What normative facts should political theory be about?
Philosophy of science meets political liberalism

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Abstract

Just as different sciences deal with different facts—say, physics versus biology—so we may ask a similar question about normative theories. Is normative political theory concerned with the same normative facts as moral theory or different ones? By developing an analogy with the sciences, we argue that the normative facts of political theory belong to a higher—more coarse-grained—level than those of moral theory. The latter are multiply realizable by the former: competing facts at the moral level can underpin the same facts at the political one. Consequently, some questions that moral theories answer are indeterminate at the political level. This proposal offers a novel interpretation of John Rawls's idea that, in public reasoning, we should abstract away from comprehensive moral doctrines. We contrast our distinction between facts at different levels with the distinction between admissible and inadmissible evidence and discuss some implications for the practice of political theory.

1. Introduction

We are familiar with the idea that different theories in the sciences deal with different classes of facts: they have, in that sense, different ontologies. For example, fundamental physics deals with facts about particles, fields, and forces; biology deals with facts about cells, organisms, and ecosystems; and the social sciences deal with facts about people and various social phenomena. The ontologies of these different sciences are related—social-scientific and biological facts depend on physical ones, for instance—but they are not the same. The ontologies of "higher-level" theories are more coarse-grained than those of "lower-level" theories. Biology and the social sciences, to take our example, abstract away from microphysical details. They are not committed to any particular such details. Instead, they deal with facts about certain higher-level entities and properties. Similarly, we may ask whether different *normative* theories, specifically moral and political ones, are concerned

with different classes of facts. In particular, do moral and political theories deal with the same normative facts, or with different ones? Do they have different ontologies?

Of course, normative theories do not deal with empirical or positive facts, like the sciences, but with normative ones: facts about what is permissible, impermissible, right, wrong, desirable, undesirable, and so on. We understand normative facts broadly, to include both "deontic" facts (facts about what is obligatory or permissible) and "evaluative" facts (facts about what is good, bad, desirable, etc.). Reference to such facts need not be metaphysically suspicious. On most interpretations—setting aside some strong anti-realist ones—normative theories are intended to capture certain normative facts. This leaves open whether those facts are independently given, natural or non-natural, humanly constructed, and if so how, universal or relative to some standpoint, and so on.

So, do moral and political theories deal with the same normative facts, or different ones? Here are two common answers (cf. Larmore 2013):

- *The domain view*: Political and moral theories are concerned with the same normative facts. They just address different questions in light of them: moral theories focus on individual conduct, political theories on institutional design and social organization. In other words, political theories explore what morality implies for political questions: for instance, what forms of social organization would be recommended by utilitarianism, prioritarianism, Kantianism, and so on. This view about the nature of moral and political theory was arguably held by Robert Nozick (e.g., 1974) and G. A. Cohen (e.g., 2008).

- *The core-value view*: Political and moral theories are concerned with different normative facts, in light of their different core values. Moral theories focus on facts about what is right, just, and good. Political theories focus on facts about legitimacy, order, and stability. Political realists, in Bernard Williams's tradition (e.g., 2005), arguably hold this view (cf. Rossi and Sleat 2014).

Our aim is to defend a third, principled way of distinguishing between the ontologies of moral and political theories:

- *The levels view*: Political and moral theories are concerned with different normative facts, which belong to different ontological levels. The normative facts of political theory belong to a higher—more coarse-grained—ontological level than those of moral theory. Normative political facts are "multiply realizable" by moral facts, so

that competing facts at the moral level can underpin the same facts at the political one. Consequently, some normative questions on which we tend to assume the existence of facts at the moral level are indeterminate at the political level. Normative political ontology is thinner than moral ontology.

Our development of this view builds on a hitherto overlooked analogy with the sciences. We argue that, despite interpretational differences, the relationship between the moral level and the political one is structurally similar to the relationship between a lower level and a higher level in the empirical sciences.

Although our analysis draws on this philosophy-of-science background and is a little outside the box, the picture we propose fits well with liberal political theory. The suggestion that political theories are associated with a thin ontology of normative facts echoes John Rawls's idea, expressed in *Political Liberalism* (1996), that at the political level we should abstract away from any comprehensive moral doctrines. However, there is much disagreement among political theorists on how to understand this idea. We make no claims about whether our proposal is faithful to Rawls's own view; our aim is not exegesis. But we suggest that it offers a plausible (re)interpretation of the ontology of political liberalism and of the demarcation between comprehensive and political morality. A key implication of our proposal is that full-blown moral realism—the thesis that all normative questions have determinate "true"/"false" answers—is not defensible *at the political level*. Only a thinner set of normative questions—"political" ones—have determinate answers at that level.

In Section 2, we outline a framework for thinking about levels. In Sections 3 and 4, we bring this framework to bear on the relationship between the ontologies of moral and political theory, and we contrast our distinction between facts at different levels (an ontic distinction) with the more familiar distinction between admissible and inadmissible evidence (an epistemic distinction). In Sections 5 to 7, we describe the virtues of the levels view from a liberal perspective and discuss some implications for the practice of political theory.

We should emphasize that, in drawing a distinction between the ontologies of moral and political theory, we are proposing a particular meta-theoretical account of how political theory should be done. Not everyone will agree with this account, and we do not mean to suggest that others could not reasonably prefer different conceptions of political theory. However, our account should be congenial to those who share the particular liberal view about the point and purpose of political theory we discuss in Section 5.

2. The framework of levels

We begin with some background on how the positive sciences depict the world and the sense in which different sciences operate at different levels of description. For the moment, we set aside anything related to moral and political theory, to which we will return subsequently. The framework sketched in this section draws on List (2018).

2.1. Scientific explanation and levels of description

Even though it is widely accepted that, from a scientific perspective, the world is ultimately governed by physical laws, it is also widely accepted that fundamental physics by itself is insufficient for explaining and making sense of the world. While fundamental physics can explain some basic features of the world, such as the behaviour of elementary particles, forces, and fields, it cannot adequately explain many other, higher-level phenomena. Special sciences such as biology, psychology, and the social sciences are needed to make sense of them. We would get overwhelmed with an unnecessary volume of detail and a computational overload if we tried to explain biological, psychological, or social phenomena in microphysical terms: we wouldn't see the forest for the trees (see, e.g., Putnam 1967, Fodor 1974, Owens 1989, and List and Spiekermann 2013). Even chemical explanations must set aside certain microphysical details. To explain chemical, biological, psychological, and social phenomena, we must employ higher-level descriptions, which abstract away from fundamental physical underpinnings and invoke a different, higher-level repertoire of concepts and categories. Microphysical concepts such as *quarks*, *bosons*, and *leptons* are absent in biology and the social sciences; instead, we speak about *cells*, *organisms*, and *institutions*.

Higher-level descriptions are more coarse-grained than lower-level descriptions: a variety of different lower-level configurations can each realize or instantiate the same higher-level phenomenon. This is a by-product of the process of abstraction. For example, different combinations of micro-states of the individual water molecules in a water tank can each realize the same macro-state of liquid water at a particular temperature. A temperature of 80 degrees Celsius can be realized by an astronomical number of different micro-configurations of molecules. We say that the higher-level phenomenon—here, water at 80 degrees Celsius—is "multiply realizable" at the lower level (Putnam 1967, Fodor 1974).

If we want to explain how a steam engine works, for example, the macro-states of the water are much more relevant than the micro-states. It matters that water turns into steam

when heated and that the pressure is such-and-such, but we need not describe the micro-states of the billions of water molecules involved (see, e.g., Jackson and Pettit 1990). A specification of those micro-states is not only unnecessary for an adequate explanation of the steam engine, but even distracting. Similarly, if we want to explain the population dynamics in an ecosystem, the appropriate level of description is the biological one, not the level of the underlying elementary particles. Good scientific methodology mandates that we explain the phenomena in question in the simplest possible way. Often, higher-level explanations are simpler than lower-level ones, as illustrated by the examples of the steam engine and population dynamics.

In fact, higher-level explanations are often not just simpler than lower-level ones, but they also pick up regularities that cannot be found at the lower level. It is a striking fact about the world that it displays regularities at more than one level. There are not only micro-physical regularities, but also regularities at various macroscopic levels—such as biological, psychological, and social ones—which are robust to changes in their lower-level realizations (see, e.g., Dennett 1991 and List and Menzies 2009). For instance, the way in which the price of a good depends on the supply and demand is independent of the detailed physical nature of the good, the structure of the economy, and the currency in question. The laws of supply and demand apply irrespective of whether the economy is a traditional agricultural economy and money takes the form of gold or whether it is an advanced industrial economy in which money is electronic and virtual. Those same economic laws apply even in informal prison economies where cigarettes play the role of cash (Radford 1945).

2.2. From levels of description to ontological levels

The point we have made so far is a basic one about scientific explanation: we employ different levels of description for different explanatory purposes, where higher-level descriptions involve different concepts and categories than lower-level ones and are more coarse-grained, deliberately abstracting away from lower-level details. At first sight, one might think that this is merely an epistemological point: our cognitive limitations as human beings, such as our limited knowledge and limited computational capacities, lead us to focus on macroscopic data and to ignore microscopic foundations when we explain certain phenomena.

However, one may coherently and plausibly interpret the different levels of description in science as markers of different ontological levels (List 2018). The idea can

be summarized as follows. Because different levels of description provide different conceptual schemes for thinking and speaking about the world, they carve up the world in different ways; they pick out different "real patterns" (Dennett 1991). Each level of description thus allows us to refer to a specific class of facts. We call these the "facts at that level". At a biological level, for instance, we refer to facts about organisms and ecosystems, but not to facts about the underlying quantum-mechanical processes. The latter can be described only using the resources of fundamental physics, and so they belong to a lower level. At a macroeconomic level, we refer to facts about macroeconomic properties, such as inflation, unemployment, and growth, but not to facts about the detailed psychological processes in the minds of individual market participants. The latter can be described only using the resources of microeconomics or psychology, and so they belong to a lower level.

It might be objected that although we talk about macro-level facts—e.g., biological, medical, chemical, and social ones—these are just ways of speaking and do not entail any ontological commitments. The only "real reality" is to be found at the most fundamental, microphysical level. This, the objection suggests, is what we should conclude if we subscribe to Occam's Razor principle—the principle that tells us not to multiply ontological commitments unnecessarily.

One can give at least three responses to this objection. First, Occam's Razor principle only says that we should not make ontological commitments when these are explanatorily unnecessary. But as we noted earlier, positing facts at the higher level is explanatorily useful, often even indispensable. Most macroscopic phenomena cannot be explained without referring to higher-level facts. So, Occam's Razor principle does not speak against higher-level ontological commitments. Second, the burden of proof falls on the objector. The existence of higher-level facts is part of our ordinary understanding of reality. We talk about chemical compounds, plants, organisms, books, money, companies, economies, and states, and we think of them as real phenomena, about which we can establish facts. Denying the existence of these facts flies in the face of scientific practice as well as common sense. That we talk about them using the vocabulary of certain special sciences, rather than that of fundamental physics, makes them no less real. The objector would have to explain how we can make sense of the macroscopic world without recognizing such higher-level facts. Third, the jury is still out on whether there is a fundamental level at all. Perhaps the world can be understood in ever-more fine-grained ways, and we will never hit rock bottom (Schaffer 2003). In case there is no fundamental level, every level can be viewed as being a higher level, relative to some other, lower levels.

2.3. Possible worlds at different levels

It is helpful to think of about the relationship between different levels in terms of the idea of possible worlds. Each level of description gives us a particular way of specifying what the world is like. The term "possible world" normally stands for a full specification of the way the world might be: the totality of facts. As Wittgenstein (1922) famously put it, "the world is everything that is the case." Now, once we recognize that facts can be associated with different levels, we must conclude that possible worlds can also be specified at different levels. A "possible world at a particular level" is a full specification of the facts at that level. Adjusting Wittgenstein's dictum, we get the following level-relativized variant: "the world at a particular level is everything that is the case at that level" (List 2018). So, a physical-level world is a full specification of the physical-level facts; a chemical-level world is a full specification of the chemical-level facts; a biological-level world is a full specification of the biological facts; and so on. Physical descriptions speak about the world at the physical level; chemical descriptions speak about the world at the chemical level; and so on. In short, instead of speaking about "worlds simpliciter", the various sciences, in effect, speak about "worlds at a particular level".

Higher-level worlds are more coarse-grained than lower-level worlds, in that they specify a thinner set of facts. Each higher-level world corresponds to an entire equivalence class of lower-level worlds: its possible lower-level realizers. For instance, each chemical-level world corresponds to the equivalence class of all physical-level worlds that could realize it and that are, therefore, equivalent with respect to chemical properties. Similarly, each world at the macroeconomic level corresponds to the equivalence class of all the microeconomic worlds that may realize it and that are therefore macroeconomically equivalent. The relationship between lower-level worlds and higher-level worlds is one of "supervenience with multiple realizability": there exists a many-to-one correspondence between lower-level worlds and higher-level worlds.[1]

We can think of a possible world at a particular level as determining the truth-values ("true", "false") of all sentences or statements at that level; so, a lower-level world determines the truth-values of all lower-level sentences or statements, while a higher-level world determines the truth-values of all higher-level sentences or statements. Since higher-

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[1] If Ω and Ω' are the sets of all possible worlds at the lower and higher levels, respectively, then each world in Ω' corresponds to the equivalence class of worlds in Ω that could realize it. This is precisely developed in List (2018).

level worlds are more coarse-grained than lower-level worlds, the truth-values of many lower-level sentences or statements are left open by higher-level worlds. At the higher level, there is no fact of the matter about those lower-level sentences or statements: they are indeterminate at that level. For example, a possible world at the level of statistical mechanics determines the truth-values of sentences about the temperature and other aggregate states of a liquid, but not of sentences about the micro-configurations of the underlying molecules. A world at the level of macroeconomics determines the truth-values of sentences about inflation and unemployment, but not of sentences about the activities of each individual market participant. Another way of expressing this point is to say that higher-level worlds are more abstract than lower-level worlds: they omit certain facts that are filled in only by their lower-level realizers. With this philosophy-of-science background in place, we return to the topic of moral and political theory.

3. The levels view about political and moral ontology

The present framework allows us to clarify the relationship between the ontologies of moral and political theory.[2] Political theory, we suggest, can be associated with a different level of description and a different body of normative facts than moral theory. Specifically, moral theory operates at a more fine-grained level than political theory. This means, in particular, that political theories have a thinner normative ontology and thinner truth-conditions than moral theories, while moral theories have a richer normative ontology and richer truth-conditions.

This insight is arguably implicit in Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (1996), and so we will develop it by reference to Rawls. As noted, however, our aim is not exegetical, and if what we offer is a revisionary re-interpretation of Rawls, then we have no problem with that. Recall the following claims from *Political Liberalism*:

- *The negative claim*: At the political level, we should not take a stand on the core concerns of comprehensive moral and religious doctrines—for instance, what a person is, what makes something valuable, what fundamentally explains the rightness or wrongness of an action.

- *The positive claim*: Normative political questions, especially about how to organize the basic structure of society, should be answered by reference to freestanding

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[2] For an earlier, but different application of levelled thinking to political theory, see Carter (2015), who uses grounding hierarchies to investigate value-freeness and value-neutrality in political concepts.

political principles, namely principles that do not presuppose the truth of any particular comprehensive moral doctrine.

- *The "overlapping consensus" claim*: The answers to normative political questions—including the freestanding political principles—should be compatible with a variety of comprehensive moral doctrines and supported by an overlapping consensus among them.

These claims can be explicated through the framework of levels. We will employ the idea of "possible worlds at different levels", but we will understand "worlds" for present purposes not as specifications of positive facts, but as specifications of normative facts. In particular, we will define a "possible normative world" as a specification of the totality of normative facts, as posited by some normative theory. Under this definition, different normative theories disagree about which normative world is actual: which encodes the "true" or "correct" set of normative facts. By positing different rightness or wrongness facts, for example, Kantian and utilitarian theories give us different accounts of what the normative facts are, thereby depicting different possible normative worlds as actual. The "levels view" asserts the following claims:

- Possible normative worlds can be specified at different levels of grain. The set of possible normative worlds at the political level is more coarse-grained than the one at the comprehensive moral level. A normative political theory specifies a thinner set of normative facts than a comprehensive moral doctrine.

- Normative political questions should be answered at the political level, not the moral one. By implication, there are questions addressed by comprehensive moral doctrines on which there is no political fact of the matter, hence no "normative political truth". Those questions are indeterminate at the political level.

- Any "normative political truth" may be compatible with a variety of "moral truths". Political-level truths can, in this sense, be multiply realized at the comprehensive moral level. By implication, competing comprehensive moral doctrines, which take incompatible moral-level worlds to be actual, can agree on the same normative world at the political level. The competing moral-level worlds can then be viewed as different possible "realizers" of the same normative political-level world. (This multiple-realizability claim must not be confused with the more trivial claim that the

same normative political principles may be satisfied by a variety of different behaviours, policies, or institutions, which is obviously the case.[3])

On the levels view, in line with *Political Liberalism*, certain political principles may be supported by a variety of comprehensive moral doctrines. Think of how many different comprehensive moral doctrines may be able to agree that we ought to make collective decisions in a deliberative democratic manner, that we ought to respect a certain system of basic rights and liberties and avoid extreme socio-economic inequality, and that we ought to have a humane criminal justice system. In this way, utilitarians, Kantians, Aristotelians, and Scanlonian contractualists, among others, may agree on the same set of political principles for governing the basic structure of society, even if they offer competing comprehensive moral foundations for those principles. At the political level, there is a fact of the matter about which political principles are the correct ones—for instance, which liberties and entitlements citizens should have—but there is no fact of the matter about the correct comprehensive moral foundations for those principles, such as whether utilitarianism, Kantianism, or some other moral doctrine is true. This is analogous to our earlier point that, at the macro-physical level, there is a fact of the matter about whether water in a kettle is boiling, but no fact about the precise micro-states of all the underlying water molecules. Similarly, there is no political-level fact about whether human beings are created in the image of God, whether one ought to confess in order to go to Heaven, and whether one ought to adhere to the Categorical Imperative in one's personal life. Those questions are settled only at the comprehensive moral level.

This does not imply that all moral facts are absent from the political level. Rather, those moral facts on which all relevant competing comprehensive moral doctrines agree, such as the fact that—in standard situations—killing innocent people is wrong, still hold at the political level. So, the most non-controversial portion of morality is preserved at the political level. That is the portion of morality on which there is an overlapping consensus among all the relevant competing comprehensive moral doctrines. We can think of the normative facts that lie within this overlap as coarse-grained moral facts that are multiply

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[3] "Realization", in our discussion of "multiple realizability", refers to the instantiation or grounding of some higher-level fact in some configuration of lower-level facts, not to the fulfilment of whatever it is that certain normative principles require of individuals and/or society. We thank David Estlund for prompting us to clarify this point.

realizable. Such facts are settled even at the political level, although their comprehensive normative foundations are left open.[4]

How to define the set of possible normative worlds at the political level and which such world is the "correct" one—in the sense of specifying the correct body of normative facts at the political level—are further questions, which must be discussed separately. Our focus up to this point has been on the *structure* of the levels view. We have explained how one can draw the distinction between moral facts and normative political facts in a levelled framework. That said, our interest is in specifying the two levels in a way that is consistent with a liberal outlook. So, what we are proposing is a liberal version of the levels view.

4. Inadmissible facts versus inadmissible evidence

One might think that the idea of treating certain issues as indeterminate at the political level is similar to the familiar idea that certain evidence is not admitted in the courtroom, such as evidence that was acquired in a procedurally incorrect way. The legal rules of evidence may exclude such evidence from consideration even if, privately, a rational agent would consider it epistemically relevant; that is to say, the evidence could lead to an opinion change in a rational agent who had access to it. The problem with such evidence is not its epistemic irrelevance, but its legal inadmissibility.

Perhaps, then, what the levels view suggests is that political theorizing is analogous to the activity of legal reasoning in the courtroom, namely governed by certain rules of evidence, which specify which evidence is admissible and which is not. Though tempting, this is the wrong way to think about the levels view. We must distinguish between two theses:

- the thesis that certain kinds of evidence are inadmissible in certain contexts;

- the thesis that at a particular level of description we can only invoke facts at the relevant level and not facts at other levels, especially lower-level facts.

The first thesis characterizes legal reasoning in the courtroom (Rawls 1996, p. 221). But it is the second that characterizes political theorizing, according to the levels view. Note that the first thesis is epistemic: its sole concern is the question of which evidence we may use

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[4] The fact that political-level discourse and moral-level discourse overlap in some of their terms (such as the use of notions like *permissibility*, *obligation*, *right*, *wrong* etc.) does not undermine the claim that the totality of normative facts at the political level is thinner (more coarse-grained) than the totality of normative facts at the comprehensive moral level.

in certain contexts. The second thesis is ontic: it is concerned with the facts of the matter we may posit. (For discussion of a more epistemic view, see Estlund 2012, p. 271.)

Deeming some evidence inadmissible—for instance, evidence gained through a forced confession—is not the same as refraining from positing a relevant fact of the matter. In a criminal trial, we certainly assume that there are facts about who did it, how and when they did it, who may have helped them, what their motives were, and so on. For this reason, we seek to establish those facts on the basis of the best evidence we have. Sometimes we cannot reliably know all the facts, or there may be restrictions on the evidence we may use, such as when some evidence was gathered in an inadmissible way. But the existence of the facts themselves is not in question.

By contrast, at the political level, the reason why we should refrain from considering, for instance, religious testimony is not merely that such evidence is inadmissible while we may still assume that there are religious facts, albeit ones we may not conclusively know. Rather, our reason for not considering religious testimony is that, at the political level, we cannot assume the existence of religious facts in the first place. Similarly, we should not assume the truth of atheism for political purposes. At the political level, we should not take a stand on this issue at all: we should treat the issue as indeterminate. At the comprehensive moral level, we *can* assume that there is a fact of the matter. Moral theories can in principle have religious or metaphysical commitments. But the comprehensive moral level is not the one at which political theorizing should be conducted, according to the levels view.

By analogy, consider whether religious testimony should be considered in medicine. Imagine a patient asking a doctor whether to pray to attain spiritual salvation. Presumably, the doctor would say that this question is outside the domain of medicine: there is no medical fact on this matter. It is not that there is a medical fact, but the relevant evidence is inadmissible. If that were the case, the medical profession would have to approach the issue as an instance of decision-making under uncertainty. It might then be appropriate for doctors to try to give the best advice under the uncertainty, for instance by invoking Pascal's wager argument. If God exists, praying might lead to spiritual salvation, not praying to a worse outcome; and if God does not exist, praying would not be much of a sacrifice anyway; so perhaps praying is all-things-considered advisable. But doctors do not give this advice. In fact, we would be suspicious of any medical professional who engaged in such reasoning. What this suggests is this. On our established views about the proper domain of medicine, there is no medical fact about religious matters, simpliciter. That is why religious testimony is not relevant to medicine. By contrast, there are facts about religious matters in theology,

and religious testimony is relevant to theological investigations. Analogously, the levels view asserts that, when we engage in normative argumentation at the political level, we must not presuppose that there is a fact of the matter about the existence of God, spiritual salvation, and other comprehensive moral questions. In sum, the distinction between admissible and inadmissible facts, as drawn by the levels view, is different from the distinction between admissible and inadmissible evidence, as familiar from the courtroom.

5. Why should we accept the levels view?

So far, we have introduced the levels view and have used it to distinguish between the ontologies of moral and political theory, taking Rawls's *Political Liberalism* as inspiration. We now want to show that the levels view, in the Rawlsian liberal version we propose, has a number of attractive features. In particular, we suggest that it satisfies three key desiderata that—we think—any good account of normative political ontology should meet:

1. *Consistency with the aim of political theorizing*: Political theory should answer the question of how to live together under circumstances of pluralism.

2. *Consistency with the core liberal conviction that "you can't push people around in the name of what you think is right"* (Korsgaard 2008, p. 318): Public decisions, which may be informed by political theory, should not be based on reasonably contested moral or religious views, even if one believes them to be correct.

3. *Consistency with Occam's Razor principle*: In any domain of inquiry, one should not posit more, nor fewer, facts than necessary to account for the relevant evidence.

Given space constraints, we are not able to show that the levels view is the only account of normative political ontology that satisfies those three desiderata, but our discussion should show, at least, that the levels view satisfies them in a clear and compelling way. Of course, the desiderata themselves are not uncontroversial. For instance, supporters of G.A.-Cohen-style, fact-free political theorizing are likely to reject Desideratum 1, which presupposes a more practical understanding of the aim of political theorizing (e.g., Cohen 2008). Desideratum 2 may be rejected by those who find liberal principles unconvincing and also by those who defend respect for persons' liberties on comprehensive—e.g., autonomy-promoting—grounds (e.g., Raz 1986; for discussion, see Nussbaum 2011). Desideratum 3 should be fairly uncontroversial. The less readers are convinced by our desiderata, the less they will be convinced by our version of the levels view. Still, the desiderata are sufficiently

widely accepted to make our exploration worthwhile. Moreover, even the acceptance of one or two of the desiderata would lend some support to the levels view.

5.1. Consistency with the aim of political theory

As Rawls noted, in a pluralistic society, stable and peaceful cooperation is hardly possible if disagreeing parties insist on imposing their comprehensive views on one another (Rawls 1996, pp. 140-144). The levels view, by prescribing political agnosticism regarding comprehensive moral doctrines, rules out the legitimacy of such imposition from the start.

In response, one might suggest that peace and stability could be obtained through autocracy, thereby suppressing pluralism. However, this option is not only morally reprehensible—certainly from a liberal perspective—but also pragmatically dubious. The costs involved in suppressing pluralism would be extremely high, and it is not clear how successful or sustainable such suppression could be, even setting aside its immorality. To a lesser extent, the same could also be said about an approach that imposes a relatively benign but still comprehensive moral doctrine on society as a whole. The answers given to normative questions by such an approach would be unlikely to convince the proponents of other comprehensive moral doctrines. By contrast, the levels view is set up to accommodate the circumstances of pluralism, and it gives us a principled methodology for answering normative political questions under such circumstances. So, the levels view fits the aim of political theorizing in contemporary societies.

5.2. Consistency with core liberal convictions

The levels view clearly accommodates the conviction that one ought not to impose one's reasonably contested views on others. To develop this point, we need to say more about the nature of moral disagreement. In moral discourse, we ask questions such as the following:

- How ought we to act, or not to act?

- Why ought we to act in that way?

Answers to the first question typically take the form of verdicts about permissibility and obligation. Answers to the second typically refer to the underlying values or reasons. Philosophers, and people in general, notoriously disagree on both questions. These disagreements are largely intractable: there is no publically accepted procedure for resolving them (Waldron 1998). For some people, the answer to moral questions lies in religion, for

others it lies in intuition, for still others it lies in rational deliberation, and so on. None of the people in question are obviously mistaken or irrational. They are responsive to evidence on empirical matters, and their thinking is coherent. Furthermore, despite their moral disagreements, their views may all be compatible with basic liberal principles. As Rawls puts it, they may all qualify as "reasonable", in a moralized sense of the term (more on this in Section 6; on ambiguities in Rawls's notion of reasonableness, see Nussbaum 2011, Sect. IV).

In the face of intractable moral disagreements, liberals typically acknowledge that they may not unilaterally impose their contested views on others, for instance through state coercion.[5] Such imposition would be contrary to the core liberal commitment to respect for persons as free and equal agents (on the "respect" principle, see Larmore 1999). In Martha Nussbaum's words, "it is especially violative of persons to impose a scheme of value upon them" (2011, p. 20). The levels view captures this tenet of liberalism. At the political level, we recognize only a thin domain of normative facts and corresponding truths: those that are acceptable from the perspective of all reasonable comprehensive views. By contrast, we do not assume the existence of facts about comprehensive moral matters, such as matters of interpersonal morality, religion, and metaphysical foundations. Furthermore, we use certain level-specific concepts and categories in political theorizing, such as concepts of political obligation and permission, reasonableness in a public sense, and so on. These are distinct from (and at most partly overlap with) the concepts and categories employed in moral theorizing, such as moral obligation and permission and an array of richer notions in terms of which we express moral reasons.

Faced with these claims, critics may raise an objection familiar from the literature on *Political Liberalism* (see, e.g., Callan 1997, chap. 2, Enoch 2017, and Arneson 2014; for discussion, see Daniels 1996). Is it not irrational or even schizophrenic

- to accept that in the political realm, due to intractable disagreement, one should not appeal to comprehensive doctrines, and use thinner, political concepts and categories,

- and yet to continue to hold on to those comprehensive doctrines privately?

Consider, for example, a liberal Catholic anti-abortionist. Would it not be absurd for him or her to believe that, at the moral level, there is a fact about whether abortion involves killing

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[5] Exceptions may be those liberals who view liberalism as a comprehensive moral doctrine, e.g., perfectionistic liberals.

a moral person and also to believe that, at the political level, there is no such fact?

As Norman Daniels (1996, p. 152) puts the concern: "Can people say to themselves, 'Although I have fundamental values and beliefs that bear on this issue of behavior, I will refrain from raising them and consider only the reasons permitted by public reason?' Is this moral double bookkeeping a kind of multiple moral personality disorder?"[6] For those who share this worry, it might be tempting to offer one of the following suggestions, each of which is an alternative to the levels view.[7]

- *Moral uncertainty*: Given intractable disagreement, we should all be uncertain about our views (cf. Barry 1995).[8] The problems of political theory then require that we apply moral decision-making under uncertainty, instead of accepting the seemingly schizophrenic view that there are different normative facts at different levels.

- *Judgement suspension*: Given intractable disagreement, the rational thing to do is to suspend judgement (see the discussion in Leland and van Wietmarschen 2012, p. 745, and Enoch 2017). If we suspend judgement, we are no longer disagreeing. Hence the problem of disagreement disappears, and with it, the associated schizophrenia of assuming different sets of normative facts at different levels (for discussion of these sceptical objections, see Quong 2011, chap. 8).

In the following two subsections, we respond to each suggestion in turn.

5.2.1. Moral uncertainty?

What about treating intractable disagreement as an indicator of moral uncertainty? It would then seem appropriate to answer all normative questions about politics by applying our best theory of decision-making under uncertainty. On this picture, we may be uncertain about whether utilitarianism, prioritarianism, Kantianism, or some other moral theory is true, and so we may need to hedge our bets in deciding which political arrangements to recommend. Yet, it is assumed, there is a fact of the matter about the true moral theory. The limitations in political theory are then epistemic, not ontic, and we can uphold full-blown moral realism, even in politics.

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[6] Note, however, that Daniels is unpersuaded by this critique.
[7] We thank Victor Tadros for discussion. For criticisms of the epistemic reading of *Political Liberalism*, see Enoch (2017).
[8] Barry (1995, p. 169) writes: "no conception of the good can justifiably be held with a degree of certainty that warrants its imposition on those who reject it".

We think this proposal is not viable. First, it is not clear that our established theories of decision-making under uncertainty can easily apply to moral matters, where the uncertainty is not about empirical facts, but about the requirements of morality. To apply those theories, we would have to accomplish at least three things:

- come up with an agreed specification of the set of possible normative worlds at the moral level; these would have to include one world in which utilitarianism is true, one in which Kantianism is true, one in which each religious view is true, and so on;

- assign subjective probabilities to these possible normative worlds, such as 0.25 to the utilitarian world, 0.25 to the Kantian world, and so on, while making sure these numbers are meaningful; and

- assign numerical utilities to the consequences of all possible choices (such as actions, policies, or institutional designs) in each possible normative world, where those utilities capture the moral value of each choice under the "true" moral theory in that world, while permitting comparability across different normative worlds; for instance, if lying is worse in a Kantian world than in a utilitarian one, then lying might correspond to a utility of -100 in the Kantian world and only to a utility -50 in the utilitarian one.

We suspect that, contrary to what some recent literature on moral uncertainty suggests, these three tasks pose insurmountable challenges (cf. Lockhart 2000). Of course, one could stipulatively postulate a utilitarian world, a Kantian world, a contractualist world, and so on, then assign some subjective probabilities to these worlds, and ask how good or bad, in numerical utility terms, various outcomes would be in each of them. This would seem to enable us to calculate the expected utility of various possible choices against the background of our moral uncertainty (for defences of such approaches, see MacAskill 2016 and Riedener 2015). However, whether this exercise is genuinely meaningful and whether it can be done in an agreeable way under conditions of pluralism are altogether different questions. The jury is still out on this.

Second, even if we set these difficulties aside, we are left with the problem that people intractably disagree about decision-making—moral or otherwise—under uncertainty. Should we be expected utility maximizers? Maxi-minimizers (who try to achieve the best possible worst-case consequences)? Risk-weighted expected utility maximizers (Buchak 2014)? And if so, what should our risk attitude be? Or should we adopt

an altogether different decision procedure? In fact, people intractably disagree about the very question of whether the appropriate response to disagreement among competent thinkers is decreasing one's degree of belief in one's comprehensive moral view (see the literature on peer disagreement, as reviewed in Goldman and Blanchard 2015, sec. 3.4).

In sum, adopting a framework of decision-making under uncertainty and selecting a particular decision procedure within that framework will reproduce the same problems we identified in connection with identifying the correct substantive answers to normative questions. The moment we settle for a certain procedure for making decisions under moral uncertainty, we impose that procedure on others who reasonably disagree with it, contrary to what we called the "core liberal commitment".[9] The moral-uncertainty response to the problem of intractable disagreement is therefore theoretically dubious and morally unappealing, at least from the liberal perspective with which we have started.[10]

5.2.2. Suspending judgement?

Let us turn to the second response to the "schizophrenia" worry, namely that, in the face of intractable disagreement, the rational response is to suspend judgement altogether. The problem of disagreement would then disappear: we would hold no views on any contested issues.

This suggestion is at odds with our moral phenomenology. It would imply that virtually everyone is irrational in a pluralistic society. Given intractable disagreement about moral matters, we ought to suspend judgement, thereby abandoning most if not all of our moral commitments. But this is not what most people, including apparently very rational ones, do. A view that leads us to regard those we ordinarily consider rational as completely irrational is one of which we should be suspicious.

The levels view tells us that we should suspend judgement only at the political level, by assuming a thinner set of normative facts at that level and using only political-level concepts and categories. This is faithful to our moral experience. As liberal-democratic citizens we accept that we shouldn't impose our convictions on others in the face of

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[9] Note that the levels view should not be interpreted as involving decision-making under moral uncertainty. According to the levels view, cases of intractable moral disagreement are not instances of uncertainty; rather, they are instances of indeterminacy. This is because, at the comprehensive moral level, the levels view does not instruct proponents of the competing moral doctrines to abandon their views. At the political level, by contrast, the levels view takes there to be no fact of the matter in such cases. So, we are not dealing with moral uncertainty at either of these levels. Furthermore, at the political level, the levels view does not impose any commitment to controversial moral facts on anyone.

[10] For comprehensive reservations about epistemic versions of political liberalism, see Enoch (2017).

intractable moral disagreement, but as private individuals we hold on to our contested convictions and shape our lives around them (Macedo 1995, p. 474).

Consider again the example of a liberal Catholic who holds the following beliefs: at the comprehensive moral level, there is a fact about whether abortion involves killing a moral person; and at the political level, there is no such fact. Are these beliefs really in tension? Recall our earlier observation that, in medicine, there is no fact of the matter about whether one should pray for spiritual salvation, while there may be such a fact in morality or religion. This claim is unlikely to elicit any charges of schizophrenia. Now imagine you went to a judge or a government official—i.e., someone responsible for making public decisions—and asked them: "Does abortion involve killing a moral person?" Presumably, they would respond: "I am the wrong person to answer this question in my capacity as a public official. At most, I can say something about *legal* personhood. The law is silent about *moral* personhood; there is no *legal* fact of the matter about it."

This hypothetical dialogue puts pressure on the claim that there is something incoherent in holding that there are different facts at the moral and political levels. The burden of proof is on the objector to tell us why the official's response is incoherent, when it seems obviously correct. And if this response is not incoherent, then neither is the liberal Catholic's belief that while there is a fact about moral personhood at the comprehensive moral level, there is no such fact at the political one, which is similar to the level at which state officials and judges operate.

Reservations about our argument are likely to be motivated by the temptation to collapse moral and political levels, or to suggest that the latter should "mirror" the former. This, however, is a substantive view about the structure of normative ontology, and one that suggests that normative ontology is "flatter"—less "multi-levelled"—than we have argued. Appeal to this substantive view, which is distinct from the levels view, is no response to our claim that the levels view is free from incoherence or schizophrenia.

5.3. Ontological parsimony and the levels view

The picture of normative ontology suggested by the levels view is also more in line with Occam's Razor principle than its comprehensive rivals. Let us explain. Given the prominence of moral realism in philosophical debates, philosophers often assume that some comprehensive moral theory must be true. While it is widely accepted that we do not conclusively know which moral theory is true, the existence of a fact of the matter is seldom put into question by moral philosophers—at least outside anti-realist circles. However, the

assumption that there is a fact of the matter, which we must "merely" discover, is a demanding one, and it is far from obvious that this assumption should be the default, especially when it comes to politics.

In science, but also in philosophical ontology in Occam's tradition, the leading methodological principle is that we should not posit more features of reality—i.e., more facts, entities, or properties—than needed in order to account for the *relevant evidence* concerning the *matter of interest*. Suppose we are interested in the ontology of physics. Electromagnetic fields, for instance, were not part of the original Newtonian ontology of the world. Maxwell's electrodynamics, however, showed that we need to invoke them as new unobservable features of the world in order to make sense of certain observable phenomena. For this reason, we now accept their reality. By contrast, the ether was an ingredient of reality postulated at some point, but it turned out to be explanatorily dispensable, and so we no longer believe that it exists.

What does Occam's Razor imply for the normative domain? Let us start with comprehensive moral questions. It may well be true that *if* we are interested in explaining what makes an action right or wrong (our matter of interest) *and* we take our personal comprehensive moral judgements as our "data points" (the relevant evidence), *then* an indispensability argument might be given for realism about certain normative facts. Specifically, it might be that, without positing a rich normative ontology, we would not be able to account for our normative "data" about comprehensive moral questions in an adequate manner. A rich ontology of moral facts might offer the best explanation of our personal moral landscape.

But even if this correctly characterizes the methodology of *moral* theorizing, the matters of interest and relevant evidence are different in *political* theory. First, the matter of interest will now be political morality and social organization, as opposed to the sorts of moral questions within comprehensive morality. Second, while treating one's personal judgements as relevant evidence may be defensible in matters of personal morality, it appears problematic once we turn to matters of public concern. Regarding public matters, "relevant evidence" should be publically ascertained. This implies that contested personal normative judgements won't count as relevant data points in political theorizing. And so, those judgements will also fail to constitute data points whose explanation makes a richer normative ontology indispensable.

These observations suggest that, at a political level, the kind of rich normative ontology that full-blown moral realists accept is hard to defend. At best, we might be able

to defend a less demanding form of normative realism, restricted to a thinner ontology of normative facts: facts concerning matters of social organization on which the evidence is publically ascertained. These are precisely the facts on which we can establish an overlapping consensus in Rawls's sense.

So, the question to ask is not "why should we accept that our political ontology is thin", but "why not"? The burden of proof should fall on those who wish to posit more facts in order to address a given set of normative questions, not on those who wish to posit fewer facts, especially when the evidence for those facts is intractably contested.[11]

5.4. An analogy

Suppose the politics department of a university is hiring a new assistant professor in political theory (for a similar example, see Quong 2016). The department is split between analytic theorists and postmodernists, who have competing comprehensive views about what counts as good scholarship. The decision about whom to hire is of great public significance in the department: everyone has to live with it. Consider the following, rather different ways of conducting the hire.

Procedure 1: Colleagues deliberate about whom to hire, each appealing to their own comprehensive views about excellence in research. The discussion turns nasty. Through the arguments they offer for and against hiring various candidates, faculty members end up making accusations at each other. The analytic theorists accuse their colleagues of sloppiness, charlatanism, and ideological pontificating. The postmodernists lament their colleagues' parochialism, sophistry, and narrow-mindedness. No consensus is found. The top candidate for each side is deemed unappointable by the other. Resigned to the need to fill the position, the department votes. The analytic side narrowly wins. A new hire is imposed on the department for reasons many of its members find deeply objectionable.

Procedure 2: In deliberating about whom to hire, colleagues with different comprehensive views look for common ground. Aware of their differences, they proceed by arguing from shared premises, abstracting away from their partisan views: the analytic theorists set aside the criterion of formal analysis, the postmodernists set aside the

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[11] A referee has raised the following objection: "The opponent of levels is not positing more total facts—they are resisting the levels view and arguing that there's just one level of normative facts and thus arguably fewer total facts. The proponent of levels is positing more total facts since they introduce more levels." We disagree, insofar as we are here referring only to normative facts at the political level. At that level, the proponent of the level view is undeniably positing fewer facts. From the perspective of the political level, matters of comprehensive morality are simply left indeterminate. At the political level, there are no facts about them.

importance of deconstruction, and so on. They focus on what they have in common. For example, they all agree that publishing in some generally recognized journals is an achievement (though they disagree about more specialist venues). They all agree that positive student evaluations are prima facie evidence of good teaching. They all agree that it would be desirable to hire someone who can teach the history of political thought. The deliberation proceeds in a civil manner. Colleagues fail to reach consensus on how candidates should be ranked, but they agree about some of them being in principle appointable. The issue is put to a vote, and again—let's suppose—an analytically oriented candidate is chosen. To be sure, the postmodernist group is disappointed, but not completely alienated. They can see some public reasons in support of the decision and feel that they have been treated respectfully by their colleagues.

Intuitively, we hope readers will agree, Procedure 2 is superior to Procedure 1. We will comment on why that is in a moment. First, we would like to look at the ontological presuppositions of Procedure 2. Importantly, it is not the case that, *for the hiring process*, participants assume that there is a comprehensive truth about the right approach to political theory, but are uncertain about what that truth is: is it in line with postmodernism or with analytic methodology? If that were the case, the department would follow some procedure for decision-making under uncertainty. For instance, colleagues would assign certain probabilities to the correctness of the different methodological approaches and decide on that basis. But this is not what they do under Procedure 2.

Instead, they refrain from assuming the existence of a fact of the matter about whether postmodernism or analytic theorizing is better. *At the level of the department*, they bracket off certain questions and assume a thinner class of facts about what constitutes good scholarship—facts that lie at the overlap between their different partisan views. Doing so does not prevent them from holding on to their comprehensive views in their own circles. At a deeper level, they each continue to believe that one way of doing research is superior to the other. But they acknowledge that comprehensive facts about research methodology cannot be assumed at the level of their pluralistic department. Procedure 2, then, presupposes an ontological structure akin to the levels view.

Now why does Procedure 2 seem superior to Procedure 1? Several answers come to mind, which are analogous to the ones we have offered in the political case. First, Procedure 2 is likely to be conducive to the good functioning of a department, by ensuring peace and stability. Procedure 1, by contrast, may lead to conflict and disaffection. Second, Procedure 2 shows respect towards both sides of the debate, who reasonably disagree with each other.

Of course, what counts as "reasonable" is often far from clear-cut; more on this below. Still, each side can see that the other consists of rational individuals acting in good faith. And each side can see the wrong involved in imposing a view on others based on reasons that those others consider deeply disagreeable. Third, given that the question "Whom should we hire?" can be answered independently of "deep facts" about research methodology, and given how contested that methodology is, Occam's Razor principle suggests that we should not posit more facts about that matter than strictly necessary for departmental purposes. Procedure 2 does exactly that.

6. Some implications

We have argued that political theorizing should operate at a more coarse-grained level than moral theorizing and should be associated with a thinner ontology of normative facts. We now discuss two questions on which we have been silent so far. First, how should we determine the "political truth", i.e., which normative facts should we posit at the political level? And second, what would the proposed approach imply for the role of the political theorist?

6.1. How to determine the political truth

On the levels view, what counts as "the political truth" depends on the society in question and its degree of reasonable pluralism.[12] To develop this point, we must say more about the difficult notion of "reasonableness". For present purposes, we adopt the following simple definition. A comprehensive moral view is "reasonable" if it is (i) so far unfalsified by incontestable evidence and (ii) compatible with basic liberal requirements, including the prohibition on coercing others in the name of contested comprehensive doctrines.[13] Reasonable pluralism, then, is the presence of different reasonable views in a given society. According to our definition, a variety of moral views can count as reasonable, including many familiar examples: utilitarianism, prioritarianism, various forms of egalitarianism, Kantianism, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and so on. Likewise, many (tolerant) religious views will qualify as reasonable.

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[12] As should be clear, on the levels view, political theory need not dispense with the notion of truth (something that sets it apart from Rawls's original version of political liberalism). Our perspective is therefore cognitivist. That said, the levels view remains agnostic about complex meta-ethical questions about the nature of the moral truth. Compare the discussions in Cohen (2009), Quong (2011, chap. 8), and Estlund (2012).

[13] Our characterization thus contains both a "thin" epistemic element and a "thin" moral one.

What we have given is a definition scheme. For example, we may use stricter or weaker standards of (i) the absence of falsification by incontestable evidence and of (ii) compatibility with basic liberal requirements. Our aim here is not to argue for a particular specification of (i) and (ii), but to make a structural point: whatever the criterion of reasonableness is, different degrees of reasonable pluralism will give rise to different specifications of the normative facts at the political level.

Crucially, the political-level facts should be multiply realizable at the comprehensive moral level, i.e., supportable from the perspective of different competing reasonable moral views. The more such views we wish to accommodate, the thinner the resulting political-level facts will be. Ideally, we will be looking for what Rawls calls an "overlapping consensus" on political matters (Rawls 1996, Lecture IV). "Political truths" should lie in the intersection of the "moral truths" according to the different reasonable moral views present in the society in question.[14] Proponents of different such views should each be able to endorse the agreed political principles from their own perspective: they may ultimately have their own comprehensive reasons for endorsing them, but they will still converge on the principles themselves.

In line with these observations, there is not just one political level, but several, corresponding to different political domains. The political level associated with a nation state may admit a richer ("thicker") specification of the normative facts than the political level associated with the international arena. Indeed, some settings, particularly the international one, may exhibit forms of pluralism that transcend the reasonable or that will qualify as "reasonable" only after significantly weakening the standards of reasonableness; such settings pose challenges for political liberalism (a point familiar from Rawls 1999). For example, the principles of justice that are likely to be supported by an overlapping consensus within the United Nations will be dramatically thinner than those that will be supported by an overlapping consensus within a nation state.[15]

Ideally, the political-level facts should include facts about which procedures should be used for making collective decisions in the relevant domain when some issues need to be resolved on which there is no overlapping consensus. For instance, there is unlikely to

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[14] This structure is also reminiscent of "supervaluationist" semantics for predicates which have competing admissible precisifications.

[15] Even within a given setting, such as a nation state, we may specify the political-level facts in thicker or thinner ways, depending on whether we are discussing constitutional arrangements, which should remain stable in the long term, or whether we are dealing with ordinary politics, where political commitments may be richer than at the constitutional level but more variable.

be an overlapping consensus on many policy issues such as the precise tax rate, and yet a binding decision may still be needed. In such a case, we would like to attain an overlapping consensus at least on the legitimacy of the decision procedure itself.

6.2. The role of the political theorist

On the levels view, the political theorist should formulate his or her arguments for a particular audience, namely everyone in the political domain. Political theory should not rely on the truth of claims that are reasonably contested within the society in question. This suggestion is familiar from the literature on political liberalism. Jonathan Quong (2011, p. 242), for example, argues that "[w]hen we go beyond the limits of the political, and try to provide the deep metaethical or epistemic foundations for political values and their priority, we are no longer engaged in political philosophy suitable for a well-ordered liberal society". In our terms, when we appeal to facts at a lower, more fine-grained moral level, we are no longer doing political theory "proper", but moral theory applied to political questions.

But what exactly does normative *political* theorizing involve? It involves seeking the truth at the political level. The levels view thus presupposes a cognitivist political meta-ethics: it refers to normative *truths* at the political level. Yet those truths must be found in the overlap between different reasonable comprehensive doctrines and be expressible using political-level concepts and categories. This places constraints on the kinds of arguments political theorists may put forward. As Rawls already suggested in *Political Liberalism*, these constraints are akin to those faced by Supreme Court Justices, who must answer legal questions not by marshaling their deep moral convictions, but by appeal to a restricted set of public reasons, as given by the relevant body of law (see Rawls 1996, pp. 231 ff.; for discussion, see also Waldron 2007).

Political theorists are not legal experts or judges. For them, identifying truths at the political level cannot be a matter of interpreting legal statutes, but it must be a matter of interpreting the public culture of the relevant society—another idea familiar from Rawls. Political theory, on this picture, needs to rely more heavily on empirical or sociological analysis, with the aim of interpreting the political-moral facts in the given society. This renders political theorizing more similar to the kind of interpretive exercise proposed by thinkers such as Michael Walzer (1987).[16] Perhaps surprisingly, then, a truly liberal

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[16] See also the so-called "practice-dependent" approach, as discussed in Sangiovanni (2008). Note that this would not remove disagreement from political theorizing. Different theorists are likely to defend different

approach requires that we re-orient political theory towards the kind of interpretive, sociologically informed methodology associated with "communitarian" approaches.

Many political theorists will baulk at this suggestion. This reaction may be, in part, due to the prospect of no longer having unconstrained freedom to invoke the rich methodology of moral theory, ranging from appeals to contested philosophical premises and following an argument "wherever it takes us" to the use of far-fetched, sometimes outlandish thought experiments and other intuition pumps. Political theory according to the levels view is a more soberly disciplined activity.

However, might one not insist, with Jeremy Waldron, that "it ought to be someone's job to figure out whether [for example] torture is objectively wrong in all circumstances and why"? And might one not agree with Waldron (2015, p. 124) that "[i]t is hard to see that this is not a task for political philosophers"? "[I]f it is not their task, whose is it?" We agree that it should be someone's task to think about these issues, but if what ultimately explains the wrongness of torture is a comprehensive moral fact, then the levels view suggests that it is the task of the moral (not the political) theorist to investigate it. However, there may well be a political-level truth concerning the wrongness of torture, which can be underwritten by a variety of different comprehensive moral truths. The political theorist would have to investigate the (im)permissibility of torture from that political perspective, not the comprehensive moral one.

Two further concerns may be put forward. The first is that doing political theory in line with the levels view involves a status-quo bias. The second is that refusing to engage with deeply contested comprehensive doctrines is disrespectful towards politically engaged citizens who fight for justice in the name of those doctrines.

The first worry—that the levels view is status-quo biased—echoes a complaint that liberals often raised against communitarians in the 1980s and 1990s. To defend the levels view, we begin by noting that a bias towards the status quo need not be bad: it depends on what the status quo is. As we have argued, our version of the levels view is meant to apply— like the later Rawls's—to liberal-democratic societies. So, the relevant status quo should ideally be one that is acceptable by liberal standards. Of course, the objector will insist that if political theory can only appeal to what "is already there" in a liberal public culture, resources will be limited for advocating progressive reform—for making a liberal society

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interpretations of the relevant overlapping consensus, given that such consensus needs to be unearthed, and is far from transparent.

morally better. We find this worry misplaced, at least if one subscribes to what we called the "core liberal conviction". The worry presupposes that invoking the truth of contested moral doctrines in political argument could lead to a better society. But justifying reforms by reference to contested views is tantamount to renouncing liberalism, at least on our understanding of it. A society that appeals to comprehensive moral doctrines in order to justify state coercion is one in which individuals are being pushed around in the name of partisan and contested views. This is not a truly liberal society, and thus hardly morally superior from a liberal perspective. That said, progressive reforms can be politically justified if the status quo exhibits inconsistencies or contains illiberal elements, for instance if some existing laws or policies tacitly presuppose contested moral doctrines. Moreover, progressive reforms can be justified if the overlapping consensus itself shifts.

The second objection, put forward by David Enoch, suggests that by refusing to engage with the substance of deep moral disagreements, the political theorist treats his or her fellow citizens in a disrespectful, patronizing manner. Focusing only on facts at the political level seems equivalent to treating "some of the most deeply held beliefs of those engaged in the relevant disagreement as if they were mere preferences: For with mere preferences, arguably going second-order and impartial is precisely the way to go, and certainly engaging them in argument doesn't make much sense" (Enoch 2015, p. 136). There is no fact of the matter about which preferences are right and which are wrong. Preferences are not cognitive attitudes; they are conative. Similarly, so the objection goes, assuming that there is no fact of the matter about which comprehensive moral view is right fails to take seriously the proponents of such views.

We think that the levels view can be defended against this critique. The view does not deny the existence of facts about deep moral questions altogether. It simply asserts that those facts do not belong to the political level; they belong to a more fine-grained moral level. The levels view can therefore not be accused of treating fundamental moral commitments as if they were mere preferences. It is precisely because fundamental moral commitments are very important that it would be disrespectful to impose them on others who reasonably disagree with them and to use them to justify public policy.

7. Conclusion

We have suggested a way of demarcating the normative ontologies of moral and political theory, based on a "levels view" inspired by the philosophy of science and *Political Liberalism*. We have argued that this view is consistent with the aims of political theorizing

in pluralistic societies, that it honours liberal convictions, and that it respects methodological principles of parsimony.

We conclude with some comments on the point and limits of our analysis. First, although we have framed the discussion around the distinction between moral and political theory, labels are not so important. Our interest is not in the question of what should be called "moral" or "political theory", but in distinguishing between different levels of normative analysis. Which labels we attach to them is secondary. What matters is vindicating the claim that, when it comes to justifying coercive state policies and binding public decisions, we may appeal only to a restricted set of normative facts and use political-level concepts and categories rather than comprehensive moral ones. This is the form of normative political theorizing we recommend.

Second, our defence of the levels view in its politically liberal form may raise the question of how it relates to the "domain" and "core values" views, and whether it really competes with them. After all, the levels view also implies that political theories (i) are concerned with the domain of public decisions (in line with the domain view) and (ii) deal with a distinctive set of normative facts (in line with the core-values view). So, what is special about the levels view? The view is special insofar as it does not merely *stipulate* that features (i) or (ii) define the difference between political and moral theory, as in the case of the domain or core-values views, but instead combines the two features and relates them to a more systematic approach to normative ontology.

Third, even those who are sympathetic to our version of the levels view may be skeptical about its real-world applicability. In the real world—especially when the overlapping consensus is rather thin—we often run out of arguments if we do not appeal to comprehensive moral convictions (see, e.g., Reidy 2000). This concern is legitimate, yet it does not invalidate the levels view. We have offered an ideal account of the facts to which we may appeal in normative political arguments. In the real world, we can at best approximate this ideal. We should appeal to as few comprehensive moral considerations as possible when we offer public justifications. In short, we should try to justify normative political claims in the spirit of the ideal, and the more a society departs from that ideal, the less liberal it will be. Nothing as neat and clear-cut as the ideal itself is likely to be realized in practice. But this does not invalidate the levels view as a regulative ideal.

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