of conflict – a friction – between different normativities it is the political normativity that trumps (i.e. has priority) all other normativities, especially moral normativity. Note that this is not how radical realists understand the priority of political over moral normativity. For radical realists, what constitutes politics' priority is moral normativity's entrapment in politics. Without this qualification, distinctness and priority resonate as metanormative concepts.

Distinctness Question: Can political normativity be reduced to moral normativity or is political normativity natural, *sui generis*, or fundamental, i.e. does it 'carve nature at its joints'?

Priority Question: In a conflict of normative interest, has the political normativity – that non-self-justifying normativity – priority over all (or some) other normativities, and especially the moral normativity?

Those two questions are separate but related. An answer to the priority question suggests an answer to the distinctness question: if political normativity has priority, that indicates that there is a distinct source of political normativity, but not vice versa. Political normativity may be distinct, and the question of priority be left open.

4. Positions in logical space

Taking those metanormative axes at face-value, combining priority and distinctness, indicates the outlines of several different metaphysical-cum-ontological positions²⁵, two of which have been hinted at in the literature:

Monism: There is only one source of normativity. This source may be indiscriminate, or else it's political, moral, prudential, or otherwise. However, assuming monism collapses the debate: with only one source of normativity, how can there be a dispute between realists and moralists over the 'right' source of normativity? Monism has not so far, to my knowledge, been defended in the literature. Everyone in the debate acknowledges the existence of at least a restricted number of different sources of normativity.

Pluralism: There are several sources of normativity²⁶, ontologically speaking, and there is one that has metaphysical priority (i.e. is

²⁵ address only those that have been defended in the literature. There are other logically possible positions which for the sake of brevity won't be addressed in this space.

²⁶ Since the broader ontological issue of how many sources of normativity there has never been addressed in the realist literature – and hardly anywhere outside this narrow debate, too – it is hard to say whether those who adopt a priority pluralist view prefer their ontology to be unrestricted or restricted. The only significant difference between the restricted and the unrestricted priority

metaphysically fundamental) in cases of conflict between sources of normativity. This seems to be the most widely insinuated position in the literature. The question is whether either moral or political normativity is fundamental?

5. How to prove metanormative distinctness?

‘Political realists claim that politics should be regulated by a distinctive political normativity, one that does not rely on external, pre-political moral standards’, says Cozzaglio (2021, 1213). But how can we prove this metanormative distinctness? An answer to this question demands an ontological proof. How can we prove the existence of some metaphysical entity called ‘source of normativity’, and moreover, how can we verify that there is a source of normativity that is qualitatively *political*, as opposed to, say, reducible to the moral? To my knowledge, no such argument has been delivered nor is any such proof forthcoming, neither here in the realism debates nor in the broader literature on metanormativity and metaethics. Yet, neither is there good evidence for the distinctness of moral normativity, which suggests a stalemate between realists and moralists.²⁷ The latter claim that there is a distinct moral normativity.²⁸

In short, the study of norms and their ontological and metaphysical status is certainly a fascinating branch of metaethics/metaphysics, but realists have never accused moralists of getting their ontology wrong. This cannot be the kernel of the debate.

6. How to prove metanormative priority?

Now, let us look at the far more interesting priority thesis: political normativity trumps or takes normative precedence over moral normativity. If this is understood as a metaphysical thesis it should remind us of the literature on the ought-simpliciter. To say that a political source of normativity is prior to the moral source of normativity is to say that in a certain context the normative force of a political ought-statement overrides the

pluralist view concerns the burden of proof of political normativity being a distinct source of normativity. If the ontology is unrestricted, that’s not an issue, whereas if the ontology is restricted, there would have to be proof of its distinctness.

²⁷For the stalemate position, see Kreutz and Rossi (2022).

²⁸If ontology is somehow grounded in or relies on the normative, how can we account for the ontological status of norms without establishing the ontology of normativity. There are proposals, such as McDaniel’s normative account of fundamentality (2017).

normative force of a moral ought-statement.²⁹ Arguing for the priority of political normativity might mean arguing for political normativity overriding moral normativity (or any other normativity) in situations in which there is conflict between the normative forces of different oughts. Amia Srinivasan has an example of meta-normative conflict: ‘occasions where anger would be counterproductive but nonetheless apt’ (2018, 127) create a metanormative conflict between prudence and affect. ‘On such occasions’ she argues,

reasons of prudence and reasons of aptness come apart, generating a substantive [meta]normative conflict. [...] the counterproductivity critic faces the burden of explaining why, in such conflicts, reasons of prudence trump reasons of aptness; until this burden is met, there is no obvious inference to be made from the counterproductivity of one’s anger to an all-things-considered prohibition on one’s getting angry. (2018, 127)

So, Srinivasan is saying that in situations of metanormative conflict – i.e. the conflict between two oughts – there is a burden of proof on each side of the conflict to explain why one ought (the prudential ought, say) must dissolve the conflict rather than another (the affective ought, say). What does it take to meet this burden of proof?

Some philosophers hold that only an external, higher-level ought can make a definite statement to the effect of whether one must, when in a situation of metanormative conflict, heed one lower-level domain-specific normative reason (prudence) over another (affective aptness). We call this higher-level ought, the *ought-simpliciter*.³⁰ In other words, the ought-simpliciter is the master-normative reason which determines all other motivated reason. There is however a deep-seated problem with the ought-simpliciter. To explain why the ought-simpliciter has normative supremacy (it tells us to heed politics over morality, for instance) it seems like we must once again refer to yet some higher-level normativity. As Stan Husi (2013, 424) puts it, to say that one ought-simpliciter to do something is not to say that one ought to do something according to yet another norm.

Consider this example, which hopefully makes this technical language more tangible: A question any normative agents might be confronted with is ‘Must I adhere to morality or prudence?’. Prudence tells the agents to adhere to prudence; morality tells them to adhere to morality.

²⁹Slote (1983, 119–21) and Foot (2002, 181–88), for instance, argue that strong reasons of self-interest can override moral reasons to the contrary.

³⁰See Baker (2017), Copp (1987), Tiffany (2007) for an overview.

Adding a third ought-simplificiter – an aesthetic ought, for instance – doesn't solve the problem. After all, following the aesthetic ought is *not* an answer to the question of whether I must adhere to the demands of morality or prudence.³¹ This is why some have concluded that metanormative reasoning must lead us into a regress.³² If we think of priority as a metanormative notion, with the metaphysical implications that come with it, there is no normative answer to metanormative conflict of the kind hinted at in the realism debates.³³ It follows that realists would do good on not barking up the priority-tree any longer. To prove their point, the metanormatively inclined realists would have to give us an account of their ought-simplificiter. The literature here suggests that this is likely to be a hopeless endeavour. That's also the reason why epistemically grounded realism should make us suspicious. The radical realist takes the epistemic ought as their ought-simplificiter. But that's a hidden premise and needs further support. I elaborate below.

7. Dead ethics and political power

Leaving the metanormative question behind, I urge the realist to return to the properly subversive point – that ethics is dead politics – without however indulging in a feud over the metanormative standing of politics, ethics, or any other normative domain, for that matter.³⁴ I consider

³¹What is required for this sort of metanormative conflict is, according to Eklund (2017), a similarity in 'normative role'. That is, roughly having the same or similar downstream inferential role. Political normativity and moral normativity are, in Eklund's terminology, 'alternatives'. The positions carved out turn out to be symmetrical: realists use normativity *x*, and moralists use normativity *y*, and there is no higher-level normativity to adjudicate between them (see the role of the ought-simplificiter above). In fact, this similarity in normative role is what many moralist arguments against the credibility of realism treat on.

³²We could of course try to resolve this metanormative conflict between moral and political oughts by extra-normative means, as in, for instance, locating the ought-simplificiter through psychological research, as suggested by Kreuz (2022a). That solution however comes down to changing the subject, leaving, in a Wittgensteinian move, the precincts of metanormativity – yes, indeed, philosophy – behind. Another strategy is to accept that normative reasons are weighted. The 'weighting of norms' it is known, optionally, as the objection from notable-nominal comparison or the extreme-comparison argument, discussed in, *inter alia*, Chang (1997, 14–17), Lord and Maguire (2015), Parfit (2011, 135), Dorsey (2013, 119–24), Sagdahl (2014, 406), Scanlon (1998, 235), and many others. The other option is to reconstruct the dilemma-case so that the conflicting normative demands are aligned, as proposed in Brink (1997, 291). Yet another option, which looks a bit like an escape strategy, is to argue that the ought-simplificiter is indifferent between all choices in metanormative conflict. For such a proposal, see Dorsey (2013) and Phillips (2011, 135).

³³If we look at this predicament pragmatically, there is of course an answer in the fact that the agent confronted with this dilemma-esque situation will have, at some point, *just acted*. The answer provided by action is descriptive rather than normative. People act, but that doesn't mean people act on the best reasons. I certainly don't, always. The 'best reasons' may even be opaque to us. What we need is a normative argument to tell us what reason to head, and which to let go of.

³⁴Sleat (2022) seems equally frustrated with the normativity issue.

realism an invitation to discover and dissolve the political power trapped in our most cherished normative ideas about politics. But before looking into that in more detail, let's take a step back and look at what should make us suspicious of moral normativity.

Realism's mistrust of moral normativity stems from a diagnosis that 'ethics is usually dead politics: the hand of a victor in some past conflict reaching out to try to extend its grip to the present and the future' (Geuss 2010, 42). Ethics – or moral normativity, by extension – is said to be particularly prone to infestation with political power. That means, whenever we practice moral argument in political theory, we are likely to let politics take over the normative guidance. And that comes with the risk of entertaining self-justifying power. When our aim is critical – critical of some political constellation, that is – realists urge us to be careful not to invite in, through the backdoor, the politics we attempt to analyse and dispute, via some moral principle, the architect of which is the very political constellation in question.³⁵

There are two options vis-à-vis this diagnosis of normativity (moral or otherwise) as being in the grip of political power. The first is an escape from the normative realm. Why, after all, should any other source of normativity be less likely to be under the influence of power? This however risks transmuting realism from a normative into a purely descriptive methodology. As mentioned above, some contextual realists, in their urge to level-up descriptive accuracy, risk abandoning the normative realm entirely. Why throw out the baby with the bathwater? The second response, promoted by the radical realist branch, maintains a normative element, and says that when the political underbelly of our normative beliefs about and applied to politics goes unchecked, we commit an epistemic mistake – the uncovering of this epistemic mistaking generating its own normativity.

I am unsatisfied with both, and I think there's a middle position to be had: We abandon the metanormative issue, but we don't abandon all normativity altogether. And here is how: We will start with the epistemic radical realist method and its grounds in contemporary critical theory. I will later disclose how and why the existing approach suffers from the anti-metanormative critique. That said, I am not interested in discarding the fundamentals of the radical realist method. Hence, I think it makes sense to gain a better grasp of its workings.

³⁵This suspicion can be contested on its own terms, but it never has been in print. Moralists are free to explain why, first, their moral principles free from political origin or why, second, if true, the realist's suspicion is nevertheless misguided.

7.1. Normativism

The phenomenon of normative cross-infestation, contemporary critical theorists has labelled ‘normativism’, to be addressed through the method of immanent critique.³⁶ There are different versions of immanent critique, some more robust than others. ‘On [one] approach’, says Jaeggi, ‘the reality of certain practices and institutions is measured up against the discarded ideals of the very people who run those practices and institutions’ (2019, 74). This has the advantage of ‘being able to latch on to already existing normative expectations’ (2019, 74). But it is also tied to the normative expectations of a particular community. Jaeggi aims for more. The political community, with its political pre-conceptions, must be transcended. She argues that immanent critique must rely ‘not just on actual but also justified norms’ (2019, 74). Rather, the norms reveal a constituent part of the justification themselves, namely when the normative origin match the normative surface-function. In other words, if a norm does what it purports to do, and doesn’t pay lip service to normative ideals outside the norm, then a necessary realist desideratum for justification has been met. As such, this method is less concerned with the reconstruction of pre-existing norms, unspoiled by normativisms, but the progressive, dialectical transformation of the status quo. This method of social analysis and critique, reminiscent of Marxian ideology-critique, doesn’t just confront reality with prefabricated blueprints, nor does it take existing ideals for granted, but develops a critique from the disconnect of the origin and the surface-function of norms.

In the words of Freud, the project of modernist social theory – in his case, of course, psychoanalytic theory and practice – to which I’d count the contemporary radical realist project, seeks to uncover connections by tracing that which is *manifest* to that which is *hidden*. Hidden in out ethical norms, says Geuss, is the politics of the latest political victor. In other words, power is hidden in our norms. We disclose the normative potential of certain norms as not what they purport to be; as paying lip-service to some remote affects or norms. If an aesthetic norm serves a political

³⁶See Jaeggi (2009, 2019) and Celikates and Jaeggi (2017). Cozzaglio argues that the ‘target’ of realist critique is the ‘externalism of the normative resources on which moralist theories typically ground their conceptions of legitimacy’ (2021, 1213). It is unclear to me whether by ‘externalism’ Cozzaglio means the friction between a norm’s origin and its surface function, which would move Cozzaglio closer to the critical theory-inspired version of radical realism defended in this paper. If, on the other hand, Cozzaglio’s externalism is simply meant to stand in distinction to internalist accounts of legitimacy, which seems to be the case, where critique is typically offered by means of self-reflection on the beliefs and attitudes of people subjected to the political power, this kinship with radical realism is largely eroded.

function, for instance, it carries forward political power and not the aesthetic norm *in and of itself*. The aesthetic has been, to put it differently, *contaminated* with political power. The origin (politics) and the surface-function (aesthetic) come apart. If anything, this should make us suspicious of the aesthetic norm *actually* doing any aesthetic work, expressing something aesthetic. We can't see the aesthetics for what it really is as long as it's in the service of some foreign power. We live, to put it with Adorno, in a context of total delusion [*Totaler Verblendungszusammenhang*] about the aesthetic. Bernard Williams, making a similar point, says.

if one comes to know that the sole reason one accepts some moral claim is that somebody's power has brought it about that one accepts it, when, further, it is in their interest that one should accept it, one will have no reason to go on accepting it. (2002, 231)

7.2. Scope of the argument

Established forms of radical realism hold that we commit an epistemic mistake if we disregard the *actual* origins of our normative beliefs and take norms at face value. The radical realist method – a corrective – aims to uncover those normative mismatches. It forces us to an awareness of their *actual* normative underpinnings. That, however, implies two further metanormative claims: First, that epistemic normativity has supreme standing amongst the normativities with respect to political power (it is the ought simpliciter: in a situation of conflict, you should heed to epistemic norms)³⁷ and second, that political power is itself a normative notion. Both are unwarranted (because of the above arguments on the metanormative standing of realism) and unnecessary (for reasons given below). We must leave behind the metanormative without leaving behind the normative. I suggest that the radical realists can achieve this without falling short of sustaining its critical punch.

Before we move on discussing the shortcoming of the epistemic radical realist approach, and ameliorate the methodological programme, I should briefly clarify the scope of the anti-metanormative argument.³⁸ Other

³⁷Aytac and Rossi (2022, 8) say 'all we need is a the claim that epistemology is considerably less politically compromised than ethics – a claim that holds even if we acknowledge that power does shape our ways of acquiring and justifying beliefs'. And further: 'Epistemic norms are less likely to be distorted by political power structures because they are more distant from the practice categories of obligation, compliance, and the like' (2022, 8). Is that reason enough to disregard the argument from ought-simpliciter? I don't think so.

³⁸A reviewer of this journal has pointed me towards other metanormative claims of distinctiveness present in the realist literature, such as instrumental normativity.

proposals, beyond the epistemic, for what could take the position of the ought simpliciter are also on the table. The anti-metanormative argument is applicable to those, too. Ben Cross (2022) has a recent defence of Marx's realism as instrumental normativity, and Erman and Möller (2018) criticise instrumental normativity. Burelli and Destri (2021) bid on instrumental normativity. Favara (2023) works with prudential normativity. For a purely functional account of political normativity, see Burelli (2022) for a rebuttal. These are the most prominent ways in the literature to cash out the metanormative claim that I wish to deny. One might worry that if I successfully debunk only epistemic distinctiveness, but e.g. instrumental normativity remains in place, my claim that realism fails on metanormative distinctiveness would not follow. My anti-metanormative argument isn't however contingent on epistemic normativity. Of course, the anti-metanormative argument does apply to instrumental and prudential normativity as much as it does to epistemic normativity. Any way in which the realist tries to spell out the ought simpliciter (epistemic, prudential, instrumental, functional, or other) will suffer in the face of the anti-metanormative argument provided above. The same applies to the moralist, who bestows moral normativity with the title of ought simpliciter. My argument is meant to discredit taking any source of normativity as supreme (distinct and having priority). The anti-metanormative arguments against alternatives to the epistemic approach therefore structurally resemble the argument against epistemic normativity. I thus figured it might be excessive to repeat the same argument thrice, yet with different objects of critique. Given that I am sympathetic to the epistemic radical realist approach, and my ameliorative proposal will take off from there, I shall focus my attention on the epistemic view.

As a form of ideology-critique, the radical realist method makes two related metanormatively significant claims: '(i) ideology critique can debunk beliefs and practices by uncovering how, empirically, they are produced by self-justifying power, and (ii) the self-justification of power should be understood as an epistemic rather than moral flaw' (Aytac and Rossi 2022, 1). Take this toy example of a radical realist analysis and critique of epistemically distorted ideology:

Settler Colonialism: Assume that the leading reason for believing in the legitimacy of settler colonialism is a belief in the right to land. If it turns out that we only believe in the right to land because we live under conditions of settler colonialism, our narrative for the legitimacy of settler colonial society runs in a self-justifying circle. Self-justification is here understood as an epistemic flaw, not a moral blemish. In this

case, this legitimisation-narrative for settler colonialism has been, in the words of radical realists, ‘debunked’.³⁹ This critical operation, if successful, is thought to destabilise support in the respective political actor or action.⁴⁰ The concerns of the settler-colonialists, disguise as a moral right to land.⁴¹

This view is clearly committed to two metanormative assumptions. First, that epistemic normativity has supreme standing amongst the normativities with respect to political power (it is the ought simpliciter: in a situation of conflict, you should heed to epistemic norms) and second, that political power is itself a normative notion. The first assumption has already been disempowered by the argument from ought simpliciter, the second will be processed below.

7.3. Express worries

Before I proceed to question the second assumption, let me discuss some express worries about this epistemic model of radical realist critique. There are open questions as to what the epistemic flaws are that are being singled out by the realist; by what means those flaws are uncovered; and what is the role of the theorist in this endeavour?

Radical realists of the epistemic bend have argued that genealogical ideology-critique uncovers circularities in legitimisation-narratives recognised as epistemic flaws.⁴² Are all epistemic flaws relevant to the social sphere forms of circularity? Or is that method limited in scope? Apart from circularity, what other epistemic flaws are there, and are they of relevance to epistemic radical realist method? So far, only circularity has been singled out as an epistemic vice endangering the standing of legitimisation-narratives. What about legitimisation narratives that are grossly incoherent because of how political power infiltrates some norms? Can every case of incoherence be redescribed as a form of circularity? The proof is in the pudding. The enduring worry from ought-simpliciter to

³⁹See Rossi and Argenton (2021) and Kreutz and Rossi (2022).

⁴⁰Future work must explore how this epistemic method, while applicable to the critique of legitimisation narratives, can provide us with the necessary tools for the vindication of political alternatives. More on this below.

⁴¹A worry concerns the assumed mono-causality in examples such as the above. In the above example, settler colonialism is considered a mono-causal generator of a belief in the right to land. There could however possibly be external motivating factors – premises hidden from the social analyst that motivate the right to land without recourse to the normative powers of a settler colonial regime to influence our beliefs. In that case, if external motivating premises exist, the legitimisation narrative isn’t circular. The radical realist method, regardless of its form, must therefore be careful not to engage in new normative hiding-practices, motivated, perhaps, by the analyst’s own political ideals.

⁴²See Rossi (2019), Rossi and Argenton (2021), and Aytac and Rossi (2022).

the side, if we were to accept a metanormatively loaded form of radical realism, the burden of proof is on the epistemic radical realist to show us how successful they are at confronting social ills through a debunking of circular reasoning.⁴³

If we think of the radical realist method as a debunking practice of hidden sources of normativity, we can compare that to psychoanalytic theory: The hidden ideology of the social practice becomes the hidden affects of the subconscious. Here, in analogy, the notion of circularity breaks down. In any case, not every 'debunking' narrative can best be described as disclosing a form of circularity. I am thinking here of the concept of *Ersatzhandlung* [substitution; redirected activity towards a substitute]. In substitution, an affect that is repressed because of its incompatibility with the ego is redirected towards some 'stand-in' object. The creation of art and other cultural exercises are often considered examples of substitution. The disclosure of substitution processes through psychoanalytic practice thus reveals how aesthetic norms – if we take artmaking as our example for redirected activity towards a substitute – are not what they purport to be. Very crudely, on the Freudian view what forces the artist to create is not the aesthetic norm, that is the quest of beauty, but some other affective mechanism previously hidden to both the analyst and the analysand. The substitute norm (the aesthetic) doesn't however, or in any case only in a mediate sense, normatively support the original norm (the affect) for the latter is still repressed by the ego, because of taboos, prohibitions, or trauma. The original norm, the affect, is never acted upon – only in its substitute form. We don't kill our fathers as art becomes the substitute for Oedipal affects. We encounter the structure of a normativism – the origin (affect) doesn't match the surface-function (aesthetic) – and yet the aesthetic doesn't normatively support the *actual* affect for the actual affect must not be satisfied. We must be contempt with the replacement; the *Ersatz*. The *Ersatz* does not support, normatively speaking, the legitimacy of the actual killing of one's fathers. It replaces it. And in that, it stabilises the ego. If there are ideological mechanisms that *replace* and *stabilise*

⁴³What is an epistemic vice to being with? According to Baird and Calvard, 'epistemic vices are reliable dispositions that produce more false beliefs than true ones' (2019, 266). Cassam proposes an obstructivist account of epistemic vices according to which an epistemic vice is a 'blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible character trait, attitude, or way of thinking that systematically obstructs the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge' (2019, 23). But what are the vices that systematically interfere with legitimation and are therefore relevant to the realist cause? The epistemic radical realist owes us a more detailed account of the epistemic vices at play in unjustified legitimation-narratives. So far, only epistemic circularity has been singled out as an epistemic vice relevant to political legitimation.

rather than *justify* and *stabilise* social practice, there are, then, cases of non-circular ideology that the epistemic critique that fetishises the epistemic norm of non-circularity fails to trace.

Herbert Marcuse, for one, thinks there are ideological mechanisms that *substitute* and stabilise rather than *justify* and stabilise social practice. 'One of the conspicuous works emphasising sublimation [...] as social concepts [as opposed to purely psychic] is Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*', argues Tidhar Nir (2018, 86ff). Social sublimation can be a violent and destructive process, just like psychic sublimation, and it is an effect of (hidden) ideological forces. The epistemic radical realist ideology critique is oblivious to this (hidden) destructiveness for its role is not to justify and stabilise a political order but to find a substitute for a political power. It is a form of ideology that stabilises political power not through circular justification but by means of substitution.

Adorno's famous example is the entertainment complex in advanced capitalist societies. Those stabilise a political order not through circular justification, as in the case of settler colonialism above, but by redirecting the subject's affective responses away from power the power of modern capital and onto some sublimated remnant of it: the culture industry. The epistemic method is oblivious to those redirected forms of ideology – ideology as both simultaneously stabilising and destructive and always a sublimation.⁴⁴

Hence, the scope of the critical powers of the radical realist critique is my first worry, and then there is the underlying thought that political power itself is a normative category. In other words, despite claiming to work only with epistemic norms (and them arguably being more independent from political power than all other norms) the radical realist smuggles political normativity into the picture by claiming that political power has a normative effect on epistemic norms. In that sense, the radical realist ideology critique is morality-free, but it isn't politics-free. It isn't free of the elusive notion of political normativity, the existence and priority of which cannot be proven if my anti-metanormative argument is valid.

⁴⁴In psychoanalytic terms, 'since Eros and Thanatos are allegedly not opposing forces but rather share a common purpose, one may reach the absurd conclusion that the failure to realize desire and the consequent rise of aggressiveness may also be an instinctual 'success.' As stimuli increase, relief can be found by destroying either the inner or outer cause of the stimuli', says Nir (2018, 86). Applying that to the socio-political case, 'in Marcuse's view, late capitalism produces social sublimations that castrate both Eros and Thanatos. The dialectical course of Eros and Thanatos is denied as ideological sublimation directs Eros toward monogamic sexuality and Thanatos toward technological advancement. By negating Eros and Thanatos, ideological sublimation produces additional aggressiveness – the very aggressiveness it seeks to diminish or refine' (Nir 2018, 87).

Here is then yet another possible way to disambiguate the Geussian line, that ethics is usually dead politics. Dead politics, on this story, has normative significance. Dead politics has a normative effect on moral norms, and that's what makes moral norms *suspicious*. And further, that's how political normativity self-justifies in epistemic circles through moral norms. I suggest we revise our understanding of the ethics is dead politics claim accordingly. Norms, on that picture, are fact-sensitive. In that, we eliminate the elusive metanormative commitments of the epistemic radical realist critique. I acknowledge that this comes with other, major metatheoretical commitments. Fact-sensitivity is just one.⁴⁵

This fact-sensitive interpretation of the Geussian line even suggests a substantive view of the nature of political theory that may be understood as grounded in its etymology. *Political* political theory is always also situated in 'the affairs of the city' (the meaning of the roots of 'politics' in the Greek *politiká*), or else the theory doesn't warrant being labelled 'political'. Rather than collapsing the categories of value and fact, political theory reaffirms both as being constitutive to political thinking – and at the essence of political power itself. The Greek *politiká* – the affairs of the city – suggests that politics is always already situated in a context (the city). Can we even think about the affairs of the city without thinking about the city itself?⁴⁶

For reasons of scope, I fear I must truncate this defence of the fact-sensitive interpretation of Geuss' doctrine with this open-ended question and acknowledge the need for impending operations.

8. Radical realism = modernist social theory

The objects of radical realist critique are compounds of a normative and a descriptive element. When we say that ethics is dead politics, we mean that some descriptive element (politics) has entered a norm (ethics). Or, in other words, that norms are fact-sensitive. As such, this view of radical realism is free of any metanormative commitments. All it must assume is that there is normativity, and that normativity is not fact-free.

⁴⁵See Cohen (2008).

⁴⁶Some political theorists surely enjoy talking about platonic forms rather than the affairs the city. Geuss, for instance, thinks that *A Theory of Justice* is misaligned with *politiká*. Whether that's a valid point is not on us to explore. Rawls might respond to Geuss' enraged remarks, saying that *A Theory of Justice*, despite its pull towards universal, synthetic, and a priori principles of justice, simply applies to (and is informed by) a different 'city' altogether. *A Theory of Justice*, from the perspective of post-war Europe (that's one 'city'), does, I admit, look like a cynical joke. From the viewpoint of a juvenile empire, the post-war United State (that's another 'city'), it may not. What I've done here, then, is to rescue Rawls from Geuss' critique by contextualising (in a purely descriptive way) *A Theory of Justice*.

Hence, the view is normative without making a case for its metanormative standing. It further doesn't fetishise one normative realm (the epistemic, say) over any other. On that view, our epistemic norms are as likely to carry descriptive content as any other norm. The task of critique is still to disclose the latent element in norms that is previously hidden. This latent element is descriptive (a fact) rather than normative. In other words, *power* is a fact. This I take from the Geussian dictum.

This newly adjusted lens opens realism's eyes to normativisms outside morality, be they aesthetic, prudential, juridical, epistemic, affective, or other. This might look like a trivial byproduct. Given the predominance of anti-moralist arguments in the realism literature (rather than anti-normativist) this is a significant extension of what social and political phenomenon a realist may address.

I want the remaining space of this essay to highlight the prevalence of this form of critique in disciplines outside political theory. Literary theory, for instance, is a hotbed for this, as it's sometimes called, *modernist* form of critique.

Modernism, as I think it's usually understood, serves as a label for phenomena as diverse as cubism, Ulysses, Saussurian linguistics, Relativity Theory, Freudian psychoanalysis, Marcel Breuer's interior design, Brechtian theatre, a suspicious yet affirmative attitude towards knowledge, the Waste Land, an experience of simultaneity, bourgeois Europe, accelerationism, a new awareness of objecthood, disturbing complexity, and a quest for structure.

Social modernism has three metatheoretical ingredients: First, as Resch puts it, social modernists are sure that 'the world existed and that, however complicated it had become, knowledge of it was not only possible, it was being produced at a dizzying pace' (1989, 513). Second, modernist knowledge comes in two guises: there is ideological knowledge, tainted by political power. As Felski (2011) puts it, straightforward appearances are deceptive or self-deceptive. And there is the 'cured', 'unveiled', 'debunked', 'cleansed' knowledge derived at through modernist practice of suspicion: psychoanalysis, Marxism, or Nietzschean genealogy. Social theory became, although only briefly, a 'distinctively modern style of interpretation that is driven by a desire to demystify' (2011, 216). And finally,

the modernist felt that with this knowledge it was possible to criticize the existing state of affairs and change it for the better, to eliminate systematic and unnecessary exploitation of the lower classes, and to expand the material

and cultural benefits of society until they were available to all classes. (1989, 513–14)

Radical realism, the way I prefer it, is a modernist project in this spirit of disenchantment.

When anthropologists unmask the imperialist convictions of their predecessors, when art historians choreograph the stealthy tug of power and domination, when legal scholars assail the neutrality of the law in order to lay bare its hidden agendas, they all subscribe to a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment', says Felski (2015, 2).

This spirit, while prevalent in post-Frankfurt School circles, never took hold in analytic political theory. Critique is not the 'dominant metalanguage' (2015, 5) of this discipline. 'Anyone who attends academic talks', Felski says in a lamenting tone, 'has learned to expect the inevitable question: *But what about power?*' (2015, 17). I don't see that anywhere in political theory circles. Radical realism is *radical* because it puts social analysis and critique right back at the centre of political theory.

Radical realism is *radical* because it proposes a return to a modernist project in the spirit of disenchantment; a continuation of modernist practices of social analysis, reminiscent of what Ricœur said are the great masters of suspicion (1977). We must not, however, in that, uncritically engage in metanormative postulation. The radical realist method of suspicion I have sketch here is suspicious about the factual element in norms. It sees norms as never purely fact-insensitive. It doesn't think of 'dead politics' as a normative category. 'Dead politics' is a descriptive category that the critical method seeks to unveil.

This method of critique can do everything the epistemic alternative can do, too, and more. It can, for instance, disclose forms of ideological sublimation. It isn't, for a start, limited to epistemic circularities. Future work shall move closer towards this amelioration. I won't go beyond this sketch here.

9. What remains of realism?

This paper has been a critique of the metanormative approach to realism, and *radical* realism in particular. What remains to be asked is, what, in the light of my anti-metanormative argument and the critique of the ordo- and contextual realist alternatives, remains of realism?

I have argued that on all three metatheoretical axes – traditional, methodological, and metanormative – none of the realist sub-branches seems

have a valid claim to distinctness. The distinctness of a tradition however depends largely on perspective; on what's considered hegemonic. I acknowledge that in analytic Anglophone political theory, where the realism debates are thriving, neither the classical realist tradition of Hobbes and Machiavelli nor the social modernist tradition of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche are considered canonical. But these traditions are thriving elsewhere. The spirit of Hobbes and Machiavelli permeates IR studies, Freudian and Marxist approaches are still being discussed, challenged, and sometimes discredited, even if largely for the wrong reasons, in feminist circles, in critical race-theory, political geography, anthropology, critical theory, and elsewhere. And what is more, those traditions have begun to blend with each other. This paper is testament of the intermingling of erstwhile sperate traditions and methodologies in contemporary work in political theory. The classical Marxist concern with ideology and the critique thereof, for instance, has recently spilled over into Anglo-American analytic discourse, and there has found a fertile soil in social epistemology.⁴⁷

Maybe nothing remains of realism without the metanormative basis, not even of the radical kind. But why not concede to its 'indistinctness'. I don't see how there could be anything wrong with thinking of radical realism are (merely) a semantic label for 'continental' practices of social analysis and critique leaking into the analytic tradition. In leaking into analytic territory, again it can be argued that most contemporary 'continental' thought, and certainly much of what passes as critical theory these days, is moralist and thoroughly anti-positivist – and that's not shared by radical realists, who are far more faithful to the Marxist, or what I call modernist, tradition of social theory.⁴⁸

What's wrong, then, I want to ask, with thinking of realism as a continuation (or revival) or modernist practices of social theory? I say 'revival' for radical realism is not clearly a continental practice – not entirely, at least. Polemically put, continentals⁴⁹ say that 'All is power', 'Power is moral', 'Power is truth', and 'Truth is moral'. What today is considered continental

⁴⁷See Haslanger (2012, 2017), Stanley (2015), Fricker (2007), to name but a few.

⁴⁸I don't want to make this a lengthy Marxologist footnote, but some things about the way in which I (and other radical realists, like Rossi (2019) and Raekstad (2022)) use the label 'Marxist' must be clarified. When I say 'Marxist', I am not talking about the moralised version of Cohen and Habermas. Yet also we are not talking about the anti-normative, fully functional interpretation of so-called 'classical' Marxists or functionalists like Leiter (2015). The 'Marxist' label for radical realists refers to a functionalist yet fully normative practice. In that, I think, radical realists are much closer to the 'real' Marx and Marxists – but that's for another paper.

⁴⁹Especially Foucauldians and those Foucauldians disguising as critical theorists.

is, I think this is fair to say, usually postmodern.⁵⁰ Radical realists, on the other hand, want to hold on to normativity and functional explanation, like Marx did and any good modernist does. We can even retain a trace of positivism. It is descriptively-accessible content (politics; material analysis) that infiltrates norms that a positivist method of disclosure seeks to disclose. The modernist approach is positivist and ‘retains a deep underlying continuity with the optimistic tradition of rationality, realism, and materialism’ (Resch 1989, 514).⁵¹ It triumphs over the epistemic approach in that eschews dubious metanormative commitments.

10. Conclusion

I have argued that realists sought to distinguish themselves on the grounds of tradition, methodology, and metanormativity. The metanormative issue, I have demonstrated in this essay, has no satisfying normative answer. Delineating sources of normativity is an impossible undertaking. Thinking that the validity and credence of realism can be debated on the grounds of ontology and metaphysics was something of a wrong turn in the literature, not only because it opened Pandora’s box, but also because of its irrelevance to the realists’ concerns with power. If my argument against the possibility of metanormative distinctness (better, the metaethical literature I exploited to make my case) succeeded, that would mean that realists cannot rely on metanormative distinctness for their place in standing in political theory – not even the distinctness and priority of epistemic normativity. This, I acknowledge, is an extreme view. I’ve never seen anyone quite defend it in contemporary political theory.

The anti-metanormative argument hits hardest the radical realist as it takes away its chosen marker of distinction. But that must not be its death blow. I have further argued that realism, in none of its alternative incarnations, has a valid claim to traditional or methodological distinctness. The alternatives to radical realism succumb to their own, idiosyncratic diseases. Contextual realists risk falling back onto pure

⁵⁰See Resch on modernism and postmodernism in Foucault and Althusser. ‘Althusser’s work and the structural Marxist school which derives from it’, Resch argues ‘represent a modernist approach to social theory, which, far from being a symptom of the exhaustion of modernism (or Marxism), demonstrates the potential of Marxist Modernism’ (1989, 511).

⁵¹‘Despite its parasitic appropriation of modernism’, holds Resch ‘postmodernism’s roots lie elsewhere, in the ultimately pessimistic tradition of irrationalism, vitalism, and extreme subjectivity, which has been *postmodern* throughout its long life but only very recently valorised as such by the very *modern* which it purports to reject’ (1989, 514). It ‘may be defined as a synthesis of epistemological relativism, ontological irrationalism, ethical nihilism, aesthetic populism, and political pessimism’ (1989, 516).

descriptivism. The ordorealists, with their claim to a tradition of social order-loving theorists, have been rightly accused of unwarranted status-quo bias.

This leaves us with radical realism. Instead of the epistemic approach that dominates contemporary radical realism, I conclude that the most promising realist project is a continuation of modernist social theory. As I have argued in the last section, maximised applicability and the avoidance of controversial theoretical commitments speak in favour of the modernist approach over epistemic radical realism. In that, there may be an opportunity for a rapprochement of analytic and continental methods and concerns in a distinctively modernist position. Much more remains to be said about those prospects.

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