
Realism and Political Liberalism in Normative Political Theory

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Summary

This paper casts light on the dialogue between political realism and John Rawls's political liberalism. I describe political realism on the basis of contemporary realist currents that attempt to render politics an autonomous sphere of human activity, largely through an investigation of sources of normativity apt for guiding political action. I elaborate on what points realists suggest they conflict with political liberalism, and identify three foundational similarities between the two approaches to the legitimization of political authority which should suggest that political realism ought to consider a consensus view of political legitimacy. First, both approaches to normative political theory emerged from the broader tradition of liberal philosophy. Second, both rest on the premise of a pluralistic society, which has certain normative implications. Third, both are attempts to justify the primacy of the political over the metaphysical. When considered together, these assumptions point to a demand for a theoretical inquiry into a consensus view of realist legitimacy.

Keywords: Political Realism, Political Liberalism, John Rawls, Legitimacy, Consensus

1. Introduction

Political realism emerged as a paradigm in political theory that is firmly positioned against Rawlsian liberal theory. In short, political realism in most recent years has become the view that normative political judgements ought to draw from or, at the least, consider non-moral sources of normativity in political theorising, such as epistemic or prudential normativity. Stronger articulations of this contention are found in Geuss's (2008) "ethics-first" critique of normativity and in Williams's departure from "political moralism" (2008) which he saw stemming from the predominant Anglophone political philosophy, his mission being to revisit concepts such

as freedom and equality strictly as political values. This paper opens a debate between political liberalism and political realism and critically reflects on some of the central claims of political realism, with the hope of preparing the ground for arguing a consensus view of realist legitimacy.

Realism in political theory has analogous positioning with realism in the international relations theory. In general, realism is linked to a school of thought emphasizing assumptions about the autonomous nature of political rationalities, the idea that politics is grounded in power and self-interests of states and the inherent conflict between states. The school of thought roots back to as early as 5th century B.C. with Thucydides' analysis of the Athenian siege of Melos which was given no moral justification resulting in the *Melian Dialogue*, arguably the first piece of realist writing that reflected on the pragmatic motives of countries during wartime. Since then, many historical figures have shaped realist political thought, most significantly Machiavelli, who sought to articulate pragmatic advice for rulers, and then Hobbes, who investigated the philosophical foundations of political authority and order. These figures are the precursors to modern thinking about neorealism which was influenced by structuralist approaches grounded in assumptions about the anarchical order of the international system (Waltz, 1990; Mearsheimer, 2007), which is why this wave of realism is also called structural realism. The following wave of realism (neoclassical realism), developed largely by G. Rose (e.g. Rose, 1998), was born out of a previous lack of concern for the domestic factors that shape behavioural dynamics of states alongside international structural factors.

While the tree of realism branches out widely across descriptive approaches to political science, there has been a recent turn in realist literature toward its normative character that are rapidly growing in their influence on contemporary political theory – a development best captured by E. Rossi's and M. Sleat's survey paper (Rossi and Sleat, 2014). In this paper, the authors describe political realism as a “family of theories of politics, one which competes with those of other traditions only when they are too idealistic or moralistic” (*ibidem*, p. 696). Therefore, the first step will be to annotate precisely what is *normative* about political realism, and the second step will be to argue how this development in realist theory can be redirected toward innovating our understanding of legitimate authority with an accent on consensus, which is currently largely grounded in liberal philosophy and concretely articulated in Rawls's body of work.

The relevance of setting political realism against political liberalism is far-reaching for theorising the legitimization of authority, and the problem begins like this: Rawlsian liberalism is predicated on the idea of consensus about justice, and this is a necessary requirement for authority to be considered legitimate. In contrast, a theorist wearing realist glasses would see that the legitimacy of authority is not

based on shared values or norms, but on pragmatic arrangements that result in order and security of citizens, which renders any idea of a consensus fragile or illusory. However, a *normative* theory of realism should suggest the existence of values and norms that *could* be shared among citizens. The thought is that for authority to be legitimate, these realist values and norms ought to be affirmed through consensus in the same fashion that consensus about justice predicates legitimate authority for Rawls, and the hope of the paper is to prepare the ground so that such an argument can be plausibly put forward.

The premise is that without at least a minimal degree of consensus, any alleged theory of legitimacy runs the risk of supposing an authoritarian position toward politics, in which case a theory of legitimacy would (at least for liberals) serve no purpose. Therefore, the paper tries to fruitfully relate political realism with the consensus view of legitimacy.

Conceptually, the debate raises three questions. First, whether the realist representation and critique of political liberalism is fair and convincing, and how does this interpretation of Rawls warrant the novelty behind political realism? Second, does political realism offer a more attractive alternative to the legitimization of authority and, if it does, does it live up to its promise of withdrawing moral normativity from political philosophy? Third, is political realism paradigmatically different from political liberalism as realists claim and, if not, what does this suggest? All three questions are transitive and parallel, so it would not be surprising to draw on either one in this paper. The focus, for now, remains on the third question, which is to delineate the theoretical similarities and differences between political realism and political liberalism in their approaches to the legitimation of political authority.

There are three assumptions central to the paper that work together to suggest that political realism ought to consider a consensus view of legitimacy, defined as the consent of all citizens to the state's political exercise of power. The first assumption is that both approaches to normative political theory emerged from the broader tradition of liberal philosophy. Second, both rest on the premise of a pluralistic society. Third, both are attempts to justify the primacy of the political over the metaphysical. This paper will explore the three assumptions to argue why political realism should seek to demand at least a minimal degree of consensus from citizens to whom the political settlement is being offered.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section two acts as a survey of traditional liberal philosophy and provides an appraisal of why Rawls and Rawlsian contractualism are considered to be a phenomenon in liberal philosophy. In section three, I examine political liberalism and the core concepts implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society. Because Rawls's political liberalism is a cumulative project, I map out the trajectory of his philosophy toward the final formulation of his theory

in 1993. I look at what makes Rawls's liberalism explicitly *political*, which is important because his theory of political liberalism is a culmination of his ideas about justice as fairness based on previous attempts to frame justice as a political virtue. I also engage in a commentary on political liberalism, the points that are already protested and Rawls's responses. Section four introduces the normative project of the realist school of thought. It is important to note that the normative political realist project consists of an array of successive and, at times, diverging positions, for example, liberal realism (Sleat, 2013) and radical realism (Cross, 2022). The convergence between Rawls and political realism has not gone completely unchecked (Gledhill, 2012; Raekstad, 2021; Thomas, 2017) – these are minority views, but by no means uninfluential. I close in section five with final comparative remarks and suggest that political realism, in order to serve as a normative theory for the legitimation of authority, must draw on some degree of consensus, which is why I argue there is a case to be made for a consensus view of realist legitimacy – something previously understudied.

2. Traditional Liberal Philosophy

Liberalism is a multifaceted term that refers to historical movements and systems of ideas that encompass, among all else, ethical, cultural, egalitarian, economic, and political liberalism. The original definition corresponds to a political movement that facilitated freedom from medieval paternalism and serfdom. Liberalism later stood for the ambition to liberate thought from religious constraints, secularization through the separation of church and state, and the equality of different religions. Lastly, liberalism is also understood as the reduction of state intervention in the economy (see e.g. Dworkin, 1978; Kymlicka, 2002, for a critical rundown of liberal thought).

One of the paradoxes of liberalism is its dynamic between freedom and security and the idea that freedom can jeopardize security (e.g. lawlessness correlates with crime). In liberal theory and practice, a number of state models were proposed in the context of 17th and 18th century political thought that should guarantee individuals the security of their person and property which citizens would obtain in exchange for loyalty to the state. Liberal democracy is thus a modern attempt to balance individuals' freedom with security. This attempt by which individuals trade freedom for security and, to that end, join together in political entities (states) was presented in political theory as the result of a "social contract": an agreement of the free and equal who leave the state of nature (the state of mutual conflicts in which individuals are judges of their own being). Traditional contract theories, as developed by theorists ranging from Hobbes and Locke to Rousseau and Kant, start from the premise of free and equal individuals capable of stepping out of the natural state

regulated by arbitrary measures and force and entering a society governed by contract and law.

Social contract theory remains one of the most enduring aspects of liberal philosophy. The earliest version of a liberal view on how individual freedom and state authority can be fruitfully related begins with a *philosophical* articulation of a particular conception of “the good”. This good (e.g. autonomy, wealth, happiness) is designed to motivate consent for the means to realize the hitherto philosophised good. It followed that the liberal political arrangement is the most productive and reliable procedural expression of that good and provides the best tools to respect and secure the nature of that good.

Traditional liberal philosophers such as Mill and Kant defended and elaborated how the liberal political order is justifiable to every citizen living under it. Rawls, too, views the legitimate political regime as one that is justifiable to every citizen living under it: “This requirement of a justification to each citizen’s reason connects with the tradition of the social contract and the idea that a legitimate political order rests on unanimous consent” (Rawls, 2007, p. 13). However, Rawls recognizes there are problems with modern contract theories since their conception in the 17th century. His intervention with *A Theory of Justice (TOJ)* (Rawls, 1999a) revitalized social contract theory in a Rawlsian key, which gives way to two reasons why Rawls can be understood as a continuation and a rupture of the liberal tradition.

First, traditional contract theories have a grounding in historically postulated natural law that individuals in the state of nature have difficulty identifying with. Rawls’s renewal of social contract theory substitutes natural law with a version of Kant’s ethics (most clearly seen in Rawls (1999a), “The Kantian Interpretation of Justice as Fairness” in *TOJ*) and argues that his principles of justice (e.g. the difference principle) apply regardless of the agent’s desires or inclinations. Assuming that individuals wish to express their moral freedom from social contingencies, the concept of the original position (introduced by Rawls in *TOJ*) meets the challenge of explaining why acting on consistent principles must mean acting in accordance with one’s true expression as a rational, free, and equal being. With that, Rawls prepared the grounds for a voluntarist social contract based on justice as fairness, which he developed by framing justice as fairness as a political rather than a moral conception of justice (Rawls, 1985).

Second, Rawls sees that traditional social contract theories never produced social contracts to begin with, in Aristotle’s sense, according to which individuals are inherently political, and that there never was a prepolitical condition that warranted a social contract. For this reason, Rawls lays out a hypothetical contract instead of suggesting that there ever was a state of nature in which an actual contract could have been signed, asking the question of what people *would* agree to, not what they

did agree to (Rawls, 1958). Based on that, he introduced the veil of ignorance experiment, the most necessary requirement for the hypothetical contract, which deprives people of the knowledge of the most particular facts about themselves and the society they inhabit: "First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like" (Rawls, 1999a, p. 118).

The freedom and security afforded by liberal states have contributed to the creation of minds that diverge from a singular conception of what is "good". In Rawls's articulation of the good, the liberal state accommodates a plurality of conceptions. To reconcile the divergence and potential fallout between these conceptions, Rawls suggested first the veil of ignorance as an experiment to determine a society's basic principles of justice, and decades later the idea of an overlapping consensus which attempted to answer how citizens from different philosophical walks of life can support the same basic political values (Rawls, 1987). Only in his later writings have these ideas been amalgamated into what we now consider Rawls's theory of justice. Therefore, according to Rawls, in order to achieve a cooperative society, two things are necessary: first, that the citizens establish an overlapping consensus on their vital interests, and second, that they decide on their disputes behind the veil of ignorance, that is, on the basis of pure justice without the admixture of any doctrinal advantages or prejudice.

This is to say that the same liberal values that have led to the development, tolerance, and protection of diverse identities are now seen as contributing, if not exacerbating, deep cleavages in fundamental principles. To embrace liberalism, therefore, means to embrace competing interpretations of its principles, and this is the central peculiarity of contemporary liberal philosophy. The competition for values may produce two dissimilar outcomes. The first option is to suppress pluralism and avoid the need for consensus on the (liberal) rules of the game. This option is considered to be highly authoritarian, so liberal exchange here is non-existent. The second option adamantly rests on the premise of toleration and an overlapping consensus. The latter variety has taken shape in political theory as political liberalism, bringing Rawls to ask the question: "How is it possible that there can be a stable and just society whose free and equal citizens are deeply divided by conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls, 2005, p. 133). This question is unavoidable in conversation with the fact of pluralism (Galston, 1989; Jones, 2006).

Despite Rawls's coherent theory of political liberalism, a wide panel of critics (realists among them) seek alternative ways of organising a legitimate political order while preserving liberal commitments. As I will show, it is Rawls's reluctance to abandon his intuitive commitments to the idea of moral agency that onsets politi-

cal realists against the consensus view of legitimacy. This is to say that most realists are critical of moralism, not liberalism per se, but I will show that one is inseparable from the other at least in the Rawlsian liberal sense. Although political realism and political liberalism are not entirely antithetical, the scope of Rawls's justice as fairness remains overly moralistic, and so political realists tend to insist on the disassociation from the political liberalism tradition in ways I will continue to show.

3. What is Political Liberalism?

Rawls's conception of an overlapping consensus and the fact of pluralism are asymmetrical concepts that are differentiated by mutual irritation in the direction of a politically demanded consensus and a morally contingent (but given) pluralism. For Rawls, pluralism is an indivisible structural fact of human existence that cannot be further atomized, and that *should not* be repressed. Under the assumption of pluralism, Rawls tries to formulate a contemporary constitutional state that is acceptable to different religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines, communities, and individuals, which Rawls collectively dubs as "comprehensive doctrines". One could make an early comparison to the communitarian view of the 1980s (e.g. Kymlicka, 1988; 1989): culturally shared beliefs in which conceptions of the good are embedded.

In a pluralistic society, every citizen grounds her moral commitments, values, and life plans within one or more comprehensive doctrines, yet Rawls argues that citizens still manage to cooperate and live in a fair and democratic society due to the political concept everyone agrees on, whereas the political concept represents Rawls's political conception of justice as fairness and the foundational ideas of a particular society's political culture: "Thus, political liberalism looks for a political conception of justice that we hope can gain the support of an overlapping consensus of reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines in a society regulated by it" (Rawls, 2005, p. 10).

Rawls seeks to consolidate all the views that cognitive freedom produces and discard the ones that are intrinsically inconsistent with the moral equality of all persons. He promptly addresses only those views that are consistent with the fundamental premise of a *liberal* political settlement. Following that, if people endorse political concepts from their own points of view (and political concepts are not enforced but affirmed through individuals' own comprehensive doctrines), then what emerges is that political liberalism is one such concept. Some critics (most openly Barry, 1995) have directed their criticism against political liberalism to reject Rawls's distinction between comprehensive and political doctrines – it would, in this case, be possible to conceive of Rawls's theory of political liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine as well.

This would mean that Rawls, as much as he is attempting to be neutral, can only be so within the framework of a certain comprehensive doctrine, which for him would be liberal philosophy. In effect, the liberal political settlement creates conditions under which there will be a plurality of *liberal* philosophical, moral, and religious doctrines, all of which are consistent with the basics of a liberal society but inconsistent with each other.

The pushback against political liberalism is that the liberal political order has to be justifiable to everyone living under it, but by everybody, Rawls accounts only for the liberally inclined. In a way, he is justifying liberalism to those who already condone it, without giving reason to non-liberals to become liberal. He tries to move in that direction only later in *The Law of Peoples*, where he assumes there may be “decent” societies that foster institutions which are not politically liberal but are well-ordered (Rawls, 1999b). Because of this, Rawls suggests distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines to then argue that what he deems reasonable comprehensive doctrines can participate in the liberal political arrangement.

A successful justification for a liberal political order is affirmed by all reasonable participants, so it must aspire to something more than the truth of liberal virtues – it has to be non-rejectable from any reasonable point of view: “Rawls assumes not only that there are values that are coherently acceptable by all reasonable citizens, but also that there are values that no such citizen can coherently reject” (Besch, 2022, p. 8). The real problem arises from the unfeasibility of formulating such a justification, so what survives of Rawls is the positive project of political liberalism as a formulation of a justification of a liberal political order that is not merely correct, but that is non-rejectable from any reasonable point of view: “That political conception is to be, so to speak, political and not metaphysical” (Rawls, 2005, p. 10).

The political concept is the agreement on the framework of our political, social, and economic institutions, the rules of social cooperation, and standards of public discussion. It is not reducible to any existing comprehensive doctrine, nor does it regulate the values of comprehensive doctrines, meaning that it is political and not metaphysical. In other words, Rawls tries to sever the link between political philosophy and applied moral philosophy, which means that political theory, according to Rawls, should be an exercise independent of epistemological contingencies. Although Rawls claims to be politically neutral, he is not morally neutral because his moral partisanship stems from the ideas of a free and cooperative society and its moral agents as free and equal.

The political concept is, therefore, a theatre of political agreement on justice as fairness, while comprehensive doctrines describe the metaphysical, pluralistic nature of the political concept. One could describe this, like R. Alejandro, as a ten-

sion between the public sphere of consensus and the private sphere of comprehensive doctrines: “The tension between these two spheres might explain why Rawls invokes ‘the fact of pluralism’ in the private sphere to justify his exclusion of comprehensive doctrines in the public one” (Alejandro, 1996, p. 10).

This is Rawls’s major distinction between *Political Liberalism* and *TOJ*, where the political concept is a singular, in Rawls’s view, and most rational comprehensive doctrine. With this distinction, Rawls deflects the scrutiny of political liberalism as a universal normative ideal that does not account for historical, that is, contextual circumstances. Without this distinction, Rawls’s hypothetical social contract would be an extension of ideal theory enterprise, and, therefore, Rawls’s principles of justice would become subjective insofar as they could not apply to any comprehensive doctrine.

Rawls is explicit about the distinction between ideal and non-ideal elements of his theory of justice: “Nonideal theory, the second part, is worked out after an ideal conception of justice has been chosen; only then do the parties ask which principles to adopt under less happy conditions” (Rawls, 1999a, p. 216). He is adamant that ideal theory can guide political action without concrete policy suggestions, as described by I. Shapiro: “Despite the fact that hypothetical social contract arguments are exercises in ideal theory, then, their proponents anticipate that they will produce tangible payoffs for arguments about politics in the real world” (Shapiro, 2004, p. 115). What comes out of this is that Rawls’s political liberalism is contextual and, therefore, usefully undoctrinaire. For example, Rawls recognized the veil of ignorance as being a pragmatic experiment that gives eminence to different issues across different contexts; in some, the priority might be to address the gender pay gap, and in others, the privileged access to the schooling system.

Consider R. Alejandro once again: “The *rational* refers to a person’s conception of the good. The *reasonable* refers to a person’s willingness to accept fair terms of cooperation as the guiding principle of society... Rawls argues that the reasonable, as the expression of public morality, is not derived from the rational; it is an external imposition. Rational parties – creatures seeking to advance the conception of the good of the persons they represent – arrive at the reasonable not because they intend to, but because the restrictions they face guarantee a reasonable outcome” (Alejandro, 1998, p. 75-76). The veil of ignorance is, in this sense, a tool for critiquing present society and this critique is, of course, a critique directed toward utilitarianism – a major adversary to Rawls because utilitarianism does not make distinctions between persons in terms of what is good under the conception of justice as fairness.

In this respect, D. Rodin sees the veil of ignorance experiment as an “anonymous environment of liberal co-existence” that is “no longer determined by any-

thing” (Rodin, 2008, p. 167). In his view, we don’t respect the equality of those around us because we consider them as moral equals, but because we are so different from one another that there arises a potentially harmful unpredictability. If the position behind the veil of ignorance is not determined by anything, then it is not determined by liberal values either. This view is broadly shared by H. Cvijanović who points out that “Rawls’s veil of ignorance is not motivated by the idea of Kantian autonomy but Hobbesian fear” (Cvijanović, 2023, p. 484), which leads him to the argument that “... man tries to push his own good and protect himself from injustice because he cannot be sure that life situations will work in his favour” (*ibidem*, p. 486). This will become especially relevant for the realist interpretation of pluralism in section four, where I also show that Rawls’s hypothetical contract is not a universalistic normative ideal, meaning it meets the contextualist demands of political realism.

Political Liberalism abandons the original position found in *TOJ* by detaching from the ideal model of society and the individual, and it becomes clearer that political liberalism is not a singular (most rational) comprehensive doctrine, but a cooperative product affirmed by different comprehensive doctrines. There will always be, however, more highly judged topics (e.g. euthanasia or abortion) that cannot be settled as straightforwardly. These topics gain a platform through what Rawls calls public reason, a form of debate in the political society necessitated by and firmly tied to the overlapping consensus.

Public reason is a doctrine that calls on citizens to justify their political stances using common values. For example, although it is unconvincing that abortion should be legal because a feminist group says so or illegal because a religious group says so, citizens might consent to legalizing abortion if the two groups agree on, for instance, (bodily) autonomy or prevention of suffering and death caused by illegal operations. Citizens, in this case, might consent to legalizing abortion because they can affirm it through their comprehensive doctrine. The principle of public reason demonstrates how political liberalism recognizes the normative association between morality and politics. Rawls circumvents the reliance on any particular conception of the good with the idea of “primary goods”, which is designed to provide a broad set of liberal values that may be reorganised to fit any particular conception of the good. For this reason, radically different individuals can come together and discuss morally contentious topics because, as R. Dworkin points out: “His contract is hypothetical, and hypothetical contracts do not supply an independent argument for the fairness of enforcing their terms. A hypothetical contract is not simply a pale form of an actual contract; it is no contract at all” (Dworkin, 2013, p. 195).

Once again, though, Rawls’s appeal to moral neutrality only interests those who have, as B. Barry astutely put it, “already swallowed a large dose of liberalism”

(Barry, 1990, p. 10), i.e. comprehensive doctrines already supporting a liberal arrangement and its values. Political resolutions thus rest on moral disputes, rendering Rawls's conception of politics insufficiently political if that is taken to mean that a political agreement cannot be fruitfully reached in inevitable cases of moral dissent. Even from a realist position, only liberal individuals will accept a justification for a liberal arrangement: "How, exactly, is public justification supposed to make a difference to the justificatory status of a (liberal) regime? This question prudently signals that, given the political realist framework of political normativity, non-liberal citizens could perhaps be able to accept the primacy of political virtue, which is a step away from Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus" (Rossi, 2019, p. 302).

Although the contractual nature of Rawls's programme is guided by abstract universalism, it is a universalism grounded in a political concept. Consider *Political Liberalism*: "We can imagine a society (history offers many examples) in which basic rights and recognized claims depend on religious affiliation and social class. Such a society has a different political conception of the person. It lacks a conception of equal citizenship, for this conception goes with that of a democratic society of free and equal citizens" (Rawls, 2005, p. 30).

In the above excerpt, Rawls recognized the difference in the level of abstraction between religion and citizenship, whereas, in a religious state, the concept of citizenship is on a lower level of abstraction than religion. Reversely, to ensure freedom and equality in a secular (liberal) democracy, the concept of citizenship must be on the level of abstraction equal to that of religion in a religious state. It is, then, possible to infer that Rawls seeks to formulate an indiscrete set of political values that govern public life at the highest level of abstraction and that his liberal project is indeed universalistic albeit grounded in politics. The original position, the agreement on the principle of justice as fairness, once again plays a role in this procedure of constructing the basic principles of a *political* society.

Together, the basic concepts of political liberalism – comprehensive doctrines, the political concept, overlapping consensus, and public reason – describe the nature of social unity and the purpose of Rawls's theory: a stable overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines bounded by the political concept agreed upon through public reason. We have seen that political liberalism, as a normative model of political legitimacy, incorporates both morality and politics into a system of a potentially endorsable liberal agreement. Whether it is the realm of morality or politics governing this agreement is a question of whether moral normativity is eliminable from political philosophy and how distinctly the normative realist project defines the nature of this dichotomy. The question that naturally flows from this is, what is political realism, and how does its normative project guide political judgement?

4.1. What is Political Realism and Why Is It Normative?

Political realists tend to define themselves negatively, that is, they define their orientation by specifying what political realism is not. Political realism is not a substantive political position that competes with liberal philosophy, nor is it a methodological treatment of liberalism as a substantive political position. Political realism is not a counterpart to non-ideal theory in the way it challenges idealized visions of political arrangements, nor is it an anti-foundationalist position in the way it challenges pre-political commitments of legitimate authority over the political, in whichever terms the political is defined. It is most certainly not advertised as an abstract formulation of “the political”, in reference to C. Mouffe’s (2020) critique of liberal theories that envision politics based on the abstract notion of universalism and advocate for a multitude of democratic expressions of political identities.

I have already mentioned in the introduction that political realism is a family of theories of politics – to understand what holds the members of this family together, a tactful strategy is to analyse how political realism positions itself against political liberalism. I explore three premises to juxtapose them.

First, political realism must, like political liberalism, be oriented toward addressing the questions of *normative* political theory. If political realism attempted to explain how the social world functions under value-free conditions, it would be a positive social theory. But as a family of normative political theories, political realism must aim at providing a value-laden view of what the social world pertaining to political relations ought to resemble. Values make up the substance of political systems; they are the catalysts in both prescriptive and descriptive accounts of politics. While descriptive accounts examine the commonly shared norms of individuals, prescriptive accounts formulate statements as to what norms political communities ought to subscribe to. As for political realism, given that political values “can and should guide politics” (Rossi and Sleat, 2014, p. 690) (the “stronger” realist claim, albeit one that seems to fervently motivate the school), political realism tends to lean heavier on the prescriptive side of normative theory.

As with any normative statement, the claim that political values ought to guide politics must reference *some* a priori concepts derivable from a judgement-based framework; for political realism, it is the “focus on legitimacy as a contextual approach to normativity” (*ibidem*, p. 694) that decides the normative political framework, and this is seen as a major rupture with liberal approaches to political normativity, notably with those developed in the footsteps of Rawls. A stark difference in approaches is showcased in the example of F. Bender (2024) who addresses the topic of refugeehood and argues that the duty to rescue is a failed argument for admitting refugees, and it is a failed argument because in the world of politics, states do not view refugees in ways that morality predicts. Instead, he argues that “Ad-

mitting refugees has always followed the function of condemning other countries, positioning themselves within the international political arena against or with other states and political systems” (*ibidem*, p. 967). The reception of refugees, Bender argues, has a de-legitimizing effect on the state from which the refugees are fleeing. Without any regard for (Rawl’s notion of) justice or any of Rawl’s principles such as the difference principle, the liberty principle or the original position, Bender’s view constitutes an example of a coherent political normativity suited for both the practical world and political theory.

It is discernible that the focal point of political realism is granting reason-based primacy to legitimacy as the foremost political value. No political situation can be understood solely in terms of (observable) political facts, so for a realist to engage in politics, they must carry some normative structure, as D. Pietrzyk-Reeves explains: “This is especially true in the discipline of international relations where institutional facts are not clearly settled, and reliance on a normative framework becomes necessary” (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2017, p. 178).

Although realists across the board are hesitant toward Geuss’s “ethics-first” approaches to political philosophy, there appears to be no lock-and-key answer as to why political values should be recognized as the popular model of legitimizing authority over political matters other than the Hobbesian adage that if men could rule themselves, there would be no need for government. What becomes crystallised in this rejection of (political) moralism is that political realism is not a branch of ethics because politics remains a distinct sphere of human activity that is for realists (as it was for Rawls and Aristotle) inherent to human nature.

As a paradigm of liberal thought, political realism would assume a prescriptive account of legitimate political arrangement and how it can be justified by explicitly political values: “... it does not seem enough to say that something is justified to me in an epistemic sense: to be normatively binding that justification has to connect to my agency in a normatively salient way” (Rossi, 2014, p. 13). This crude reconstruction is already not so far out of sight from Rawls’s political project. Both political realism and political liberalism, being reviews of the concept of the political in their own right, focus on the positive appraisal of what is “good” in a liberal political order. It’s clear that political realism tries to differentiate itself through the recognition of the self-standing nature of politics, but Rawls tries to share equally in this endeavour: “First, the priority of rights means (in its general meaning) that the ideas of the good must be political ideas...” (Rawls, 2005, p. 209).

Second, and in continuation of the first, both political realism and political liberalism appear to belong to the same tradition of liberal philosophy. If this were not the case, political realism would present a critique external to the tradition of liberal thought, which does not seem to be the case since both political realism and politi-

cal liberalism dwell on essentially the same topics: government limited by law, individual rights and freedoms protected by the independent judiciary, and legitimization of authority based on a social contract.

For example, we may inspect the basic premises of realism in the international relations theory: states are self-interested actors (states operate on individualism in the anarchy of world politics), and state politics purport a pre-eminent authority over its citizens (pragmatic solutions to maximizing state interests under the assumption of moral asymmetry between the state and its citizens). We may compare these premises against what Burelli and Destri (2022) call instrumental normativity (a realist type of normativity independent of morality), which states that “we have reason to take what we believe are necessary means for our goals” (*ibidem*, p. 401). Instrumental normativity alone is not equipped to arrive at truth-claims “Since it only pertains to the internal coherence between attitudes and beliefs, it only works with the set of beliefs we already have and does not constitute a ground for individuals to change patently false beliefs” (*ibidem*, p. 404). Still, it is a useful approach for assessing the normative relationship between morality and politics, similar to how public reason works in Rawls; an individual or an institution might not particularly care about the moral standing of some ethnic minority group within the state, but they might care about preventing uprisings because it is in their interest to maintain social and political order. Here, the individual or the institution has instrumental reason to consider other people’s moral interests.

If political realism is attempting to distance itself from moralist concepts like justice the aim of which would be (from the above example) to increase the moral standing of an ethnic minority group, then the question is how political authority is justified under realism – by provisioning a more pragmatic approach to politics, or by adopting a more fleshed-out normative framework, however minimal or non-universal? On the one hand, realist approaches to normativity could be boiled down to its pragmatic and individualistic character, something deeply entrenched within the liberal tradition as seen through, for example, the critique of an ontological essence and natural rights, and the separation of the public and the private (Hay, 2012; Shusterman, 1994). On the other, we may say that political realists seek to establish a core set of political values (or at least concerns) through which it is possible to derive normative political judgements irrelevant to personal moralities.

Third, there must exist a tension between political realism and political liberalism on the basis of overly moralistic or idealistic grounds. In general, non-ideal theorists (such as Valentini, 2012) commit to stronger structural claims of non-ideal theory as a vital component of theorising political values (Rawls, for instance, relies on both ideal and non-ideal elements to guide political action). Non-ideal theory argues that theorising a political value, be it justice or legitimacy, is intrinsic to non-

ideal enterprise, rendering ideal theories of political values *ipso facto* scholastically distorted. But political realism is not non-ideal theory – it would be, at least in this case, a critical approach to normative theory that is “meant to uncover injustice, tensions and contradictions of social structures” (Pietzyk-Reeves, 2017, p. 179-180), whereas (radically speaking) injustice perpetrated by Rawls as an ideal theorist pertains to his engagement with philosophical indoctrination. The realist disagreement with Rawls can be seen to be premised on an epistemic disagreement about the virtue of justice in its relation to politics and as a formulation of ideology critique by radical realists (c.f. Raekstad, 2021; Aytac and Rossi, 2022).

Although political realism and political liberalism converge on the idea of politics as an autonomous realm of behaviour, political realism protests the superimposition of a political philosophy extricated from moral contingencies. The objection to Rawls is an objection to his attempt to build a normative political framework around what he perceives to be individual moral principles, failing to recognize the normative association between morality and politics, for which reason moral values are inapt for guiding political action.

4.2. A Consensus View of Realist Legitimacy?

Realist political autonomy from the moral could be theorized as both an inherent advantage and a dubious grey area of human behaviour. The moral and political divide is not absolute in every realist account, but the almost functionalist overarching realist dimension could facilitate the justification of anything, provided there is a clear structure to the realist argument (c.f. Lakatos and Feyerabend, 1999, for their “anything goes” argument). The bottom line, then, is that political liberalism is more value-based, while political realism is more procedure-based. For instance, should a political realist want to find out whether a certain political action achieves wanted results and, at that, win an election (e.g. ban abortion but not compromise a large portion of their constituency), they are not burdened in this process with any regard to moral considerations. Although political realism does not put forward a social scientific theory that aspires to become a guidebook to success in politics, it is in principle an attempt at elevating the level of abstraction of politics to the level of abstraction that morality is on. As such, it demands a more settled positionality of political philosophy with regard to the context that defines the (historical) circumstances and conditions for political action.

Even so, as we have seen, the veil of ignorance experiment can also act as a contextualist approach to political normativity. Although the non-ideal aspect of political liberalism is more partial to the realist critique against the “out of touch” character of liberal theory, political liberalism and its constitutive consensus legitimacy remain fused to a set of assumptions about the morality and politics dichoto-

my that realists reject (see e.g. Sleat, 2014). Plainly, realists disapprove of Rawls's ineptness to navigate through what counts as a valid concern for politics, but this criticism is partly rebutted if we consider the veil of ignorance experiment.

One realist alternative to the disagreement with the liberal consensus view of legitimacy founded on morality that Rawls vetoes is *modus vivendi* (c.f. Rossi, 2010), whose realist exponents return to the Hobbesian state of nature. Rawls, on the other hand, advocates for an overlapping consensus in which members of different comprehensive doctrines co-exist politically, but both positions emphasize the dangers of extra-contractual existence, which is epiphenomenal and tightly bound to the fact of pluralism.

Dependent on the pragmatism of the principle of toleration, Rawls hopes that differences "can at least be moderated, even if not entirely removed, so that social cooperation on the basis of mutual respect can be maintained" (Rawls, 1985, p. 231). Rawls then goes further than hoping differences can be moderated; the substance of his political liberalism demands that citizens be *willing* to support fair terms of cooperation. *Modus vivendi*, in lieu, is a solidarity founded on an existential fear that serves as a ligature of human cooperation. Positioning these two visions against each other, one can see that the realist position against liberal universal foundations of social life (at least as it is proposed by *modus vivendi*) does not have to entirely deviate from Rawls's hypothetical contract under which individuals respect one another out of fear and self-interest, not out of mutual respect for each other as moral equals.

Pluralism, then, is a firm parallel between political liberalism and political realism and perhaps the only ethical position that political realism can endorse. As J. Gray puts it, "value pluralism is an account of ethical life as we find it" (Gray, 2000, p. 35; c.f. Horton, 2006). The nature of this pluralism raises important questions about the role of citizens in legitimating authority. For political realism, *modus vivendi* would be an acceptable societal arrangement whereas for Rawls, *modus vivendi* is merely the outcome of a balance of power that lacks any moral foundation. What comes out of this is that political realism treats the fact of pluralism as a descriptive ethical position, while political liberalism treats the fact of pluralism as a normative ethical position. The pertinent question for political realists then becomes: by which means does a pluralistic society "recognize" the priority of politics?

An overlapping consensus is not enforced on the citizens and Rawls does not find it politically necessary that people agree on a comprehensive doctrine, while for political realism, it is impossible for citizens to endorse the virtue of politics from their own point of view; they must endorse it from the point of view of politics because while comprehensive doctrines are consistent with the basics of a liberal

society but inconsistent with each other, realist political norms must be consistent with a collective recognition of the primacy of politics over morality.

Political realism has two options in order to stop the need for consensus from arising in the legitimation game characterized by a pluralistic society. The first option is put forward by B. Williams whereby political legitimacy rests on a *justificatory* theory of legitimacy: "... the subject of a state is anyone who is in its power, whom by its own lights it can rightfully coerce under its laws and institutions" (Williams, 2008, p. 4). The problem with justification, where morality is not the basis for political legitimacy, is that it does not directly relate to values that citizens consider important to them, such as individual rights, equality and justice. The second option rests on a degree of *coercion* to aspire to the fact of political virtue in the game of political legitimation.

But coercion is where liberalism ends, and for political realism to remain a liberal discourse on legitimation it cannot violate this principle – it must instead either produce a potent account of the non-rejectability of political priority or there must exist a consensus view of realist legitimacy. For that to come into consideration, realism must consider pluralism as a normative fact, not a descriptive one, opening the gate for citizens to aspire to the virtue of political primacy *collectively* and *consensually*. But given the current lack of theory behind this proposition, it is up to the scholars of political realism to explore the possibilities for a realist consensus view of legitimacy. Already at an intuitive level, the discussion around realist consensus would first and foremost be a discussion on pluralism – is it a descriptive fact whose sole capacity is facilitating the application of the political, or is it a normative standard for legitimate decision-making? This question must be addressed by realist scholars before continuing to theorise the nature of realist consensus, by whom it is demanded and to what ends.

5. Conclusions

Political realism is argued to be the new game in the town of legitimation, and this paper has explained why via a comparison with Rawls's theory of political liberalism as a counter-position. While Rawls attempts to reconcile morality with politics by building the political concept around different conceptions of the good, realists aim to push down on moral frames through the separate realm of politics. Political realists argue for a more comprehensive account of political autonomy that is expressed in political terms, which would allow for the legitimation of political authority that is not premised on morality. The novelty behind political realism as a legitimation theory is warranted by the focus on legitimacy and not justice as the first virtue of politics.

The theoretical positions of political realism and political liberalism converge at several points. Both can be considered as grounded in liberal philosophy, and

both aspire to formulate theories of political legitimacy. This is reaffirmed through their mutual acknowledgement of the fact of pluralism, albeit with a varying range of normative implications for political legitimacy. This difference translates to perhaps the biggest challenge facing realists, which is the lack of a normative account of the fact of pluralism since political realism as a justificatory theory cannot (nor does it seek to) justify the priority of politics to individuals who are observers, not agents of politics. At the same time, citizens are the source of legitimacy, and it could be the case that there is a missing link between legitimacy and agency. Without a non-rejectable account of political primacy, it is sensible to propose a consensus view of realist legitimacy.

In order to refine our understanding of what is political, we must study the moral. Neither approach is the only way to address matters of political philosophy, nor is either of them necessarily the best approach. However, this does not mean that there is no question immune to, or at least incapable of drawing benefit from, the realist approach.

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