Should Political Philosophy be more realistic?

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There has been a great deal of argument of late regarding the proper relationship between politics and moral theory (Estlund, 2008; Freeden, 2009; Galston, 2009; Geuss, 2008; Gray, 2007; Philp, 2007; Swift, 2008; Williams, 2005). Whereas so-called 'moralists' hold that politics *is* subject to determinate, absolute moral rules, even if those rules are not quite the same as those applicable to matters of personal morality, 'realists' hold that matters are, *in reality*, substantially more complicated. And yet, exactly *why* these new realists believe things to be so complicated, and exactly *what* they think such complications entail for both political philosophy and political practice, is often unclear. It is, therefore, a most welcome fact that both of these two volumes go some way towards easing that lack of clarity, and in particular towards helping us answer three very important questions, each of which looms large over realist political thought as it exists today. These are: (1) what exactly is the realist account of politics such that that domain standardly undermines attempts to make it always and directly answerable to moral theory? (2) What is the importance of history and, in particular, historical context to realist theory? (3) What exactly is meant by realists when they declare that the decisions of powerful political actors ought to be determined by careful, practical judgement rather than abstract moral theory? In what follows, I shall try first to capture the family of answers each of these volumes provides to these three questions, second to consider the problems subsequently raised by those answers, and third to assess the merit of each volume as a whole, together with the more general prospects for the kind of political philosophy which both of them propound.

Getting real about politics

In addition to several restatements of the standard and at times rather vague realist line about power and conflict being permanently ineliminable from human affairs (e.g. Geuss, 2008; Mouffe, 2005; Newey, 2000), we find many original and plausible reasons given in these two volumes for thinking that politics *really is* somewhat less amenable to moral theory than has generally been assumed by political philosophers. In *Political Judgement*[1] for example, we learn from Montaigne via Fontana of the permanent and limiting influence of custom on political affairs. We learn from Tuck of the difficulties encountered in meeting the universal need for 'trust' in politics, particularly in the wake of war or, even more pertinently today, in the face of terrorism. We learn from Bourke of the problems produced by ineluctable

[1] *PJ* hereafter.

conflicts of interests and ambitions, and from Thucydides via Hawthorn of the ways in which political actors, whatever their ideal intentions, are constrained by the vicissitudes of domestic rivalries. We also learn from Przeworski of the almost insurmountable economic difficulties governments face *even when* domestically supported in their attempts to introduce the sort of 'just' redistributions of income or resources which have so often been prescribed by the political philosophers of the last forty or so years, and from Khilnani of the ways in which even the best domestic agendas can be undermined by the realities of international competition.

In *Political Thought and International Relations*[2], in turn, we learn again, this time from Emmerich, of the ways in which domestic agendas can become undermined by both economic and international pressures. We learn from Turner and Dienstag of the problems caused for political actors as a result of the fact that they operate under conditions of both uncertainty regarding the short-term consequences of their actions and deep unpredictability regarding their longer-term implications. And we learn from Rengger and Dienstag of that awkward balance which has always to be struck between, on the one hand, public reason and critique, and, on the other, the requirements of public order.

So: Custom, trust, domestic rivalries, international politics, uncertainty and unpredictability, economic intransigence and the requirements of order – is this the sum of the collective case made across these two volumes for a more realistic account of political life? Not by any means, for by far the most interesting argument in either is that presented by McGeer and Pettit in *PJ*, which holds that ideal political procedures, and in particular ideal democratic procedures, need to be rethought in the light of what modern psychology tells us of the limits of human judgement. Their case, in short, is that ordinary human judgement is so bad at adapting as it should to the evidence in front of it - as a result of frames, biases, habits, and poor intuitive assessment of probabilities - that it would be dangerous to simply expect voters and politicians to promptly respond to changes in reasoning and evidence in the way that philosophers have traditionally expected. What is therefore needed, they conclude, is a greater respect for rhetoric in public life – and thus also in political philosophy - as a result of that form of speech's ability to emotively dislodge our evaluative thought-processes from those well-worn and often dangerous tracks along which they usually run. This argument, which parallels numerous recent applications in philosophy of moral psychology and so-called 'experimental' ethics to problems of epistemology and moral theory (Greene, 2003; Knobe & Nichols, 2008; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006; for an excellent overview see Appiah, 2008), is a highly persuasive one, and it bodes for well for realist theory that it may be able to draw upon such a well-developed picture of the human mind in support of its traditional political conclusions. Indeed, it is only surprising that it has not done so earlier, especially when one considers how far back the association goes between realist theory and a somewhat unenthusiastic view of ordinary human reason.

In addition, though, to this further point regarding the limits of average human reasoning in the ordinary course of political events, there is still one last aspect of the realist account of 'politics as it really is' that deserves mention here. This is the importance of legitimacy and, in particular, 'legitimations' to both political success (that is, achieving one's policy aims) and the maintenance of public order which, as all realists point out, is a precondition of achieving anything else at all in politics, *good or bad* (Williams, 2005). This is a point discussed from various interesting angles by Lebow and Turner in *PTIR* and Kaviraj and

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[2] *PTIR* hereafter.

Hawthorn in *PJ*, and also a point which carries with it one final, very important aspect of the realist account of political life, namely the way in which its character in any particular time and place, and thus the various challenges and opportunities that it presents, varies according to the *history* of that particular context.

The relationship between politics and historical context

For Bourke and Geuss in particular, it is important that political actors, together with the political philosophers who would advise them, make their decisions on the basis of what they call sometimes "historical judgement", sometimes "historical reason", sometimes "historical prudence" and sometimes even an "historical sense" (*PJ*: 7, 9, 78, 79, 81). Such judgement involves a careful assessment by each actor of the particular environment in which they operate, which means an assessment of the various options realistically available to them, together with an assessment of the likely consequences, both short term and long term, which would result from each option. And *that* kind of assessment, in turn, requires an understanding not just of which options can be legitimated to a given political audience at the present time, but also which options *will be deemed legitimate* in the future if they are undertaken now, regardless of whether or not they are currently approved of. To correctly 'judge' a given historical context, therefore, will be to judge not just what can be achieved and justified in the here and now, but also how that context, together with its available set of legitimations, will change in the future.

This kind of judgement is an *historical* one precisely because (1) the ways in which one context differs from another are themselves the product of different histories, and (2) in order to precisely understand all the relevant details of any given political context, one will have to understand the particular historical story of how it became the context that it is today. As Charles Taylor once expressed the general thrust of this contextualist logic, "In order to understand properly what we are about, we have to understand how we got where we are" (Taylor, 1984, 28). Or, as John Dunn has put the point a little more recently, and this time with considerably narrow focus: "The forms which politics takes now are the product of the history of at least two great forces: the conflicts between our purposes, and our endeavours to co-operate to pursue these more effectively [...] The politics of the future will be a continuation of that history" (Dunn, 2000, 136). So, because the particular shape taken by politics varies from context to context, according to the different histories of each, political actors and, in turn, political philosophers have to grasp those histories in order to make informed decisions regarding what *ought* to be done *next*. In this realist view, they cannot simply decide what is best for all times and place, and then say 'do it!', for that imperative takes no account either of what it possible or impossible in the present circumstances - given considerations of both order *and* legitimation - or of what the consequences would be if actors *did* attempt to do so.

Political actors thus have to grasp - in ways that may well escape, if not the language and structure, then at least the *pace* of theory - all the various relevant aspects of their given context if they are to pursue reasonable courses of action in the here and now. They shall need to understand, at the least, the present distribution of power in their society, together with the character of those individuals and institutions which, respectively, wield and mediate it. They shall need to know the problems their society faces, together with the general distribution of sentiments amongst its members. They shall need to know its economic position, as well as its international situation. Or, in short, they shall need to know just how

all the various pertinent features which realists attribute to politics – as noted above – manifest themselves in their particular locale.

Such knowledge in the context of modern, Western politics will apparently have to involve many things. According to Bourke and Geuss, for instance, it will have to involve an understanding of the ways in which modern democracy manages to present itself, which is to say manages to *legitimate* itself, as the inheritor of ancient direct democracy, as well as the ways in which it tries to grapple with different understandings of, in particular, equality, authority, and the clash between what theoretical reason demands and actual democracy decides (*PJ*, 26). It will further have to involve, as Dunn long-insisted, and as Hont, Emmerich, and Tjalve agree, a grasp of the ways in which commerce and capitalism shape and impinge upon pretty much any important contemporary political endeavour (Dunn, 1979; Dunn, 2000; Hont, *PJ*, 131-171; Emmerich, *PTIR*, 216; Tjalve, *PTIR*, 177ff). And, in addition to these two things, it will also have to involve, according to Spegele, an understanding of the ways in which science and technology shape virtually every aspect of our lives, political or otherwise (*PTIR*, 136-139).

It is possible, however, that all of these insistences upon what might be termed the 'priority' of political context to moralist political theory would feel somewhat exaggerated in the absence of some plausible illustration of what can in fact go wrong when actors simply pursue a given moral agenda without proper regard for the kind of considerations noted so far. This, I think, is why the chapter by Kaviraj in *PJ* is so important. As he neatly explains in the context of post-war India, what happens when a political party pursues what they take to be *the* political agenda required by justice, without proper regard to the ways in which both that agenda and that notion of justice 'fit' with the particular sentiments of a given society, is that it fails – and not just fails in the sense of blowing some given electoral window, but fails in the sense that those goals move further and further away in political reality just so long as they are stubbornly and inflexibly adhered to in that way. The lesson here for political philosophy, then, is that when political actors adhere to what they consider to be *the* just political agenda, as required by what they consider to be *the* correct moral theory, without proper regard to the kinds of sentiments, institutions, economic arrangements, and plausible legitimations found locally, they will often make the prospect of achieving that justice not a nearer, but rather an ever-more distant phenomenon.

Judgement and Consequences

And yet, even if one accepts the basic idea that politics is not just a difficult domain to navigate – because of concerns of custom, economics, international affairs, domestic rivalries, legitimacy and order, etc – but also one which has to be navigated in different ways in different contexts – e.g. with regard to capitalism, democracy, technology, and local sentiments – there still remains the fundamental question of just which *goals* political philosophers *ought* to be recommending to political actors. That is, there still remains the question of how this understanding of politics in general and modern politics in particular ought to affect the answers we give to what might plausibly be described as political philosophy's organising question, namely, *how should we live*?

Both volumes, it must be said, are rather more adept at making this a tricky question than they are at formulating a compelling answer. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a reasonably coherent line of argument which emerges from a majority of the chapters when taken as a whole. This is an argument which begins, as noted above, with a declaration to the

effect that what political actors ought to be aiming for is good *judgement* (e.g. Lebow and Molloy in *PTIR*; Geuss and Bourke in *PJ*). But then, we have to ask, what is it that good judgement is supposed to be aiming at? This, I think, is where the problem becomes really interesting. The general answer offered in both collections, fascinatingly enough, is that good political judgement aims at better *consequences* (e.g. Geuss, Bourke, and Tuck in *PJ*), which suggests straight away that the opposition realists have to 'moralist' political philosophy might not be so much an opposition to moral theory as such, but rather to its more Kantian manifestations. Could it therefore be the case that an acceptance of realism leads not to the rejection of moralism, where moralism is understood as some general attempt to make politics answerable to the demands of morality, but rather to the acceptance of one particular form of moral consequentialism? (And, if consequentialism, would it then be act-consequentialism over rule-consequentialism?)

To answer this question, we need to pay attention to the kinds of things these authors say about morality and value-theory in general. Here, two themes in particular appear to play a prominent role, the first of which is a subscription to some kind of value-pluralism. That is, it certainly seems to be the case that most, if not quite all of the authors in these two books share some kind of view to the effect that there exist plural, irreconcilable and incommensurable values in the world, the implication of which is that not all good things can be had at once, either in personal life or in political practice (e.g. Khilnani in *PJ* and Molloy in *PTIR*, although Sangiovanni, *PTIR*, might well be an exception). And of course, this is not particularly surprising when one considers that they also subscribe to a view regarding the inevitability of conflict in political life – for if only some out of many possible goods can be realised by any one individual or society, then there is always going to be conflict within both individuals and societies regarding just which goods ought to be chosen. This connection between pluralism and political conflict was absolutely central to John Dunn's work, the inspiration for Bourke and Geuss's volume, and it appears that it is very much alive in many of the essays featured in both volumes (Dunn, 2000, 21, 28, 102, 133, 361).

The second theme is a belief in universal evils (e.g. Dienstag and Tjalve, *PTIR*). As pluralists have long been aware, it is perfectly possible to reject the possibility of a *summum bonnum* without also excluding the possibility of a *summum malum* (Berlin, 2003; Gray, 2000) That is, although we might disagree about what might be ideal, we can still all agree about what would be terrible, awful, unbearable, etc. Whatever one's value-orientation, or whatever one's conception of the good, there are always going to be things which we shall *all* want to avoid under just about any circumstances, such as war and insecurity, or famine and disease. And this belief - which regards the existence and universality of such evils – is then combined with a second regarding their *likelihood*. According to many of the thinkers gathered in this volume (though Skinner in *PJ* and Sangiovanni in *PTIR* appear to be exceptions), such evils are always much closer than political philosophers (and in particular liberal political philosophers) seem to think, and so must always be kept in mind in the course of forming political judgements. This is so, in part, because beneath any political settlement there are always tensions produced by unavoidable conflicts, but also because any given political action is likely to produce a range of consequences, of which only a few are likely to be intended (Bourke & Geuss, *PJ*, 11).

It is only when all of these arguments are combined, however, that the final normative conclusion generated by these two books begins to emerge and, at the risk of rewriting the contents of both, that conclusion seems to run as follows: Because political actors operate in an environment characterised not just by danger, but also chronic uncertainty, and because

whatever political course moral theory tells them to follow is likely to serve some values and individuals but not others, it is advisable for those actors to restrict themselves to political options about which there is the greatest certainty that they shall not upset whatever degree of order and minimum of universal evils has already been achieved. Or, to put the same point another way, political philosophers ought to recommend to political actors, not Kantian measures of just procedure, but rather maximin-consequentialist political strategies informed both by an acceptance of value-pluralism *and* by an understanding of what can be achieved and justified in the particular historical context for which each strategy is intended. There is an unlikely parallel here with Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Just as individuals in the original position are supposed to adopt maximin strategies involving primary goods (things which are of appeal to anyone, regardless of their other commitments) *because of* the radical uncertainty with which they are confronted (where such uncertainty is understood not just as an ignorance of what position one might end up occupying, but also of the probabilities of occupying any particular position), so are political actors operating within the realist universe expected to do their utmost to avoid what *anyone* would consider the *worst-case scenario*.

Some Problems with this Argument

So, having aggregated most of the various claims made across these two volumes, we have arrived at a theory which combines (1) a view of politics as recalcitrant in the face of theoretical reorganisation, (2) a view regarding the historical specificity of each political situation, and (3) a view regarding both the proximity of universal evils and the inevitability of deep value conflict, in order to produce (4) an imperative to the effect that political actors ought to do their utmost to preserve order and avoid universal evils, being wary all the time of the fact that anything more ambitious is likely to bring with it numerous unintended consequences. As Bourke and Geuss express the point, we need to reject outright the "relentless pursuit of an ideal of justice" and retain a "realistic sense of practical possibility" (*PJ*, 11) because, as Dunn once put it, "it is hard to imagine a world in which the great majority of human beings no longer have anything to fear from politics" (Dunn, 2000, 99).

This argument, however - which we can treat as the best representative of the kind of theory propounded in these two volumes, even if it is not directly representative of any one particular chapter - faces at least three kinds of problem. These are problems of clarity, problems of doctrine, and problems of engagement. First, as regards clarity, there remain serious doubts regarding just what would count as *good* political consequences. As noted above, one of several common themes across these chapters is the combination of a belief in 'universal evils' with a belief in their ever present danger, and yet, avoidance of evils does not seem to be the only kind of consequence in which some of these authors are interested - Bourke, for instance, talks of the "well-being of citizens" on one occasion (*PJ*, 109), whilst Geuss often refers to the need for current actions to appear legitimate in the future (*PJ*, 43-44). So, is realism concerned more with the promotion of general welfare, perhaps as judged by the people whose welfare it is, or instead with the maintenance of perceived legitimacy - or does it really only confine itself to the avoidance of things which would undermine either under any circumstances?

A second problem of clarity concerns the difference between short-term and long-term gains. Is realism, perhaps, simply a theory which tells us to focus on ensuring that things go well in the short-term, rather than trying to improve them considerably more in the long-term, especially when that improvement could well involve some hardship in the meanwhile? Certainly there seems to be a great deal of this sentiment across both of these two volumes,

but then, if this is so, the question of just *why that is* deserves further treatment. After all, as Sangiovanni points out, the view that we should *only* focus on universal evils because any further improvements would be too *difficult* to achieve is itself highly contestable (*PTIR*, 233). Can we really not say, for instance, that certain improvements in liberty, equality, or general well-being would be worth considerable sacrifice in the here and now if that sacrifice would ensure their coming to pass and, if not, why not? Przeworski is presumably correct when he points out that no modern democracy has achieved reasonable equality of income and opportunity in the absence of some kind of social cataclysm, but perhaps even some cataclysms are worth going through? Or, if they are not, why is that? Is it because when such things are attempted in politics they inevitably spiral out of control, producing all manner of universal evils in their wake, or is it because of some deeper thesis of morality or rationality which results in a preference for short-term absence of hardship over long-term broader gains?

A third problem of clarity concerns the relative weights given by realists to those different features of politics which, in aggregation, are supposed to undermine that domain's ethical reorganisation. What, in short, are the relative contributions of sentiments, value-conflicts, uncertainty, economic intransigence and international politics towards ensuring that condition? And this third problem, which I shall not dwell upon here, also contributes to a fourth, which concerns the status of realism in general. Is it a political theory - or, perhaps, ideology - in its own right, or merely an attitude or cautionary note which political actors are supposed to add, as a sort of stabiliser, to whatever political agenda it is they are already pursuing? Bell, in his introduction to *PTIR*, is certainly clear himself that it is not a political ideology, whilst no one, across either of the two volumes, seems willing to advance a complete realist doctrine themselves. *And yet*, that absence of stated ambition does nothing to dampen the fact that most of these chapters do function as contributions to such a theory, and particularly the kind of theory which has been advanced elsewhere by one of their authors (Geuss, 2008). So the question remains: Is realism a political theory proper and, if not, is that simply because of a quibble regarding what would count *as* a political theory - which reduces then to a claim that realism is not an ambitious moralist programme of political reconstruction - or is it because of some deeper rejection of 'theory' in general? Just as there are numerous reasons for thinking any one of these things at various points throughout these two volumes, so is there little doubt that more work needs to be done to clarify the kind of status for realism that is intended, let alone appropriate.

As regards doctrine, in turn, at least two problems seem to present themselves from the off, the first of which is tightly bound up with those problems of clarity noted above. This problem can be expressed with the following question: Is realism an excessively *conservative* doctrine? There are at least two reasons for thinking that it might be. Firstly, if one really did always prioritise order and the avoidance of universal evils (such as war, torture, disease) over any bolder attempts at social reform, then no exploitative, authoritarian regime would ever be overthrown, and it is hard to see how that benefits the majority of people who have to live with them, at least in the long-run – which returns us to the point above regarding short-term versus long-term considerations. Secondly, if one has always to frame one's political decisions with regard to context and local legitimacy, is there not a danger of simply reproducing local prejudices time and time again? Geuss has been very keen elsewhere to highlight the problem which ideological distortion poses to the use political philosophy makes of human intuitions – namely, that even these basic data of human evaluation can be corrupted by power, rhetoric, prejudice, etc – so why should realists, of all people, concede

quite so much to whatever sentiments and institutions happen to exist in the here and now? (Geuss, 2008).

The second problem concerning doctrine, which becomes particularly acute in the face of the challenges noted, is that of realism's relative originality. Apart from a rather general account regarding the difficulty of subordinating politics to moral theory, what is there in its insistence upon value-conflict, universal evils, and judgement between theoretically under-determined options that is not already to be found in pluralist political theory? Certainly we should not be surprised that a large number of political theorists once interested in or even defined by reference to pluralism are now contributing to, or even being rolled in as contributions to, a realist theoretical programme (e.g. Arendt, Berlin, Gray, Shklar, Williams). But the real point here is this: Even if realism is, in certain ways, a superior doctrine to pluralism, it is important that what pluralism did well – namely, combining a clear and cogent theory of value which a relatively focussed set of political prescriptions – should not be lost in the development of one into the other. Realists would certainly do well to study Berlin's work on judgement alongside John Dunn's, just as they would do well to pay as much attention to Stuart Hampshire as they do to any of Thucydides, Morgenthau or Strauss – for if one really is after a clearly worked out theory which combines value-conflict, a belief in universal evils, the necessity of judgement, and an acceptance of the variability of politics in different contexts, one would be hard pressed to find something better than the argument already advanced in either *Innocence and Experience* (1989) or *Justice is Conflict* (1999).

Realism's last problem, finally, is the problem of engagement. Despite the fact that most of the chapters in these two books make some sort of a 'call' for political theorists to combine contextual political analysis with concrete political recommendations, there is actually very little work done of that sort in either. For example, a lot more might have been said by Bourke and Geuss of the apparent 'clash between reason and democracy' to which they refer, just as more might have been said by Hont and Emmerich about the problems supposedly posed by 'commerce'. John Dunn's work provides by far the most obvious example of how this engagement with modern politics can work in general, as well as by far the most perceptive example of how it can engage with capitalism in particular, so it is even more surprising than it is disappointing that nobody really follows his lead in either volume. It is not enough, at the end of the day, to simply disparage moralism whilst calling for a more realistic and politically engaged kind of political philosophy – at some point one has to deliver the latter in order to prove the possibility of an alternative to the former.

Some Conclusions

To say, however, that this 'new realism' still has a long way to go is not to say that these two collections are in any way disappointments to the interested reader, for although they are, in many respects, reflective of the weaknesses of the movement as a whole, they also do a rather impressive job of advancing it in various ways, as well as an excellent job, in places, of highlighting several of its weak spots (e.g. Skinner in *PJ* and Sangiovanni in *PTIR*). Nor is it to say that the two are identical to one another, for although they both contain pioneering arguments along what Bell would call a 'realist theme', there are certainly more of them in *PJ*, whereas there are considerably more treatments of classical realist thinkers in *PTIR*. So, if one is after a book which combines a handful of engagements with the idea of political realism, a cluster of engagements with classical realists, an illuminating overview of the literature (Bell's opening chapter), and a cogent rejection of the same (Sangiovanni's), then

one would do well to choose *PTIR*, whereas if one would prefer a larger set of pioneering essays on a wider range of realist concerns, one would do well to plump for *PJ*.

And yet, if one *is* to draw a single, overarching conclusion here, besides the point that these volumes provide both accurate reflections *of* and genuine contributions *to* a certain kind of political philosophy, it does seem to me that the kind of theoretical endeavour explored in both does now need to make a real effort to become both (1) more *systematic* and (2) more *politically engaged*. It needs to be more systematic, in particular, both in its account of what politics *is* and in its account of what good judgement *should* aim at (and why!). For even if realists are right that politics cannot itself be systematically redesigned, that is no reason by itself not to try and develop a more systematic realist theory. And it needs to be more politically engaged, in turn, just insofar as it needs to actually *provide* the kind of concrete guidance-for-judgement that is so often declared, without illustration, as the proper object of political philosophy in both of these two collections. We might alternatively put these two points as follows: If the 'new realists' really are right about how political philosophy should relate to politics, then the best to way to prove the wisdom of that belief would be to both precisely articulate in theory *and* clearly demonstrate in practice just how that relationship should work. Or, if one prefers: If political philosophy is to become more realistic, then realism will have to become, not just more engaged, but also more philosophical.

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