

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Political Normativity

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Abstract: Do salient normative claims about politics require moral premises? Political moralists think they do, political realists think they do not. We defend the viability of realism in a two-pronged way. First, we show that a number of recent attacks on realism, as well as realist responses to those attacks, unduly conflate distinctively political normativity and non-moral political normativity. Second, we argue that Alex Worsnip and Jonathan Leader-Maynard's recent attack on realist arguments for a distinctively political normativity depends on assuming moralism as the default view, which places an excessive burden on the viability of realism, and so begs the question. Our discussion, though, does not address the relative merits of realism and moralism, so its upshot is relatively ecumenical: moralism need not be the view that all apt normative political judgments are moral judgments, and realism need not be the view that no apt normative political judgments are moral judgments.

Key Words: Method in political philosophy; Political realism and moralism; political normativity.

*If you know your enemy,
and you know yourself,
you need not fear the results
of a hundred battles.
- Sūnzǐ*

1. Introduction

Where do normative claims about politics come from? From what sorts of premises do they follow? Most post-Rawlsian Anglo-American political philosophers maintain that most normative political judgments are derived from or reducible to moral normativity. Over the last decade a realist challenge to that orthodoxy has emerged. In different ways, realists reject the centrality or even the pertinence of moral normativity to political philosophy. In a recent paper, Jonathan Leader Maynard and Alex Worsnip try to put the realist challenge to rest. They discuss five realist arguments for a “distinctively political normativity”, and contend that all five “fail to establish a sense in which political normativity is genuinely separate from morality” (2018: 764). This and other attacks have led some realists to distance themselves from the idea of a non-moral political normativity. “The origins of the realist/moralist distinction turned not on the demarcation of

different normativities”, they argue, “but on how political theory understands the relationship between morality and political practice” (Sleat 2021: 2). Relatedly, others argue that realists should be “either indifferent or openly sceptical of the metanormative thesis [about political normativity]”, and focus on offering “practical guidance” instead (Bagg 2022: 6). Others suggest relocating the discourse away from normativity and towards empirical political psychology—which, it turns out, lends plausibility to realism (Kreutz 2022a). More perplexingly, some even say that the distinctiveness of political thought cannot be defended philosophically, by engaging “in the way that Leader Maynard and Worsnip seek”, but is rather to be found in “a more discursive, allusive method, often leaning on stories of one sort and another” (Jubb 2019: 8). We argue that those lines of defence are overly concessive: realists need not abandon political normativity, let alone exacting philosophical argumentation. We make that case in two independent and mutually supportive ways.

Firstly, we show that the stakes in this debate are lower than Leader Maynard and Worsnip suggest: even if their argument were to succeed, it would not doom realism, but only a very specific version of it, because non-moral political normativity is not the same as distinctively political normativity—a simple distinction that, nonetheless, even some of the realists quoted above miss. Distinctively political normativity has been characterised in several ways. Arguably some loose remarks in a paper by Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat (2014) are at least partly responsible for the metanormative turn in the debate we address here. Political realism, they say, 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’ (2014: 1).¹ This was taken by several commentators to suggest ‘distinctness’ in an ontological sense. But political normativity doesn’t have to be its own ontological category. There are politically salient normativities, such as epistemic or prudential normativity, which are distinct from moral normativity without being constitutively or ontologically political. Even the strong versions of realism that seek to eliminate morality from political theory altogether do not need to posit a *sui generis* political normativity: epistemic and/or prudential normativity are enough for their purposes.² Such normativity may not be political

¹ The term ‘source of normativity’ comes from Koorsgard (1992) but is used differently there. It is telling however that Koorsgard’s use of the term ‘normativity’ is heavily morality-centric or moralised—a legacy that extends into the present, as we will argue. We use ‘normativity’ in the more ecumenical and widely accepted sense of ‘responsiveness to reasons’, be they moral, prudential, aesthetic, or other. In this way we can accommodate morality as a type of normativity without demanding that all normativity mimic key characteristics of morality. This is the position we urge moralists to heed, too.

² Burelli and Destri (2021: 2) call the two positions—*sui generis* political normativity and politically salient non-moral normativity—“strong” and “weak” interpretations of political normativity.

in some ontological sense, but it is political in the salient sense that it can generate normative political judgments.

Secondly, we show that Leader Maynard and Worsnip's argument does not succeed on its own terms. They aim to proceed from a "position of neutrality between realism and moralism" (ibid.:764), but we argue that they don't, because their argument for the redundancy of distinctively political normativity depends on unwarrantedly assuming moralism as the default position in the debate. We advance this argument while suspending judgment on the existence of distinctively political normativity, and so on whether versions of realism that rely on a such normativity constitute a plausible method alongside or in opposition to moralism. We merely argue that Leader Maynard and Worsnip do not succeed in ruling out distinctly political normativity. They do not succeed because moralists are not entitled to demand of realists that they produce the same kind of judgments about politics that an 'ethics first' approach produces, namely judgments about duties, all-things-considered *oughts*, and the like. Moral normativity should not be the gold standard for politically salient normativity. For instance, as we will see below, realist normative political judgments will often take an evaluative rather than prescriptive form. That is a feature, not a deficiency. It is a feature of a different way of doing political theory. And this difference is not a legitimate ground for complaint, at least if we want to place realism and moralism on a level playing field.

The upshot is that realism and moralism can be understood as alternative methodological stances, and not necessarily as diametrically opposed claims about the only or primary kind of normativity in political theory, pace what both some moralists and some realists claim. And so we do not need to adjudicate the controversy about the relative merits of realism and moralism. What we want to show is that realism has characteristic and viable ways to make normative judgments about politics without relying on moral normativity, i.e. collapsing into moralism. In which case, the controversy between realism and moralism can be adjudicated by looking at each approach's achievements, and not through a debate on metanormativity.³

2. Lowering the stakes

Despite the title of their paper ("Is There a Distinctively Political Normativity?"), Leader Maynard and Worsnip oscillate between two characterizations of the realist position they attack. At times they indeed question whether political normativity is "its own distinctive kind of normativity" (ibid. 759). But sometimes they conceive of the realists' arguments as just "attempting to isolate a

³ E.g. Jubb 2019, Erman and Möller 2015, Jubb and Rossi 2015, Sleat 2021, Leader Maynard 2021.

sense in which political normativity is distinct from moral normativity" (ibid. 764). We submit that, by conflating distinctively political normativity and non-moral political normativity, Leader Maynard and Worsnip misconstrue realism, even in its stronger versions, i.e. versions that, roughly speaking, reject any role for morality in normative political theory. We should note, though, that Leader Maynard and Worsnip are not alone in this mistake: even some realists commit it.⁴

This is how Leader Maynard and Worsnip delineate the issue at stake:

...if a collapse into merely verbal debate is to be avoided, this way of distinguishing different kinds of normativity must be able to distinguish the moralist view that political principles are a part of morality, albeit perhaps a distinctive part, from the realist view that political principles are of a different, nonmoral normative kind altogether. (Ibid. 762).

It is clear from that quotation that they do not wish to consider the middle position of a non-moral politically salient normativity that is not its own normative kind—an understanding of political normativity that is compatible with it being reducible to any of the other normativities Leader Maynard and Worsnip do acknowledge: “epistemic normativity, prudential normativity, ‘aim-given’ normativity, and aesthetic normativity” (ibid: 756).⁵ Indeed, even if realism’s aim is to eliminate moral judgment from normative political theory (an aim not all realists share), it’s far from clear that it needs a *sui generis* political normativity, though realists may sometimes have been guilty of suggesting as much through poor terminological choices. Realism is less demanding: “if realists can show that they can make normative political judgments that [...] don't share the sources of normativity of moral principles, then they will have made room for their view.” (Rossi 2019: 640).

The challenge for realists, then, is to show that it is possible to make normative judgments about politics by using non-moral (and not

⁴ For instance, there is a clear-cut conflation of distinctively political normativity and nonmoral political normativity in Sleat’s recent defence of realism against Leader Maynard and Worsnip’s argument, where he claims that radical realism needs to rely on distinctively political normativity (2021, section 2)—whereas most radical realists rely on epistemic normativity (e.g. Prinz & Rossi 2017, Rossi & Argenton 2021, Aytac & Rossi 2021). Unsurprisingly, it is mostly liberal realists who claim that more radical forms of realism that reject morality in politics altogether fall prey to Leader Maynard and Worsnip’s critique (Sleat 2021, but also Bagg 2022). We contend that this claim rests on the conflation of distinctively political normativity and political normativity simpliciter.

⁵ Leader Maynard and Worsnip explicitly consider “prudential (or instrumental) normativity”, but maintain that “this does not seem to be what realists typically mean by ‘political normativity’”, as it “fails to carve out a role for a distinctively political normativity” (2018: 765).

necessarily *sui generis*) normativity. We submit that epistemic, prudential, and ‘aim given’ normativity are strong candidates for this role. This is not a claim that we have the space to defend in full here. But all we need to establish is that this claim would have made a better target for Leader Maynard and Worsnip’s argument. And that is easy to see: removing moral normativity from normative political theory would be a sufficiently disruptive methodological development to warrant attention to realism. In fact, the critics of realism seem to acknowledge as much when they take their positive claim to be just that “political justification is irreducibly moral” (Erman & Möller 2015: 1) or that it has “its ineliminable roots in morality” (Leader Maynard & Worsnip 2018: 787).⁶

What we need to establish, then, is just that there is a *prima facie* case for grounding at least some significant normative political judgments in epistemic or instrumental rationality.⁷ We can do so by pointing at the literature. First, it is worth noting that a recent article by Carlo Burelli and Chiara Destri (2021) defends the role of those normativities within realism extensively and exhaustively: they clarify, inter alia, that Leader Maynard and Worsnip fail to consider the option of epistemic normativity altogether, and take instrumental normativity to be immaterial to the question at hand (ibid.: 7).⁸ Second, we can point to various contributions to the

⁶ In a more recent paper, Erman and Möller (2021) acknowledge that “instrumental normativity” could yield political justification, but argue that such a strategy is “unattractive” or “redundant”. We agree with Erman and Möller that *some* realists, e.g. Jubb (2017), fail to live up to their aspiration to differentiate themselves from non-ideal theorists, thus inviting a charge of redundancy. And we don’t wish to establish whether realism is attractive relative to moralism, but simply to show why some prominent arguments for the view that realism is a non-starter—i.e. that it is incoherent or redundant—fail. In short, Erman and Möller’s claims depend on the observation that the boundary and content of politics are essentially contestable. But realists hardly presuppose agreement on what politics is. They simply claim that the scope of political norms should be determined on the basis of some (contestable, loaded, etc.) description of what politics is. Indeed, if Lorna Finlayson (2015) is right, it is moralists who unduly constrain our understanding of the political through their moral commitments—an argument to which we are sympathetic, though we do not pursue it here. Further, concerning Erman and Möller’s ‘unattractiveness’ charge, it is worth making this observation: that conclusion just doesn’t follow from Erman and Möller’s observation that “realists would have to claim that competing accounts which use norms that cannot be reduced to instrumental norms in relation to (a particular understanding of) the ends and constraints of politics are simply changing the subject rather than doing normative political theory.” For it is a common realist claim that moralism is the wrong way to go about doing political philosophy. Erman and Möller shouldn’t treat this claim as a *reductio ad absurdum*, or else they would just be relying on the superior popularity of the moralist way of doing political philosophy—a move similar to the one we attribute to Leader Maynard and Worsnip in the next section.

⁷ We can set aside the issue of the relative weight of moral and non-moral normativities in politics, for that would lead us to adjudicating a direct confrontation between moralism and realism.

⁸ In another recent critique of realism, Sam Kiss also focuses on distinctively political normativity, and so ends up distinguishing between realism and prudentialism—but also acknowledging the correctness of longstanding

‘radical realist’ current, some of whose exponents explicitly rely on epistemic normativity alone: the rough idea there is that empirical evidence can be mustered to show that some normative beliefs about political power structures are caused by those very structures, and so lack epistemic warrant due to vicious circularity (e.g. Aytac & Rossi 2021, Aytac 2022, Cross 2021, Prinz & Rossi 2017, Rossi 2019, Rossi & Argenton 2021).

Note, though, that epistemic normativity does not yield strict prescriptions. It is an *evaluative* normative theory, not a prescriptive normative theory (Rossi 2019, Aytac & Rossi 2021).⁹ A moralist may take this to be a disadvantage of realism vis-à-vis moralism. The realist need not concede this point. Focusing on evaluation rather than prescription is just a different *modus operandi*. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that the focus on prescriptions is peculiar feature of contemporary Anglophone political philosophy, whereas, for example, large swathes of the ‘critical’ or ‘continental’ traditions have no interest in or even reject the identification of obligations and such like as a task for political theory. So, there is a sense in which at least some strands of political realism break with some commitments of much Anglophone or ‘analytic’ political theory. That should not be seen as a weakness. It is just a way in which the *modi* of realism and moralism differ.

3. Levelling the playing field

Let us now move on to consider Leader Maynard and Worsnip’s case against distinctively political normativity, rather than non-moral normativity. The general pattern of their argument is this. First, they introduce a set of premises accepted by the realist (P1) from which the realist infers that (C1) there is a distinctively political source of normativity. Second (P2), Leader Maynard and Worsnip profess that there is nothing keeping the moralist from *also* accepting the realist’s premises (or something sufficiently similar), and then drawing moralist conclusions. Therefore they conclude that (C3) the realist is not warranted to infer, given (P2), that (C1) is true.

readings of realist classics like Hobbes and Machiavelli as prudentialists (Kiss 2021, 92*n*).

⁹ But notice how epistemic normativity can be action-guiding in an indirect sense: having knowledge of the location of a source of water might guide our actions, but it does not tell us whether water consumption is preferable to starvation—and it doesn’t have to, because in *my* situation, in which I am thirsty, that’s sufficient guidance. “To say that *this* piece of advice or guidance is not *real* guidance because it is only relative to my situation is to miss the point”, says Geuss (2016:41). A prudential normativity might, but that is not to be confused with the evaluative epistemic normativity employed by radical realists.

For example, this is how Leader Maynard and Worsnip reconstruct a realist argument concerning the realist's distrust in the legitimacy of the unrestricted enforcement of universal moral claims.¹⁰

(P1) Just because a moral principle is either true or reasonable it doesn't follow that it is legitimate to enforce it politically. In other (realist) words, even if A morally-ought to ϕ it doesn't follow that B *politically*-ought to force A to ϕ .

Leader Maynard and Worsnip note that this is an argument realists may make in light of Bernard Williams's thesis that the "Basic Legitimation Demand" requires a political power-holder to provide a legitimation story acceptable to those over whom the power-holder wishes to have authority, and that such legitimation stories float free of morality (2005: 7). Granting the *prima facie* plausibility of Williams's claim that his machinery involves a non-moral concept of acceptability,¹¹ the realist account of legitimacy escapes the confines of morality. Thus,

(C1) political realists can claim to have found a non-moral yet normative political value, legitimacy, and thus to have unveiled a genuine political source of normativity.¹²

Leader Maynard and Worsnip then agree, *qua* moralists, with the realist's observation that

(P2) Just because a moral principle is either true or reasonable it doesn't follow that it is legitimate to enforce it politically. In other (moralist) words, even if A morally-ought to ϕ it doesn't follow that B *morally*-ought to force A to ϕ .

But then, since the (in)acceptability of forcing others to abide by some true or reasonable moral principle "can itself be moral in nature" (p.767), Leader Maynard and Worsnip contend that

(C2) The normativity of (P2), the observation that sometimes a true and reasonable moral principle shouldn't be enforced on others, springs from a moral source of normativity.

¹⁰ We are not aware of any realist making this argument. We chose to discuss it to be maximally charitable to Leader Maynard and Worsnip. We think that two of their four other arguments follow similar lines. Space forbids a detailed discussion. Refuting one should suffice.

¹¹ E.g. a notion of acceptability derived from a conceptual distinction between politics and raw domination (Hall 2015). This assumes a need for politics, which presumably most moralist political philosophers would also accept.

¹² We can leave open whether Williams' argument, i.e. the inference from P1 to C1, succeeds. We only need Williams's inference to be *prima facie* plausible.

And on that basis, they conclude that

(C3) Distinctively political normativity is redundant.

C3 supposedly follows because moralists can assert P2. As Leader Maynard and Worsnip put it, “it can be true that actor A morally ought to do action X, while also being true that actor B morally ought not to force actor A to do action X. Since this is evidently coherent, even reading both ‘oughts’ as moral, *there is no need to introduce a distinctive political ‘ought’* to make sense of such a structure.” (ibid., emphasis added).¹³ Yet we don’t know what would have to be the case for political philosophers to have a *need* to introduce distinctive sources of normativity. And this debate is not about what political philosophers need, but about what they may plausibly do. It is about trying to establish the presence of a viable methodological approach. There is no inconsistency nor redundancy in developing a realist account from a set of premises that the moralist accepts. The fact that despite agreeing on the premises (P1 and P2) realists and moralists develop two different accounts just indicates that realism is another *prima facie* viable position.

If Leader Maynard and Worsnip didn't assume moralism as the default view, their claim (P2) that a moralist can *also* account for the realist's observations on legitimacy (P1) would lead not to the alleged refutation of the realist conclusion (C3), but to a stalemate between the realist and the moralist. Realism’s critics aren’t entitled to expect from non-moral normativity the same sorts of things one expects from moral normativity. Put differently, without assuming moralism as the default view and forbidding the proliferation of normativities, (P1) and (P2) allow for several different conclusions—which hardly undermines the case for distinctively political normativity. It just puts it *on a par* with moral normativity. We shouldn’t ask whether political normativity can do what moral normativity does, but whether it enables us to do normative political theory in a different way.

Our point, then, is that the deep disciplinary embeddedness and conventionality of moral normativity can’t be used to adjudicate this question. This is because assuming that political philosophy’s core aim is to generate all-things-considered prescriptions is tantamount to stacking the deck in favour of moralism. That is to say, it is inappropriate to demand from non-moral normativity the same “authority” or “force” as prescriptive moral normativity (a

¹³ This move recurs at various stages in the paper, e.g. in the rejection of another realist argument because “there is *no need* to introduce a distinctive kind of normativity [...] into our taxonomy of kinds of normativity” (ibid. 779, emphasis added). This move reoccurs in a recent paper by Leader Maynard, where he does consider epistemic versions of radical realism, but then brushes them aside by saying that “there is *no need* to see ideology critique as purely epistemically grounded” (Leader Maynard 2021: 9, emphasis added).

point similar to P2, where it is argued that non-moral normativity has nothing to add over and above moral normative verdicts):¹⁴ other kinds of normativity, and even some versions of moral normativity, simply do not aspire to make this kind of judgment.¹⁵ But it must not be. Likewise, it's not appropriate to require realists to show that non-moral normativity overrides moral normativity. "Overridingness" is a desideratum of certain accounts of moral normativity (Stroud 1998), and so of their application to political philosophy, but there is no reason to take this as a yardstick to measure all ways of rendering normative judgments about politics.

Relatedly, saying that something can be accomplished with moral normativity is not enough to conclude that it cannot or should not also be accomplished with some other kind of normativity: saying that some other politically salient normativity is not needed because we already have moral normativity is not a way to show that arguments for political normativity are not convincing. There are many ways to make normative judgments about politics, possibly as many as there are distinct normativities, and we shouldn't assume that the moralist one is the gold standard.

Indeed, there may just not be a sufficiently neutral standpoint from which to adjudicate whether what we do with moral normativity is equally important or interesting as what we do with other kinds of normativity. So we are not claiming that Leader Maynard and Worsnip advance their argument in an avoidably biased way, but rather that this sort of methodological argument from need and redundancy is bound to be biased, and so should probably not be advanced.

One might reply on Leader Maynard and Worsnip's behalf that they are not trying to establish that there's no conceptual room for distinctively political normativity, but just that there is nothing in political philosophy that would call for such a view. But that depends on the prevailing yet contingent preferences of political philosophers—just what realism set out to change. So, using the current prevailing preference for moral normativity as an argument against distinctively political normativity begs the question of whether the latter is viable.

But doesn't explanatory parsimony caution against multiplying normativities (and methodological approaches) beyond necessity?¹⁶

¹⁴ For an assessment of this nothing-more-to-add argument, see Kreutz 2022b.

¹⁵ A theme familiar even from within moral philosophy, as exemplified by debates on internal and external reasons, the ethics of care, and more besides.

¹⁶ This might be phrased in terms of ontological minimalism: the default source of normativity is moral and sources of normativity shouldn't be multiplied beyond necessity—a "moralist Ockham assumption". Just as in the case of purported explanatory parsimony, the moralist Ockham assumption would be an unwarranted way of skewing the playing field, and so might as well be replaced by a realist Ockham assumption. The issue turns on which assumption is *prima facie* more plausible, and, since taking moral language at face value is

If that is the case then one may as well turn the tables and replace moral with political normativity, e.g. by way of ideology critique: as Raymond Geuss pithily put it, “ethics is usually dead politics; the hand of a victor in a past conflict reaching out to extend its grip to the present and the future” (2010: 42). Whether ideology critics are right in their suspicion of morality’s ubiquity or whether the moralists are right to take moral language at face value is just what is at stake here.¹⁷ But that cannot be taken as a neutral starting point, because it is precisely the position the realist attacks.

Given Leader Maynard and Worsnip's apt insistence on rendering the debate non-trivial, and on escaping a merely verbal dispute, we must assume that, at least in principle, all *prima facie* plausible sources of normativity should be acknowledged a methodological option, at least until we find any contrary evidence—evidence, that is, other than the contingent pre-eminence of moralism in contemporary political philosophy. We can only heed Leader Maynard and Worsnip’s recommendation to not play “games of burden-shifting tennis” (2018: 764) so long as they agree to play on a level field. A field, that is, where current methodological preferences are not a reason to rule out alternative methodologies that seek to change those preferences.

What we take away from this engagement with realism’s critics, then, is that realism and moralism are just different but not necessarily incompatible approaches to political theory: they have different accounts of what should be the main focus of normative judgments about politics. Still, if we are right, moralism need not be the view that all apt normative political judgments are moral judgments, and realism need not be the view that no apt normative political judgments are moral judgments. And so we have not taken up and need not take up the question of whether and to what extent political normativity should replace moral normativity. Pace what many realists as well as many of their critics claim, realism doesn’t need to unseat moralism to claim its seat at the table of normative political theory. One may even envisage a generative division of labour between moral and political normativity, or ways to balance their respective desiderata, though doing so would take us far beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸ We simply hope to have demonstrated the viability of the realist project of making normative political judgments not grounded in moral commitments.

philosophically controversial (extremely so in non-Anglophone philosophy), we see no evidence for the moralist position beyond its superior popularity among Anglo-American political philosophers.

¹⁷ Traditionally Anglo-American philosophers is quite hostile to critiques of morality as ideology (e.g. Rosen 1996). Even as ideology critique comes back to the fore in this tradition, it is predominantly driven by moral concerns, unlike in the Marxist tradition (Aytac & Rossi 2021).

¹⁸ On trade-offs between political and moral normativity see Burelli 2020.

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