The continuity of ethics and political theory

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Abstract

What is the relationship between ethics and political theory? In particular, is the study of interpersonal and social morality continuous with inquiry into how we should lead our political lives? This article evaluates the call for firmer boundaries between moral and political thought that is central to recent realist critiques of analytical political theory. I identify, and reject, three versions of this position, which I term "discontinuity realism." My critique draws attention to an important silence within discontinuity realism, concerning how its call to address politics from within relates to the feminist insight that politics is deeply intertwined with our personal choices and interpersonal relationships. The article goes on to defend an alternative "continuity" approach to the study of ethics and political theory. This approach better realizes the realist's own aspiration for greater sensitivity to empirical detail in normative political theory.

Key words: Realism, political theory, ethics, methodology

What is the relationship between ethics and political theory? Is the study of interpersonal and social morality continuous with inquiry into how we should lead our political lives? Or are there firm boundaries between moral and political thought? In particular, is there something about the nature of politics that makes the values or methods of individual and social ethics unhelpful or harmful in political theory?[1] The paper addresses these questions, starting from a claim that is central to recent realist critiques of analytical political theory: that political theory should be (more) autonomous from ethics. Realists argue that many of its contemporary practitioners inappropriately subsume political theory within ethics, and thereby fail to appreciate the essential character of politics and the distinctive kinds of normative theory appropriate to that domain.

This view, which I term "discontinuity realism," has been the subject of significant recent critical attention (notably in Erman and Möller 2015, 2018; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018). The paper aims to advance existing debate in three main ways. First, I provide a sharper focus for the discussion, by distinguishing three forms of the discontinuity view and making explicit some key desiderata for an appealing version of that position. The paper argues that, in none of its main forms, does discontinuity realism fulfil these conditions. Second, the paper seeks to open a new conversation about the relationship between realism and feminism. Here I draw attention to an important silence, amongst both realists and their critics, concerning how the call to address politics from within relates to the feminist insight that politics is deeply intertwined with our personal choices and interpersonal relationships.[2] The feminist message,

[1] I use the terms ethics and moral philosophy interchangeably. I revisit this assumption later in the paper, when I consider whether the realist account in fact turns on a distinction between ethics and morality/moral philosophy/applied ethics, where the latter are inherently problematic modes of ethical thought.

[2] Frazer (2018) is, as far as I am aware, the only extended exploration of the relationship between realism and feminism. Frazer argues that feminism is essentially realist in important ways.

I suggest, is in tension with the realist drive to identify and shore up the boundaries between political theory and ethics. The paper goes on to offer a positive defence of the disciplinary continuity of political theory and ethics, drawing on recent work on epistemic injustice to illustrate how we can productively trace morally salient features of our relationships across a variety of political and non-political contexts. Finally, the paper departs from prominent recent responses to realism by advancing a partly internal critique. In particular, I point to tensions between the discontinuity account and the realist call for greater sensitivity to empirical detail in political theory; identifying places in which the emphasis on the distinctiveness of politics leads realists to seek to settle, in theoretical terms, questions that are more productively seen as subject to on-going empirical debate. I argue that we should take up the realist call for more contextual and empirically engaged forms of political theory, whilst resisting the second-order claims about the relationship between political theory and ethics to which this demand is often connected.

A few clarificatory remarks on the concept of politics are necessary before I proceed. Realists characteristically treat politics as a particular *sphere* of life, rather than a *process* (e.g. the exercise of power or resource allocation) that arises across many domains (for this distinction see Leftwich 2017, 2, 13-14). For example, Rossi and Sleat note that "Realists posit a dichotomy between the realm of human action that is now appropriately regulated by morality … and the realm of politics, which requires separate norms" (2014, 691). More specifically politics, for many realists, is the sphere within which we seek to generate binding decisions for a whole society and thereby to provide order, given our conflicting interests and value commitments (for example, Sleat 2016a). It is a significant feature of the debate around realism that something like this understanding of politics is shared ground with many moralist

theorists.[3] Thus my objections to discontinuity realism will centre not on the realist conception of politics, but rather on the restrictive normative agenda that is seen to flow from it. It is also important to note that this conception of politics does not imply that political theory is concerned exclusively with the collective, and ethics with the individual. The latter view unhelpfully closes down space for normative inquiry into the behaviour of individual political actors, and it is also in tension with the prominent strand of realist thought that focuses on individual political conduct (for example, Philp 2010). Thus, on the view I adopt, and attribute to realists, we can include within the sphere of politics the actions and decisions of individuals as they use, or seek to influence, the coercive power of the state.

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, I outline the discontinuity account and situate my argument within the wider literature on realism. Second, the paper identifies, and rejects, three versions of discontinuity realism. Third, I discuss an alternative realist picture of the relationship between political theory and ethics, and thereby address a potential objection to my argument. The discontinuity claim, as it is commonly expressed, seems to leave ethics untouched. On this view, the problem is not with ethics itself, but rather with the way in which it has come to govern our approaches to political theory. Here I consider whether, when realists object that "political theory is not applied ethics" the charge is in fact that political theorists have replicated mistakes within particular traditions of ethics. I discuss how the latter claim relates to the discontinuity view that is the primary focus of my critical discussion, and I show what it would imply for the realist project. Finally, the paper makes the positive case for working in a continuous way across the fuzzy boundaries of questions of political and non-political morality.

[3] For example, Swift (2017, 138) offers a similar characterisation of politics in the course of arguing that political philosophy is a subfield of moral philosophy. Cf. Sleat (2016b) and McQueen (2018), who claim that the realist critique turns on a distinctive conception of politics.

REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

The last fifteen years have seen growing calls for a reorientation of political theory in a more "realist" direction. Realist critics, many of them drawing inspiration from the work of Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams, argue that much analytical political theory has failed properly to engage with real politics. For example, it focusses excessively on questions of justice, and neglects the more fundamental political problem of securing order; it fails to recognize the ineradicability of conflict and disagreement in political life; it is insufficiently contextual and historically sensitive. This paper addresses one important strand within recent realist thought, which locates contemporary political theory's lack of fidelity to real politics in a tendency to proceed as if political theory were a subfield of ethics. On this view, realists "aim to defend the importance of 'distinctively political thought' as opposed to the applied ethics they believe characterizes much contemporary political theory and causes it to misunderstand and make mistakes about its subject matter" (Jubb 2019, 360). This discontinuity critique offers both a specific diagnosis of the general problem identified by realists (namely the absorption of political theory within ethics), and a particular solution (the establishment of political theory as a more autonomous discipline).[4]

There are important aspects of realist thought that stand outside, or in an uncertain relationship with, the discontinuity view. Insofar as realists are concerned with the priority of non-ideal over ideal theory or with issues of political feasibility, realism appears orthogonal to

[4] One way of distinguishing ethics and political theory would be to treat only the former as a fundamentally evaluative and normative enterprise. I am concerned with a more complex view, according to which political theory is centrally a normative and evaluative discipline, but ought not to be pursued as a subfield of ethics.

the discontinuity/continuity question.[5] The connection to the strand of "realism as ideology critique" (Prinz and Rossi 2017) is also complex. For example, Geuss, in this vein, asserts that "ethics is usually dead politics" (2010, 42). Here Geuss suggests that political theorists have gone wrong not in trampling on the proper boundaries between political theory and ethics, but in failing to recognize the extent to which politics and ethics are intertwined, since our ethical claims typically represent the residue of past political battles.

Whilst neither exhaustive of realism, nor central to the work of all thinkers, the discontinuity claim is significant to the wider realist turn in two ways. First, the call for a sharper separation between political theory and ethics recurs across many realist writings. For example, Sleat (2018, 3) suggests that "political theorists have in recent years too often treated politics as if it were merely a form of "applied ethics" or "a branch of moral philosophy"." Jubb (2015, 689) notes "realism's hostility to contemporary political philosophy's tendency to see itself as a form of applied moral philosophy," and Larmore (2018, 43) emphasizes that "political philosophy is not a province of moral philosophy."[6] Second, realists themselves sometimes present the discontinuity claim as an overarching commitment that draws together

[5] Whilst issues of political feasibility arise in the realist literature, some realists emphasize that their concerns are not contiguous with calls for political theorists to deliver more in the way of action-guiding recommendations for real politics – for example, Sleat (2016b).

[6] There are many further examples - see e.g. Cozzaglio (2020, 9); Hall (2015, 466); Hall and Sleat (2017, 278). Realists sometimes claim that politics (rather than political theory) is distinct from applied ethics. I find this statement difficult to interpret, except as shorthand for a claim about the distinctiveness of political theory, or as expressing something uncontroversial about the way in which real world politics departs from our ethical ideals. Conversely, I take it that the 'anodyne sense' in which Geuss affirms that 'politics is applied ethics' is also shared ground. Realists and moralists agree that politics 'is not and cannot be a strictly value-free enterprise, and so is in the very general sense an "ethical activity"' (Geuss 2008, 1). They disagree about whether it is therefore appropriate to approach normative political thought as a branch of ethics.

different strands of thought. For example, in an important overview of the literature, Rossi and Sleat summarize the realist critique: "Mainstream moralist political philosophy fails, from the realist perspective, to take seriously enough the peculiarities of the political … to the extent to which politics can be theorised in a manner that is appropriately sensitive to the nature of politics, *political philosophy ceases to be a branch of moral philosophy*" (2014, 690). The powerful charge here is that by treating political theory as akin to ethics, political theorists assume away the very subject matter of politics that they claim to address (see also Sleat 2016a, 252; Sleat 2018, 2, 8). If we can make good on this thought, Rossi and Sleat suggest, we should see a changing shape to the disciplinary landscape: "recognising the force of realist claims should force a methodological transformation of the discipline: some theorists would embrace fully fledged political realism, others would maintain the moralist approach and so move away from political theory and towards moral philosophy" (2014, 696).

EVALUATING DISCONTINUITY REALISM

The discontinuity critique rests on two sets of contrasts: between realist political theory and its moralist target; and between (properly political) political theory and ethics. Thus a successful version of discontinuity realism must meet three conditions:

1. Non-triviality: It must assert/embody something about the practice of political theory that many contemporary political theorists, at least implicitly, deny.
2. Plausibility: It must offer an appealing view of the character of political theory.
3. Nondistortion: it must succeed in distinguishing political theory from ethics, without relying on a distorted picture of the latter.

Below I reconstruct three forms of discontinuity realism and evaluate them against these conditions. Whilst not exhaustive of the ways in which we can seek to give "greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams 2005, 3) I believe that these are the central patterns of argument in the recent realist literature.

Before I proceed, it is helpful briefly to explain how this organizing framework departs from some prominent recent critiques of realism. My concerns about the discontinuity view partially overlap with issues addressed by Erman and Möller in a series of critical works on realism. However, their defence of an "ethics first" approach (Erman and Möller 2013) ranges across the three issues of subject matter, values and methods, which I suggest should be distinguished in order to give clearer meaning to the discontinuity position.[7] A sharper organizing framework is offered by Leader Maynard and Worsnip (2018), in an important paper in which they delineate five potential paths to the realist claim of a distinctively political normativity. Here I treat that claim as just one way of filling out the discontinuity view, which I take to be more basic.[8] Whilst the idea of a distinctively political normativity is increasingly prominent in the realist literature, realists sometimes urge that we distinguish the practice of political theory from that of ethics, without committing to, or even rejecting, that notion (for example, Larmore 2018). Thus it is helpful to consider ways in which the discontinuity account might stand, or fall, independently of the idea of a distinctively political normativity.

Subject discontinuity: Political theory and ethics address distinctive normative problems

What, if anything, legitimizes the exercise of the coercive power of the state? What kind of economic order is justified at the national level? New questions arise when we think about how we should organize our political lives; issues that have no direct analogue outside of the

[7] A clearer interpretive framework is offered in Erman and Möller (2018), where they distinguish three routes to minimalist realist accounts of political legitimacy. But there Erman and Möller are concerned specifically with the source of a set of substantive normative claims in realism. This paper addresses a broader realist picture of the place of political theory vis-à-vis ethics.

[8] See Jubb's comment (2019, 361) that Leader Maynard and Worsnip 'try to disarm at least *one of the ways* in which realists criticize contemporary political theory's supposed reliance on ethics and moral philosophy'.

political sphere (Estlund 2017, 387). Is it a mistake then to treat political theory as a subfield of moral theory? The basic observation that politics throws up distinctive normative problems is insufficient to mark a significant divide between political theory and ethics (condition 3), since our non-political lives also encompass a wide variety of roles and relationships that generate their own normative agendas. For example, a significant amount of work in medical ethics centres on problems that are distinctive to the domain of healthcare and to the character of the doctor-patient relationship. The challenge then for discontinuity realists is to show that the subject matter of political theory differs from that of ethics, in a way in which the diverse moral problems we face outside of politics do not vary from each other.

One candidate answer to this question, which recurs in the realist literature, is that politics and therefore political theory (but not ethics) is centrally about disagreement. Can this argument from the "primacy of disagreement" (Estlund 2017, 391) in political theory ground the discontinuity account? Realists do not deny that we are deeply divided about many ethical issues outside of the political sphere. Rather they suggest that politics distinctively demands that we *deal with* disagreement. This claim still needs to be nuanced further, since we also face a wide variety of moral problems about how to handle disagreement in our personal and professional lives. For example, think about the position of a doctor who believes that a patient's life support should be withdrawn, but needs to decide how to act in light of disagreement on the part of relatives or professional colleagues. It would be wrong for her to proceed without giving any consideration to the fact of these opposing views.[9] It is within the sphere of politics, however, that we typically confront disagreement in a context where high-

[9] If we are not working within a set of democratic procedures that already take others' views into account, there will sometimes be a greater individual duty to anticipate disagreement and to build what other people think into our own decision-making. Thus there is a respect in which disagreement should sometimes weigh *more* heavily on the individual outside of democratic politics.

stakes decisions must be made that will be binding on many others who disagree.[10] Indeed getting enforceable decisions to structure our interactions with others who disagree is, realists emphasize, why we need politics in the first place. It is in this context that realists see a fundamental problem with much contemporary theorizing about justice. If politics is essentially about making binding decisions in the face of ongoing disagreement, they argue, it seriously misses the mark to propose theories that hold that we should all agree on some ideal of justice: "To think that a fully just society would be one in which all people converged on the same principles of justice is, in an important sense, to put the possibility of full justice outside of the political realm and into a world devoid of much of the original impetus for politics in the first place" (Sleat 2016a, 259). Sleat's point, which is echoed by other realists, is not simply that we will never agree about the demands of justice. It is also that an imagined situation in which we did so would no longer be a situation of politics.

The stronger version of this critique suggests that there is an internal tension within much theorizing about justice. For example, Jubb objects that "Theories like luck egalitarianism assume levels of moral agreement among those to whom they are supposed to apply which would, independently of their application, remove the difficulties with which they are supposed to deal" (2015, 680). Jubb goes on to suggest that luck egalitarianism involves 'circular recommendations' in a sense described by Patrick Tomlin. Think, Tomlin suggests, of a situation in which our car has run out of fuel and a solution is offered that involves driving the car to a nearby petrol station: "If we could do that, we would not have this problem. And if we could do that, we would not pursue this solution, we would pursue the (currently unavailable) first best" (2012, 43). It is difficult to see how the parallel with the empty tank case is supposed

[10] Whilst we do stand in a variety of authoritative relationships in our non-political lives (e.g. parent-child or umpire-player), this authority is typically restricted in scope and may depend on political decisions for its bindingness. Cf. Miller (2016, 163); Leftwich (2017, 13-14).

to work here. It cannot be that proposing an answer to a problem about which we disagree is to assume away the fact of the disagreement. Indeed, it is often the presence of disagreement that shows us there is something interesting and philosophically significant to think and to argue about. Rather, when Jubb objects that luck egalitarians "demand that political power realize the highest moral ideals, whether we can agree on what those are or not" (2015, 680), he appears to be pressing a version of a complaint that recurs in the realist literature: that moralists illicitly seek to settle, in philosophical terms, issues that should be addressed instead by political means. In response, moralists have pointed out that this objection blurs two distinct senses of settle: to try to identify a correct answer to the question and to enforce an answer politically (Baderin 2014, 138-139). Thus luck egalitarians, for example, need not, and typically do not, think that their theory of fairness should be imposed through non-democratic means.

The problem with how moralists treat disagreement then is not one of circularity. Nor is it an antidemocratic attempt to bypass the political process. The objection must be that even if theories of justice do what they set out to do, what they seek to do is not properly seen as a project in political theory. Thus some realists argue that political theory should be centrally concerned with questions of legitimacy; theorizing about justice belongs instead to ethics. But this move, which relocates a wide range of issues from political to moral theory, is undermotivated (Estlund 2017, 392). There are a variety of questions we can raise in response to the disagreement that forms part of political life.[11] We can ask what we should think, even when the answer to that question makes no practical difference to what we do (Cohen 2008, 268). We can ask what side we should take, as democratic actors, in the ongoing political conflict (Mason 2016, 38). Theories of justice seek to play some role here in guiding how we

[11] To reiterate a point made earlier, my objection here is not to the realist understanding of politics, on which politics is partly constituted by disagreement, but rather to the narrowness of the normative agenda that realists take to follow from that conception.

use the levers of the democratic process, and it remains unclear why we should close down disciplinary space for these projects within political theory (condition 2).

The commitment to foregrounding disagreement in political theory has stimulated a realist search for a thinner and less contestable set of normative principles. But here realists have failed to show how we are to proceed without replicating the charge of suppressing or denying disagreement that is levelled at the moralist (condition 1). For example, Jubb defends a form of "negative non-intrinsic egalitarianism," involving a commitment to avoiding the harms of status inequality, as a locus of consensus in contemporary politics (2015, 680). However, studies of social dominance orientation – "the belief that some people are inherently superior or inferior to others and approval of unequal group relationships" (Pratto et al. 1994, 745) – suggest that negative non-intrinsic egalitarianism is not a value on which the public converges. Rather we differ significantly in the extent to which we disavow status hierarchy, with important consequences for the dynamics of contemporary politics (Ibid).

Perhaps we can do better in identifying some locus for agreement if we shift our attention from ideals of equality or justice to legitimacy, as some realists have urged? A long-standing body of psychological research emphasizes a common tendency for perceptions of legitimacy to be grounded in the presence or absence of voice in decision-making procedures (Tyler 2006). However, there is also evidence to suggest that procedural voice has limited power to temper disagreement when that disagreement is seen to be moral in character (Bauman and Skitka 2009, 47). More generally, the extent of, and relationship between, disagreement over legitimacy and justice, are contested empirical questions. We should resist making the parameters of the discipline contingent on answering them.

I have briefly illustrated the challenge realists face in trying to occupy a different kind of space with respect to political disagreement, even as they advance their own normative agendas. I believe the right response to these difficulties is not to seek some more minimal

normative position that holds out the possibility of greater consensus, but rather to reject the strong charge that drives this search. We can propose theoretical answers to problems about which people are (and will likely remain) in disagreement without denying or suppressing that disagreement, or illicitly assuming away politics itself.

Value discontinuity: Political theory and ethics deal with distinctive values or forms of normativity

The second thesis I consider holds that political theory is distinct from ethics because the values that ought to govern our political lives are distinct from those that apply in non-political contexts. On this view, realism is based on a "commitment to working within the parameters of a sphere of politics with its own normative standards" (Prinz and Rossi 2017, 352). We can helpfully distinguish progressively stronger versions of this claim. First, there is the idea that we should weigh candidate moral values differently in political and non-political spheres. Some considerations (e.g. order, stability and legitimacy) count for more when we are dealing with political decisions that commonly involve high stakes, draw in large numbers of people and are backed up by the possibility of coercive enforcement. This idea is reflected, for example, in realist writings on political conduct, which emphasize that the virtues we require of politicians diverge from those we ought to display in our personal lives (Philp 2010). Some realists suggest that not only the relative weight of our value considerations, but also their valence may shift across political and non-political contexts; it is often that case that "private virtue turns out to be public vice" (Bellamy 2010, 414).

One potential response to these arguments is to point to some higher-level principle that guides the selection or weighing of values for both political and non-political contexts. On this view, discontinuity at the level of our specific values would be underpinned by a deeper value continuity. However, we need not appeal to context-invariant principles in order to resist this version of discontinuity realism. Whilst particular values may come to the fore or weigh more

heavily in politics, similar discontinuities arise within our non-political lives (and indeed across different parts of our political lives). To the extent then that we have a distinctive "code of political ethics" (Ibid, 420), we also have codes of workplace ethics, family ethics etc (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 760-761).[12] We cannot fix ethics and politics, at least in advance of a specific normative inquiry, as the key point of value rupture (condition 3).

A stronger version of the value-discontinuity view holds not that we should weigh competing moral values differently in the political sphere, but rather that moral values play a more restricted role in normative thinking about politics. This claim is sometimes seen to follow from a recurring realist observation about the relatively weak causal and motivational power of ethical ideals in political life (for example, Rossi and Sleat 2014, 691). But this is unpromising terrain for discontinuity realism. The claim of motivational discontinuity implicates a hugely complex set of issues in moral and political psychology, and it seems unlikely that the relative motivational force of ethical ideals will map onto any broad dividing line between political and non-political life.

A second way in which realists restrict the role of moral values within political theory is to claim that political theory deals, at least in part, in a distinctively political and non-moral set of values, reasons or oughts. On this view, "it is possible to derive normative political judgements from specifically political values – a position resting on the view that not all values are moral values, plus the more controversial claim that such political values can and should guide politics, whereas moral values are ill-suited to that task" (Ibid, 690). What is the source of this political normativity? The most prominent answer to this question, outlined by Williams,

[12] As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out to me, there is an alternative view on which the realist might happily embrace this result. Specifically, if the complaint is not about the absorption of political theory into ethics, but rather about the application of flawed universalistic and context-insensitive models of ethics, then this picture of multiple discontinuities might give the realist what they want. I discuss this alternative position later in the paper.

involves looking first to the concept of politics itself. Specifically, Williams draws a distinction between a political situation, in which something is said to justify the exercise of power by one group over another, and circumstances of domination or brute force, in which no such justification is given. Thus he argues that the notion of politics itself gives us the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD), which calls for some justification of the exercise of political power to be offered to each subject. Even if this principle of legitimacy is moral, it does not represent a morality that is prior to politics, since "it is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics" (Williams 2005, 5). Leader-Maynard and Worsnip sharply expose the problem with Williams' move as a basis for the claim of a distinctively political normativity. Williams' argument, they note, is built on an equivocation between a putative principle being satisfied and it being justified: "to show that the satisfaction of the BLD is built into the definition of politics is not to show that politics justifies the BLD… It doesn't answer the question of why we should adhere to the BLD" (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 784).

It is open to the realist to maintain that there is a distinctively political normativity in some further sense, or that there are alternative routes to the one sketched by Williams. However, any such argument will need to defeat a reasonable presumption against the proliferation of forms of normativity: Will we also recognize medical normativity, or family normativity? (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 761). Unlike the distinction between moral and prudential normativity, political normativity does not mark a boundary that we are already implicitly aware of in practice. Whilst we do commonly talk about "political reasons" in everyday conversation, this typically expresses some notion of instrumental normativity (e.g. she did it for "political reasons"). Thus the burden rests with the realist to justify demarcating a distinctive category of political normativity.

Methodological discontinuity: Political theory and ethics employ distinctive modes of normative reasoning

Within the realist literature we see a cluster of related claims concerning *how* we should think normatively about politics: an emphasis on contextual rather than abstract modes of theorizing; the importance of situated judgement over the mechanical application of universal principles; the indeterminacy of theory and the necessity of historical understanding. My intention here is not to evaluate these claims as accounts of how to do political theory. Instead, I want to suggest that these methodological commitments are unsuited as grounds for discontinuity realism, because it is unclear how and why they resist the boundaries between ethics and political theory (condition 3). For example, the anti-theory ideas expressed by some realists echo a perspective that is well developed in ethics in general, as well as within particular subfields such as bioethics. Why, if we are drawn to claims about the limited value, or dangers, of general theoretical principles in thinking normatively about politics, would we reject the parallel arguments in ethics? A similar challenge arises for claims about the sensitivity of political theory to history, or to political attitudes "now and around here." For example, Sleat argues that some candidate political values (for example, aristocratic notions of dignity or highly demanding conceptions of citizenship) cannot be values for us, because we are unable coherently to integrate them into our lives (2016a, 262). But if the lack of purchase on prevailing attitudes or practices undermines these political values, shouldn't we be similarly suspicious of interpersonal and social ideals that are out of step with contemporary norms?[13]

The most promising answer to this comparative challenge recalls some core realist ideas about the nature of politics. Specifically, when we are dealing with questions about the

[13] Again, there is an alternative reading of the realist critique on which we might happily concede that this asymmetry cannot be established, and embrace an overarching commitment to context-sensitivity across political and non-political ethics. I discuss this possibility further below.

legitimate use of the coercive power of the state – a form of power that is typically inescapable and involves high stakes – perhaps political theorists have reasons to attend to what people actually think, in a way that moral theorists (who are asking what individuals or groups without a hand on or eye to the levers of state power should do) do not. Whilst it has surface plausibility, there is a flaw in this argument, in the way in which it moves from the observation that political legitimacy is bound up with the actions of democratic citizens, to the implication that political theory should therefore be carried out in an opinion-sensitive manner. To justify an opinion-sensitive approach to political theory on the basis of a commitment to democratic legitimacy is to suggest that the work of determining what is politically legitimate can be done partly in advance of real democratic politics, through a combination of theoretical reflection and empirical investigation of public views. It is therefore to amplify the claims of political theory over actual democratic politics, in a way that should be particularly unattractive to realists (Baderin 2016).

I have emphasized the difficulty of making good on a realist form of methodological discontinuity, according to which political theory is distinctively contextual, historical or opinion-sensitive. But the challenge here is a general one that faces any attempt to demarcate ethics from political theory on the basis of their characteristic methods. Consider Dworkin's suggestion that personal morality should "make sense of … common moral opinion" and "make best sense of [existing] behaviour," when political morality need not (2011, 277, 279).[14] It is interesting to note that Dworkin (typically seen as an arch-moralist) shares something of the realist's bifurcated view of the methods of ethics and political theory, although in roughly the opposite form (for critical discussion of this feature of Dworkin's view, see Clayton and Stemplowska 2015). But Dworkin's version of the methodological discontinuity thesis looks

[14] Dworkin is concerned here with issues of individual aid and harm between strangers. Thus his personal morality is only one element of a broader sphere of non-political morality.

similarly undermotivated. It is highly plausible that the appropriate methods for normative theory will depend in part on the nature of the question we are addressing, for example at what level of abstraction we are working. However, this observation does not support a general methodological divide between ethics and political theory.

POLITICAL THEORY VERSUS ETHICS, OR POLITICAL THEORY VERSUS MORAL THEORY?

I have reconstructed three forms of the realist claim that political theory is distinct or discontinuous from ethics. In each case, I emphasized the variegated nature of our ethical lives, and suggested that many of the discontinuities realists identify are replicated *within* ethics. I have also emphasized that political theory – even on the realist view of politics – has disciplinary space for a wide range of projects. Thus the drive to demarcate clearer boundaries between ethics and political theory risks flattening out the inherent diversity of the subject matter and methods of each discipline. In addition, my discussion has identified a number of places in which the discontinuity account forecloses issues that are best treated as matters of ongoing empirical debate – a result that is at odds with the realist's own call for greater sensitivity to empirical detail in political theory.[15]

I now want to consider a potential response to my account, which suggests that I have misrepresented the nature of discontinuity claim. Specifically, it might be objected that realists do not seek to demarcate political theory from ethics, but only from specific deformations of

[15] Consider also the strand of realism that identifies lying as a characteristic feature of political life. There is a rapidly developing body of work in psychology and behavioural economics exploring when, why and how much people lie. This research suggests that to understand the role of lying, we will need to look beyond politics as a category and consider different *types* of political situations and interactions. For example, to what extent does a political interaction involve communicating a personal message? (Cappelen, Sorensen and Tungodden 2013). Is it a context in which smaller lies can pave the way for bigger lies? (Welsh et al. 2015).

the ethical, such as Williams' "morality system" (Williams [1985] 2011). This move is explicit in a recent paper by Hall and Sleat: "if morality cannot be all it has purported to be not only does this undermine traditional moral philosophies, it also throws into severe doubt any political theory that takes itself to be grounded in those philosophies. Accordingly, one of the reasons why politics cannot be applied ethics is because ethics cannot be applied ethics. If we continue to think that politics is a form of 'applied ethics' then the problems that we encounter in making sense of morality are only going to replicate themselves at the level of politics" (2017, 283; see also Owen 2018). This suggests an alternative reading of realist arguments about, for example, the folly of abstracting from history and context. Above I discussed these ideas as they have been used in service of a claim about the distinctiveness of political theory. But perhaps they are better understood as a critique of certain modes of ethics in general? It is notable in this regard that Geuss and Williams, the two most prominent figureheads of political realism, are also highly critical of many features of modern moral philosophy. Hence the utilitarian and Kantian forms that Williams picks out in his critique of enactment and structural models of political moralism are also models of "morality" against which he sets his ethics.[16]

Following Hall and Sleat's claim, we can usefully distinguish two realist pictures of the relationship between political theory and ethics:

D1: contemporary political theory's failures of realism reflect political theorists' tendency to proceed as if their discipline were a branch or subfield of ethics.

[16] I thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation, and for pressing me to clarify my response to the alternative realist position considered in this section. Note that recent contributors to the realist literature have differed on the question of what role the distinction between ethics and the morality system plays in Williams' own critique of political moralism. Cf. Bavister-Gould (2013) and Miller (2016, 160).

D2: contemporary political theory's failures of realism reflect political theorists' tendency to replicate mistakes to be found within particular traditions of ethics.[17]

These positions are typically not clearly distinguished in the realist literature. For example, Geuss objects to the claim that "politics is applied ethics" as a "specific view about *the nature and structure of ethical judgement* and *its relation to politics*" (Geuss 2008, 4) without commenting on the relationship between these two critical thoughts. How then best to interpret the characteristic realist claim that "political theory is not applied ethics"? Thus far I have taken D1 as the focus of my critical discussion, but are realists more plausibly understood to be advancing D2?

For the "political theory is not applied ethics" claim (and similar) to stand for a version of D2, there must be some implied criticism of applied ethics qua ethics. But (with the exceptions noted here), such statements strongly suggest that the problem lies in the *application* of methods, approaches or ideals from ethics (where their appropriateness is not questioned) *to* questions about politics. For example, when Rossi and Sleat argue (2014, 696) that moralist political theorists should "move away from political theory and towards moral philosophy," they do not go on to indict moral philosophy itself, when kept out of the political sphere. A similar observation applies to Larmore's claim (2018, 43) that political theory is not "a province of moral philosophy" and Jubb's suggestion that realists "do not think it is useful to understand political philosophy as continuous with moral philosophy" (Jubb 2019, 365). Such claims call for a sharper separation between political theory and moral philosophy, rather than identifying any problem within the practice of moral philosophy.[18]

[17] '[O]ne of the reasons' gives a more equivocal tone to Hall and Sleat's claim, and perhaps suggests that they mean to endorse a mixed view, combining D1 and D2.

[18] In claiming that there are interpretive grounds to favour D1 as a reading of realist claims about the distinctiveness of political theory, I do not deny that many characteristic realist claims about the practice of

The realist might respond here that "political theory is not applied ethics" was always intended as a criticism of applied ethics itself, not (or not only?) as a claim about the disciplinary distinctiveness of political theory. If that is the response, then I hope the paper will play a useful role in pushing realists to clarify their position in relation to these two alternatives. But this move would also not be cost free for the realist. A picture on which there is significant *asymmetry* between the proper endeavours of political and moral theorists has, I think, underpinned some of the appeal of realism. On the D2 account this falls away; the objective is no longer to separate political theory from ethics, but only from bad ethics – and even ethicists shouldn't do that.

I have sought to respond to the worry that, in focussing on D1, I am addressing a straw man, or a less significant form of the realist view about the relationship between political theory and ethics. Whilst there is not scope within this article to evaluate D2 in its own terms, it is helpful to say something briefly about where this claim would leave the realist project. Specifically, D2 points to two potential routes forward for realism. First, realists might better integrate their meta-level claims about the appropriate practice of political theory into the parallel, and well-established, debates in ethics. This will implicate realism in complex interpretive and meta-ethical issues (cf. Nye 2015). Take, for example, the version of D2 suggested by Hall and Sleat, which draws on Williams' opposition between ethics and the morality system. Central to Williams' critique of morality is its alleged reductionism, in terms of the concept of obligation. To what extent are realists faithful to Williams on this point, given

political theory (e.g. that it should be contextual, historically sensitive, or suspicious of systematization) have strong parallels in particular modes of ethical thought. Indeed, I highlighted these parallels in my response to the methodological version of the discontinuity critique. My interpretive claim is that realists have tended to draw attention to these features of political theory as markers of the distinctiveness of political thought, rather than as unifying features of ethics and political theory.

that an important strand of realism calls for the concept of legitimacy to be made more central to political theory? Williams ([1985] 2011, 194) also emphasizes that the morality system is "not an invention of philosophers," but a feature of the modern world. Would realists endorse a parallel claim about the political sphere i.e. has the morality system deformed contemporary politics, as well as political theory? If so, where does this leave the basic realist claim that political theory must show greater fidelity to the actual practice of politics?

An alternative route forward for the realist is to focus on engaging in first order normative inquiry; applying their preferred mode of ethical thinking within the political sphere. Indeed, realists have increasingly noted the imperative to reorient their agenda away from meta-level critique, and there have been a series of recent contributions applying the realist perspective to concrete political problems (for example, Beetz 2018; Cozzaglio, 2020). Taking the issue of epistemic injustice as an example, the next section outlines an approach to normative theory with some features that are in sympathy with these realist efforts. But I also emphasize that the payoffs of recent work on epistemic injustice have stemmed partly from theorists' willingness to move back and forth across the fuzzy boundaries of ethics and political theory.

THE CASE FOR CONTINUITY

Our ethical lives are not compartmentalized. Morally significant phenomena replicate themselves in different places and there are important causal interactions between different domains. For both reasons it is often morally illuminating, and sometimes morally necessary, to study the intersections between different spheres of life. Ethics and political theory in particular are intertwined because our interpersonal relationships are shaped by political decisions, and our social interactions and personal choices in turn affect how political power is used. This observation has a powerful form in feminist work that reveals how the nuclear family produces, and is produced by, women's material and political disadvantage (notably Okin

1989). Thus we cannot properly understand, or begin to address, gender inequality until we see family, society, work and politics as deeply interconnected.

Within feminist thought this claim is often linked to a demand to increase the scope of political authority, or even to erode the boundaries of the concept of politics itself, such that "Politics is everywhere … because no realm of life is immune to relations of conflict and power" (Squires 2017, 119). However, we can take up the basic feminist epistemic insight – that we better understand the moral problems that politics presents, and the potential solutions, if we attend to the commonalities and causal connections with our non-political lives – whilst resisting the associated conceptual move. The feminist message is also consistent with a range of views about the degree of continuity in the substantive content of the normative principles that apply within interpersonal and political spheres. This question about substantive continuity structures several important areas of contemporary normative inquiry. For example, debate about the legitimacy of parental efforts to shape their children's values has turned, in part, on the question of the ethically salient parallels between the state-citizen and parent-child relationship. Notably, Clayton argues that these relationships are analogous to the extent that both are non-voluntary, involve coercion, and have profound effects on individual lives. Hence, he concludes that parental conduct, like political action, should be governed by the principle of liberal legitimacy, and be 'guided by ideals and principles that do not rest on the validity of any particular reasonable comprehensive doctrine' (Clayton 2006, 95).[19] Or, to take another example, it is contentious within just war theory to what degree restrictions on military violence should be continuous with those that apply between private individuals. Is state-sponsored

[19] I thank Adam Swift for pointing to the relevance of Clayton's argument. The direction of travel in Clayton's work is from the political to the familial. Below I suggest it will often be more fruitful to work in the other direction, starting from non-political ethics.

violence morally special, or should our account of the ethics of war cohere with our broader ideas about when it is morally permissible to attack another person?

The point here is not to endorse the substantive continuity position on these two issues, but rather to emphasize that moving back and forth across the boundaries between the personal and the political in relation to these (and other) normative problems gives rise to illuminating lines of inquiry. For example, the three features Clayton picks out do indeed appear to hold across both parent-child and state-citizen relationships. But are there also some special, and especially valuable, features of parent-child relationships that would be compromised by a commitment to liberal neutrality within the family? (Brighouse and Swift 2014, 170). To cut off these debates, or to seek to settle them via some *general* view about the disciplinary boundaries between ethics and political theory would be a mistake. First, there is no reason to think that our stance on these issues should move together; we might consistently reject the state-citizen/parent-child analogy, whilst taking a substantive continuity position in relation to the ethics of war, or vice versa. Second, we risk impoverishing the resources of both ethics and political theory. Recognizing where there *are* morally relevant continuities between political and non-political life gives us a broader range of insights to draw on in normative inquiry. Moreover, studying the specific *discontinuities* will sometimes also be illuminating. Below I fill out this broad outline of the case for continuity through a discussion of the recent political turn in work on epistemic injustice.

Epistemic injustice

Epistemic injustice concerns the wrongs done to individuals specifically in their capacity as knowers (Fricker 2007, 1). In her influential account, Fricker traces two main forms.[20]

[20] There are important prior traditions of work (notably in black feminist thought) that address related problems without the terminology of epistemic injustice (see McKinnon 2016, 438-9). I focus here on Fricker's highly influential account in order to illustrate, more concretely, the payoffs of a continuity approach.

Testimonial injustice arises when a speaker receives less credibility than deserved because of identity prejudice on the part of the hearer. Consider, for example, a black witness to crime whose testimony is not taken seriously by police due to racial prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when members of marginalized groups lack the conceptual resources required to make sense of, or to communicate, some significant aspect of their experience, due to their exclusion from processes of collective meaning-making. A central case here is the situation of women struggling to interpret their subjection to sexual harassment, prior to it being recognized as such.

The power of Fricker's work comes in part from the way in which she traces, and gives a name to, a problem that we may have glimpsed in a variety of more inchoate ways. Epistemic injustice, Fricker notes, often goes unacknowledged, in part because it commonly operates below the level of conscious belief, through prejudicial images embodied in the social imagination (2007, 15). But, when we are shown it, we do instinctively recognize this picture of the problematic patterns in our epistemic relations: Problems about who we tend to believe and who we do not; and who does and does not have access to the tools they need to make sense of, and to communicate, their experiences. Thus work on epistemic injustice offers an appealing model of applied ethics. It identifies a core moral problem – the wrong of systematic exclusion from the community of knowers – that makes sense of our ethical experience across a wide range of contexts. Crucially though, recognizing the unified form of the basic problem does not preclude us from thinking about particular instances of epistemic injustice in contextually sensitive ways. Indeed, the idea of epistemic injustice is increasing being (re)interpreted and applied across a number of spheres, including healthcare and education (see Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus 2019).

In addition to this growing body of research within ethics, there has been an important political turn in studies of epistemic injustice. In Fricker's own work, this has taken the form

of an exploration of the relationship between epistemic injustice and non-domination, as an ideal of political freedom (Fricker 2013). More generally, the problem of epistemic injustice is increasingly being considered in relation to democratic decision-making, deliberation and legitimacy. For example, Fricker's framework has recently been applied to the issue of state intervention in the running of financially distressed US municipalities. Since 2011 in the State of Michigan, this intervention has taken the form of the appointment of Emergency Managers, with extensive powers to assume the responsibilities of local elected officials. Doan employs the concept of testimonial injustice in order to draw out the ethical-epistemic component of these governance practices. Specifically, he argues that Emergency Management "legitimizes the use of 'fiscal responsibility' as a proxy for the credibility of entire populations" (Doan 2017, 183). Thus Emergency Management is grounded in an unfair denial of credibility to the residents of particular municipalities, on the basis of the financially distressed state of their city; and it involves an ongoing commitment to disregarding their testimony on matters of public policy concern. By viewing Emergency Management laws anew through the lens of epistemic injustice, Doan suggests, we see an intrinsic injustice that has been overlooked within the existing critical literature.

Political theorists are also increasingly exploring the specifically political implications of hermeneutical injustice. We have seen that hermeneutical injustice concerns the gaps in our interpretive resources that arise when members of some groups are marginalized in processes of collective mean-making. Fricker shows how these "hermeneutical lacuna" (Fricker 2007, 188) can undermine an individual's ability to make sense of her own experiences, and thereby damage her life in significant ways. But there are also significant negative implications for our political agency, which remain unexplored in Fricker's original work (Morgan-Olsen 2010, 217-8). Specifically, gaps in a society's conceptual framework can impair members of marginalized groups in their ability to express, or secure uptake for, political claims. Thus the

hermeneutical injustice lens points towards conceptual exclusion as an important aspect of political exclusion.[21] It also suggests a potential expansion of our duties of democratic citizenship, to include an active obligation to assist in the translation of the political claims of the marginalized (Morgan-Olsen, 238-242).

Recent work on epistemic injustice has directed ethical attention towards our practices of giving and pooling knowledge; practices that are also central to many aspects of democratic political life. I have briefly illustrated how political theorists are taking up this parallel in a productive way, deploying Fricker's ethics-oriented concept of epistemic injustice to generate normative insights into democratic politics. However, explorations of its political manifestations have not left the concept of epistemic injustice entirely untouched. This work has also pointed to some shifting of emphasis relative to Fricker's original account, which stresses identity prejudice as the source of testimonial injustice, and the cultivation of individual epistemic virtue as a crucial part of the solution. Political theoretical work on testimonial injustice has served to highlight its sometime-structural character: that unfair denials of credibility can result directly from institutional structures, as well as residing in prejudice on the part of individual hearers (Anderson 2012). Thus Doan, for example, argues that Emergency Management laws involve a distinctive form of epistemic injustice, which he terms "epistemic redlining": "an act of spatial demarcation" (Doan 2017, 183) that deflates the credibility of entire residential populations. Epistemic redlining, he emphasizes, is neither directly traceable to individual prejudice, nor amenable to correction through the cultivation of virtue on the part of individual hearers. What we see exemplified in the recent literature on epistemic injustice then is not simply the political application of a static concept derived from

[21] Morgan-Olsen illustrates the problem of conceptual exclusion in relation to two main political cases: the concept of pregnancy at work in Supreme Court rulings on pregnancy discrimination in the 1970s; and disputes over the meaning of land between Belyuen Aborigines and the Australian Northern Territory government.

individual and social ethics. It is a fluid moving back and forth across the boundaries between political and non-political ethics, with potential payoffs on both sides.

The primary aim of the paper is to defend a continuity approach to ethics and political theory. But the epistemic injustice example also points to a selective case for the epistemic *priority* of non-political ethics. If we are interested in the operation of power relations in the processes by which we pool our ideas: "The interpersonal pushes and pulls in daily life encode the larger social structures one hopes to understand … the micro is generally a good place to start, for one does not really understand the structural or know how to combat it unless one also understands a good deal about how it is played out at the micro level" (Fricker 2019, 57). Thus the development we see in recent work on epistemic injustice – in which the phenomenon was initially identified and explored primarily in interpersonal contexts, and subsequently addressed in its political form – is contingent, but not wholly accidental.[22] It is reflective of the broader methodological point that we often come to better understand normative problems that arise in the political sphere by engaging first with related phenomena in our interpersonal lives.

This, more tentative, commitment to the epistemic priority of interpersonal ethics follows from an idea that is in sympathy with realism, about the value of grounding normative theory in close engagement with everyday lived experience. On this view, political theory can benefit

[22] The defender of a "politics first" approach to political theory might reply here that the conceptual and normative resources generated by work on epistemic injustice in interpersonal contexts are not *necessary* precursors for thinking about related ethical-epistemic features of politics. And they might rightly point to insights into political forms of interpretive injustice, prior to Fricker's formulation of the concept of epistemic injustice (see, for example, the discussion of Stokely Carmichael in Atkins 2019). My claim here is not that it is impossible to recognize these normatively salient aspects of politics without the ethics-derived concept of epistemic injustice in hand. However, I have sought to illustrate how theorists have generated useful perspectives on democratic politics by starting from work on epistemic injustice in interpersonal contexts. There seems little reason to disregard these resources and insist that we must begin again from within politics.

from an "ethnographic sensibility," according to which we start the process of normative theorising "with the situated experience of ordinary agents" (Herzog and Zacka 2019, 764). If we take this idea of an ethnographic sensibility seriously, our attention will often turn towards interpersonal, family, social and workplace contexts; arenas that are typically experienced more directly, richly and vividly than is political life. For instance, the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice is given powerful shape in Fricker's work through the story of Carmita Wood, and her experiences of sexual harassment at work in the 1960s (Fricker 2007, 149-162). Realists have tended to connect their opposition to starting political theory with insights derived from non-political contexts with a concern about excessive abstraction or idealization. For example, Hall (2013, 180) urges that "if we want our reflections on politics to be at all convincing it is imperative that we begin from within the political domain *and not with some idealised position external to it*." But, as the epistemic injustice example illustrates, we can hold apart these features of the practice of political theory. Starting from without politics, "in the thick of everyday life" (Herzog and Zacka, 780) often offers us easier epistemic access to morally important phenomena that also have application in the political sphere. To this extent, "[T]he ethical is primary" (Fricker 2007, 177).[23]

Discontinuity realists "do not think it is useful to understand political philosophy as continuous with moral philosophy" (Jubb 2019, 365). The first part of this paper emphasized the challenges that realists face in filling out their characteristic claims about the distinctiveness of political theory vis-à-vis ethics. In this section I have sought to put further pressure on the

[23] This claim also marks an area of disagreement with some prominent critics of realism. Whilst Erman and Möller defend an "ethics-first" approach in a justificatory sense, they reject the epistemological reading of this principle, on the grounds that "we seem perfectly able to understand the political domain through our understanding of collective action, the processes of actual politics and so on – aspects that are all internal to the political domain" (2013, 224-5).

discontinuity view, by outlining an appealing exemplar of a continuity model. Epistemic injustice is a particularly helpful example for my purposes, because there is much here for the realist to applaud. As well as engaging in-depth with details of our lived experience, work on epistemic injustice exemplifies the realist-friendly principle of "methodological negativism": of starting with dysfunction rather than with exploration of an ideal. However, I have emphasized that some of what is powerful in recent studies of epistemic injustice stems from the way in which theorists have moved across the fuzzy boundaries of ethics and political theory – tracing a key feature of the moral quality of our relationships through different spheres of life.

There is a potential response to my argument that might tempt the realist here. Work on epistemic injustice highlights the role of power in our lives as knowers; it reveals the morally problematic ways in which power relations shape who we tend to believe, and who can make themselves understood. The realist might argue that insofar as epistemic injustice is about power, it is *always* a political phenomenon, and therefore does not support my case for the continuity of ethics and political theory. However, this reply involves a shift from the notion of politics as a distinct sphere of life, with which we began, to a process-based notion of politics as power. This conceptual move is not easily available to the realist, since it seems inconsistent with the framing of, and underlying motivation for, the discontinuity account: to seek "a way of thinking normatively about politics that is suitably sensitive to the conditions and features of the political sphere" (Sleat 2018, 8). Such a response on the part of the realist would also concede much of the substance of what I want to argue here. To the extent that we are driven to identify epistemic injustice as always essentially political in character, this reflects the interconnectedness of moral problems that arise within our interpersonal, familial, professional and political relationships, and the value of studying these spheres of life in a continuous way.

CONCLUSION

Some of the appeal of the recent realist turn in political theory has stemmed from its promise of a mode of normative theory that is more distinct from ethics, and thus more responsive to the special character of politics. This paper has sought to show both the difficulty of making good on that promise of greater disciplinary autonomy, and the costs of seeking to do so. The effect of such a separation of political theory from ethics would be to distance political thought from valuable evidence about our everyday lived experiences, and to block fruitful lines of enquiry into the varying continuities and discontinuities across different spheres of life. Instead, I have argued that we should take up the realist call for more empirically engaged and contextually sensitive forms of political theory, whilst setting aside its second order claims about the distinctiveness of moral and political thought.

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