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LEVELS OF NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY[1]

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Abstract

Much of contemporary analytical political philosophy has been dedicated to methodological questions, especially those concerning realism in normative political theory. Bernard Williams's criticism of what he calls 'political moralism' and his defense of political realism have been a major source of these discussions (Williams 2005). In a similar vein, Jonathan Wolff criticizes the idea of applied philosophy by contrasting it with more practically oriented engaged philosophy (Wolff 2020). However, David Estlund has put forward several arguments to the effect that political realists, including Williams, have not demonstrated that anything is wrong with a kind of political theory that is abstract, unrealistic, and morality-based (Estlund 2020). Building on insights from Williams, Wolff, and Estlund, I shall argue that

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their views on normative political philosophy are not mutually exclusive and that the best way to further advance their points is to take into account different levels of normative political theory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much of contemporary analytical political philosophy has been dedicated to methodological and meta-normative questions, especially those concerning realism in normative political theory. Bernard Williams's criticism of what he calls 'political moralism' and his defense of political realism have been a major source of these discussions (Williams 2005). In a nutshell, Williams argues that the political domain has its own specific form of normativity, which, in political philosophy, can only be captured by political realism (or, at least, this is how his view of political realism is usually understood). In a similar vein, Jonathan Wolff criticizes the idea of applied philosophy by contrasting it with more practically oriented engaged philosophy (Wolff 2020). However, David Estlund has put forward several arguments to the effect that political realists, including Williams, have not demonstrated that anything is wrong with a kind of political theory (particularly a theory of justice) that is abstract, unrealistic, and morality-based (Estlund 2020). After all, that theory might be the true theory of justice. Estlund has also argued against practicalism—the view that "only practical political theory has value" (Estlund 2011, 396).

Building on insights from Williams, Wolff, and Estlund, I shall argue that their views on normative political philosophy are not mutually exclusive and that the best way to further advance their points is to take into account different levels of normative political theory. In particular, I shall argue that although the idea of 'levels of normative political theory' is implicit in much of contemporary political theorizing, there is a need to make explicit the basic presuppositions of the levels view, clearly delineate between the levels,

and formulate a cogent argument in favor of the levels view—an argument that is presently lacking.

This paper is structured in the following way. In the section titled 'Explicating the Levels View,' I present the levels view. In the section titled 'The Plurality of Political Normativity,' I argue that each level has its own kind of normativity. I also defend the idea of *a plurality of political normativity*. Note that by 'levels of normative political theory,' I mean that theories might be more or less abstract, which does not imply either hierarchy or any kind of reductionism. So, to argue for a plurality of political normativity, I am going to show that the normativity of each level cannot be reduced to some other level considered more basic.

2. EXPLICATING THE LEVELS VIEW

To explicate what I mean by 'levels,' I shall distinguish between the following levels of normative political theory: (1) the abstract level, (2) the realistic level, and (3) the practical level. I now discuss these three levels in turn.[2]

Level 1: The Abstract Level

Although there is no necessity for normative political theory to be highly abstract, much of political philosophy displays highly abstract theorizing. Indeed, normative considerations and justifications within dominant theories related to legitimacy, justice, democracy, and so on usually abstract away from many features of political practice. Philosophers then focus on hypothetical

2 Some important aspects of the levels view that I will defend are captured by the difference Swift and White identify between a "level of philosophical abstraction" and a "level of policy" (Swift and White 2008, 50, 51). They go on to explain that "some political theory simply operates at a different level of abstraction from the political choices actually on the agenda for a particular polity at a particular time" (Swift and White 2008, 52). Swift and White further argue that there is nothing problematic with doing political theory at the level of philosophical abstraction. However, on their view, it is wrong to completely neglect the level of policy in political theory. So, starting from the perspective of abstract philosophical theorizing, they end up arguing for the importance of both levels of normative political theory.

scenarios while aiming to justify certain *principles* of justice, legitimacy, or democracy. These hypothetical scenarios are often depicted with the use of thought experiments. However, the use of abstract ways of thinking goes even further by formulating *ideals* of well-ordered societies regulated by principles of justice, legitimacy, or democracy. To be sure, much of mainstream political theorizing is based on these highly abstract devices.

Modern social contract theory and Rawls's theory of justice are paradigmatic in this respect. They both rely heavily on the device of hypothetical agreement situations depicted using thought experiments. Examples include the 'state of nature' in modern social contract theory or the 'original position' with its 'veil of ignorance' in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971). In modern social contract theory, these thought experiments lead to a justification of the state (as in Hobbes's theory) or a justification of the principles of legitimate government (as in Locke's theory). In the case of Rawls's theory, the original position leads to justifying the basic principles of justice. Social contract theorists, such as Locke and Rousseau, go even further in formulating ideals of legitimate and democratic government. In Rawls's theory, considerations of legitimacy and democracy are incorporated into a much wider ideal of the well-ordered society regulated by the principles of justice.

Interestingly, one of the reasons why Rawls later criticized his own theory of justice is that it was too abstract. It also did not take into account some important features of democratic societies—features that the theory was designed to accommodate in the first place. For that reason, Rawls includes the notion of 'reasonable pluralism' in his later view, developed in *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 2005, 36). Now the question is not only about the nature of the principles of justice that someone would agree with in the hypothetical original position. It is also about whether there might be an overlapping consensus related to the same principles from a plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. This is less abstract than the earlier view from *A Theory of Justice*. Nonetheless, focusing on reasonable comprehensive doctrines and reasonable citizens in *Political Liberalism* makes Rawls's revised theory vulnerable to criticism that it is still too abstract.

The general point I want to make is that although there is a continuum containing more or less abstract normative political theories, we can have a clear idea of whether a certain piece of political theorizing belongs to a more abstract, more realistic, or more practical level. Although there are no sharp boundaries between the levels, I do not think that this precludes the possibility of determining the level of abstractness some theory is operating at. Returning to the example of Rawls's later political theory, it remains at the abstract level of normative political theory (even if it is less abstract than his earlier view). The gist of the argument is that although theories might be more or less abstract at each level, a certain boundary enables us to realize which level a theory belongs to.

Boundaries between levels also do not imply that it is impossible to mix considerations from different levels for certain theoretical purposes (I return to this point in the next section). In any event, having a clear idea about levels enables us to (a) criticize inappropriate mixtures and/or (b) check whether a theory is as abstract, realistic, or practical as it purports to be. For example, Rawls's later theory can be criticized for not being practical enough. Moreover, it does not seem to belong to the realistic level of normative political theory (even if it is more realistic than his earlier theory).

Level 2: The Realistic Level

Realism in political theory is often understood as opposing the abstractness and moralism that characterize the dominant ways of doing political philosophy. Williams has recently revived the realist perspective by (a) contrasting political realism and political moralism, and (b) criticizing dominant models of normative political theory for being too remote from political practice. So, one of the realistic level's main characteristics is the idea that normative political theory should take into account more realistic views of politics, justice, democracy, legitimacy, and so on.

Williams's view of legitimacy in terms of the 'basic legitimation demand' (BLD) is exemplary in that regard. Importantly, he makes a distinction between an enactment model and a structural model of political theory, where the first model might be associated with utilitarian approaches and the second with Rawls's political

philosophy. Williams thinks that despite their differences, both models promote political moralism as an appropriate approach to political theory. This is done by either looking for (moral) principles one could apply to political practice or abstractly examining the conditions of legitimacy one should apply to real political institutions. According to Williams, these approaches are characterized by the way that they "both represent the priority of the moral over the political" (Williams 2005, 2). On his view, the dominant ways of doing political philosophy or normative political theory are wrong because they presuppose the priority of morality over politics, which widens the gap between political theory and real politics. Williams thus advances a view of political realism that "gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams 2005, 3). From this perspective, he then puts forward his account of the BLD as an alternative to dominant ways of thinking about legitimacy in normative political theory.

On Williams's account, the BLD is a principle stating that "the state has to offer a justification of its power *to each subject*" (Williams 2005, 4). If this principle is not satisfied, then, through the use of state power, some people are becoming significantly disadvantaged (meaning that they have reasons to be fearful). Such a situation then signals that the use of state power has become a problem instead of a solution. The principle is basic in the sense that it offers an answer to what Williams calls the "first political question," that is, "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (Williams 2005, 3). It is not that the BLD is the only condition that can be adduced for state power to be legitimate. Instead, on Williams's view, the BLD is the necessary condition guaranteeing that state power is a solution to the first political question rather than a problem.

Given that the BLD is a principle with a moral dimension, it seems reasonable to ask how political realism is different from political moralism. Here is Williams's answer to that kind of dilemma:

> It may be asked whether the BLD is itself a moral principle. If it is, it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics: in particular, because it is inherent in there being first a political

> question. The situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation: it is, rather, the situation which the existence of the political is in the first place supposed to alleviate (replace). If the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution to the first political question, and not itself be part of the problem, something has to be said to explain (to the less empowered, to concerned bystanders, to children being educated in this structure, etc.) what the difference is between the solution and the problem, and that cannot simply be an account of successful domination. It has to be something in the mode of justifying explanation or legitimation: hence the BLD. (Williams 2005, 5)

In what follows, I shall not delve into the success of Williams's solution to the aforementioned dilemma. Instead, my main concern is the problem of understanding the realistic level of normative political theory given some ambiguities in Williams's conception of political realism.

In this context, the main problem is the ambiguity between political theory and politics (or political practice). As we have seen, Williams thinks that political realism "gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams 2005, 3), which is best understood as a claim about political theory. In my terms, this refers to the realistic level of normative political theory. That said, Williams also states that the BLD is "a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics" (Williams 2005, 5). This means that the principle belongs to politics, not to political theory. But this is clearly wrong, since there are no political actors who ever claimed the satisfaction of the BLD. So, there is ambiguity between understanding the BLD as something inherent to politics and understanding it as something inherent to political theory. The ambiguity might be resolved by saying that the BLD (as a principle) is characteristic of the political realist approach, which is appropriate (at least for the sake of argument) at the realistic level of normative political theory.

This line of argument also offers a disambiguation concerning the abstractness and moral dimension of the BLD. The BLD is still a principle, even if it is (a) less abstract than the principles

characterizing dominant approaches to normative political theory and (b) not derived from morality prior to understanding the basics of politics (let us also suppose this for the sake of argument). The BLD is, however, not a principle because of being inherent to politics, but because of being a way of engaging in normative thinking about politics.[3] This is as it should be, since the BLD is a principle belonging to political theory and more specifically to the realistic level of normative political theory. What distinguishes Williams's political realist approach (and his account of the BLD) from dominant approaches in normative political theory is that it offers a more realistic view of legitimacy. In this sense, his approach vindicates the relevance of taking into account the realistic level of normative political theory.

Note that even this view might be criticized for being too concessive to political realism. In various places, Williams says that abstractness is a necessary feature of (political) philosophy. For example, in his discussion of modernity, which places more stringent conditions on legitimacy, Williams says that it is "a very general sketch at a very high level of generality" (Williams 2005, 15). Another example is Williams's discussion of human rights, which he says "will display philosophical abstraction" (Williams 2005, 64). He goes on to explain that "it is the ineliminable consequence which follows from a philosopher's discussing the subject at all" (Williams 2005, 64). But a critic could then insist that political realism is then no different from dominant approaches in normative political theory. One answer to the critic is to say that normative political theory can be more or less abstract and that political realism displays a less abstract way of political thinking than dominant approaches. If so, then it makes sense to treat political realism as a distinct approach in political theory and, when appropriate, accept that there is a realistic level of normative political theory.

In contrast to previous criticisms, proponents of political realism might criticize my use of Williams's theory to elucidate the realistic level of normative political theory as being alien to the basic intentions of his thinking about politics. According to this critic, one of the main intentions of Williams's political realism is

3 For more on this point, see Larmore (2013, 16).

not only to offer a more realistic view of politics than dominant theories, but also to argue that those theories are misleading and should be replaced with a completely different way of thinking about politics. Instead of answering this kind of criticism directly, I shall point out that Williams sometimes hints at the idea of levels of normative political theory.[4]

The most explicit claim in this regard can be found in Williams (2006), where he writes the following:

> There is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them; and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from. (Williams 2006, 192)

Now, I do not want to suggest that Williams's view completely maps onto the proposed idea of levels of normative political theory. Nonetheless, I think that he, at least implicitly, presupposes the idea of levels and that the first kind of activity belongs to the practical level, the second kind of activity to the abstract level, and the third kind of activity to the realistic level (although a historical understanding is only part of it). Thus, I aim to make explicit the idea of levels of normative political theory that is already implicit in Williams's views about various types of activities within political philosophy.

Level 3: The Practical Level

To introduce the difference between the realistic and the practical level, I shall start with a distinction Baderin makes between 'displacement' and 'detachment' critiques of dominant approaches in normative political theory (Baderin 2014). On her view, both types of criticism belong to realism in normative political theory. There is, however, a difference in that the displacement critique claims that "normative political theory threatens or disrespects politics,"

4 See, for example, Williams (2005, 17, 76).

while the detachment critique says that "political theorists… have a responsibility to face outwards towards real politics, rather than absorbing themselves in technical and abstract theoretical debates" (Baderin 2014, 132, 134). In other words, according to the first critique, greater realism is needed because abstract political theory might be misleading and even dangerous due to distorting the reality of political life. According to the second critique, the main problem of mainstream political theory is that it is completely irrelevant to real-world politics.

Although both kinds of criticism call for a more realistic view of political theory, Baderin points out that they actually contradict each other. The problem for realism in political theory is that "we must weigh the charge that political theory is useless against the fear that it is dangerous" (Baderin 2014, 145). This problem disappears if we consider these critiques to be operating on different levels of normative political theory, that is, on the realistic and the practical level. So, the charge that there is a contradiction in recommendations of how to do normative political theory is rebutted when taking into account the following point: Instead of representing different strands of realism, the displacement and the detachment critiques operate at different levels of normative political theory—the former on the realistic level and the latter on the practical level.

Another conceptual distinction might be useful for explicating the practical level of normative political theory. Wolff proposes a difference between 'applied' and 'engaged' philosophy to elucidate the most appropriate normative way of thinking vis-à-vis public policy (Wolff 2020).[5] Although formulating recommendations related to public policy is not the only activity where normative political thinking might have practical importance, I take Wolff's understanding of engaged philosophy in the context of public policy to be representative of the practical level of normative political theory. The main point about the difference between applied and engaged philosophy is that standard approaches in political philosophy to formulating principles, building theories based on those

5 For more on the idea of applied philosophy, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2017).

principles, and then applying them to political practice might be irrelevant to public policy.

There are several reasons for this. For example, there might be many inputs from other disciplines that are (more) relevant, or the recommendations might not be supported by public opinion. So, on Wolff's view, the engaged philosophy approach might be more relevant than the applied philosophy approach in the context of formulating public policy. He lists the following six steps, which are characteristic of engaged political thinking in this regard: (1) identifying the issue and current state of affairs (including relevant facts and legislation), (2) identifying the arguments and values that are relevant in the context of concern, (3) taking into account history and comparisons with already existing solutions in other places, (4) creating a profile of possible solutions, (5) evaluating options, and (6) formulating appropriate policy recommendations (Wolff 2020).

Wolff makes the same point by articulating a difference between 'theory-driven' and 'problem-driven' approaches (Wolff 2011). However, this difference might be misleading in a way that the first is not. If we understand the theory-driven approach to be only relevant to applied philosophy, then the difference is pertinent. But why not suppose that engaged philosophy might be both theory-driven and problem-driven? Wolff's main point is that the theory-driven approach alone is not enough to arrive at the most relevant public policy recommendation. But this does not imply that theory-driven approach cannot be relevant when formulating public policy recommendations. It might just be that in addition to looking for the most appropriate principles, values, and arguments, it is necessary to do the hard work that is specific to the problem-driven approach. So, the practical level of normative political theory can be both theory-driven and problem-driven.

My analysis so far suggests that, in addition to the abstract level, it is important to recognize the relevance of doing political theory at less abstract levels. I have labeled these the 'realistic level' and the 'practical level' of normative political theory. However, in the light of the aforementioned detachment critique, my view of the practical level might be criticized in the same way as my view of

the realistic level: The critic might object that the whole point of distinguishing between applied and engaged philosophy is that the first approach is mistaken and that the theory-driven approach in general should be abandoned. Again, instead of arguing directly against this kind of critique, I shall point out that on Wolff's view, recognizing the relevance of engaged philosophy does not mean that more abstract political thinking is useless. Quite the contrary, he says the following:

> In trying to work out how moral and political philosophers can engage with, contribute to, and learn from policy debates, I am not at all suggesting that this is all philosophers in these areas should do. We continue to need a wide variety of approaches, methodologies and interests. This includes what has become known as 'ideal theory,' where philosophers set out visions of how things should be, without worrying about the practicalities of implementation. As I have said, debate needs ideal theory. Without it, discussions would be limp and unimaginative. (Wolff 2011, 205)

I take this passage to be implicitly pointing in the direction of different levels of normative political theory. It suggests not only that there must be room for different levels of normative political thinking, but also that these levels are each valuable in their own way. It also testifies that the theory-driven and problem-driven approaches need not necessarily exclude each other, even at the practical level.

Taking into consideration some aspects of the well-known distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory can be helpful for understanding the importance of the practical level.[6] Rawls introduced the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory in *A Theory of Justice* to differentiate between considerations concerning the ideal of perfectly just society and considerations of justice relevant to solving the problems we face in the real world. Moreover, in explaining this distinction, Rawls emphasized the priority of ideal over non-ideal theory by saying that "until the ideal is identified, at least in outline—and that is all we should expect—nonideal

6 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting me to take into consideration the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory in this context.

theory lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered" (Rawls 1999, 90). In my view, some of the main criticisms of the priority that Rawls gives to ideal over non-ideal theory can be understood as arguments in favor of the practical level in normative political theory.

In this regard, Amartya Sen's critique of Rawls's understanding of the priority of ideal theory is particularly important (Sen 2009). Sen argues that the ideal of perfectly just society is neither sufficient nor necessary for addressing injustices in the real world. First, even if such a conception exists, it would not be sufficient to compare different types of injustice. Second, it is not even necessary, because deciding between two options for confronting injustice does not require determining the ideal of a perfectly just society in the first place. Sen illustrates this with the example that when deciding whether we prefer a Picasso or a Van Gogh painting, we do not need to know which painting is the best in the world (Sen 2009, 101). I think that Sen's arguments against Rawls's view on ideal theory support the idea of the practical level in normative political theory. Sen's criticism of Rawls's conception of ideal theory is usually understood as an argument in favor of non-ideal theory. However, given that Sen in his critique does not use the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, but rather the distinction between transcendental and comparative approach, the comparative approach that he advocates for, in my view, is more appropriately understood as characteristic of the practical level in normative political theory.[7]

In this section, I have elaborated on the most pertinent conceptual distinctions. In doing so, I tried to make explicit the idea of levels of normative political theory—an idea that is already implicit in some exemplary views. In the rest of the paper, I shall focus on the question of normativity in political theory. More precisely,

7 It should be pointed out that Sen does not consider it a necessary implication of his criticism that the transcendental approach should be completely rejected. He even explicitly states that the comparative and transcendental approaches can be parts of a single theory, which he calls a conglomerate theory, but adds that Rawls has not offered such a theory (Sen 2009, 97). Valentini also argues that Sen's critique of Rawls's understanding of ideal theory does not necessarily suggest a complete rejection of the transcendental approach (Valentini 2012).

by starting from the idea of levels of normative political theory, I am going to explore the possibility that each level has its own specific kind of political normativity. The hope is that this sort of investigation, if successful, might provide further justification for the idea of different levels of normative political thinking.

3. THE PLURALITY OF POLITICAL NORMATIVITY

I shall start this section with what I call "the question of normativity in political theory." This question can be formulated as follows:

> Is there only one conception of normativity in normative political theory, or are there specific conceptions of normativity for each level?

The 'monistic view' answers the question of normativity by saying (and arguing) that there is just one conception of normativity. The 'pluralistic view' claims that there is a plurality of political normativity and argues in favor of specific kinds of normativity for each level of normative political theory.

One of the implications of the monistic view is that it might lead to reductionism and eliminativism. Thus, if some political theory can be reduced to another theory at a level considered more basic, then it could also be reasonable to ask what task is left for the former kind of theory. If there is just one conception of political normativity (as per the monistic view), then political theories can be either reduced to that kind of normativity or eliminated because they have no role to play in normative political theory. But if someone holds the pluralistic view, then there is no need for either reductionism or eliminativism. One of the implications of the pluralistic view is that someone can be justified in holding different theories on different levels of normative political theory.

The monistic view is commonly used as a basis for criticism of political moralism and abstract political thinking. If only political realism depicts political normativity, then all political theories can be either reduced to the realistic level or eliminated due to having

no normative role to play. Galston, for instance, says that Williams's political realism,

> encompasses approaches that give more autonomy to 'distinctively political thought'… this is not meant to imply that politics is amoral or immoral; rather, appropriate standards of evaluation arise from within politics rather than from an external moral standpoint. (Galston 2010, 387–388)

Obviously, Galston inherits the same ambiguity from Williams's political realism, which I addressed in the previous section. Leaving aside that ambiguity, it is noteworthy that only one kind of political normativity is presupposed from the perspective of political realism, which implies that either political moralism should be abandoned or moral principles such as the BLD should be understood as arising from the very specific realistic conception of political normativity that is inherent in politics. But by disambiguating Williams's claims, I have already established that this understanding of the source of normativity within political realism is problematic.

Although the monistic view is usually employed to argue in favor of political realism, this need not be necessarily the case. It is also possible to use the monistic view to show that political realism can be reduced to political moralism. On the monistic view defended by Leader Maynard and Worsnip, there is only one kind of moral normativity, from which even political realism derives its normative force (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018). So again, reduction follows, but now for political realism. However, if we assume the levels view and that there is a conception of normativity that is specific for each level, then there might be no contradiction between Level 1 and Level 2 (or Level 1 and Level 3).

As indicated, I am in favor of the pluralistic view and against reductionism and eliminativism in political theory. A consequence of this view is a defense of the kind of abstract political thinking that characterizes much of political philosophy while accepting the importance of more realistic and practical view. What follows if the monistic view of normative political theory is correct? It follows that there is a need to tell other people how to do normative

political theory (e.g., to avoid political moralism). However, there is no need for this if there are different levels, since political moralism might be appropriate at the abstract level for someone who accepts a more realistic view at the realistic and practical levels. So, even if the realistic political theory that characterizes Level 2 is correct, there is nothing wrong with doing abstract political theory (at Level 1).

Some might object that the pluralistic view, in a way just presented, leads to relativism. It is, therefore, important to point out that this is not necessarily a consequence of the pluralistic view. This view just says that it might be legitimate for someone to hold different theories at different levels of normative political theory. But this need not necessarily be the case because various mixtures of considerations from different levels might also be appropriate for some purposes. In that case, it is important to have a clear view of which levels a certain consideration belongs to and to preserve coherence across different levels.[8] It follows that the pluralistic view does not necessarily imply relativism.

I now turn to a justification of the plurality of political normativity. It is often argued that a normative political theory is wrong if it ignores the fact that people in the real world will not comply with its proposals. Estlund accepts that normative political proposals can be invalidated if they fail to invoke complaisance. However, he also argues that a principle's normative force remains untouched by this kind of criticism. In particular, political principles are different from institutional proposals. Although it is not the case that we ought to *build* basic social institutions according to principles if we are not going to *comply* with them, this says nothing about those very principles and does not undermine the normative force of a theory that says we ought to *build* and *comply*. These might still be true principles (of justice), and it might be true that we ought to build and comply with basic social institutions regulated by those principles.

Estlund motivates this idea by using the example of Professor Procrastinate (Estlund 2020, 29–30). Suppose that Professor Procrastinate is duty-bound to write a book review for a journal

8 A similar idea is defended in Erman and Möller (2018, 150).

because he earlier promised to do so. Then the time comes when he is asked whether he will accept the assignment. However, it is quite certain that he will not complete the assignment even if he accepts. This raises a question about whether Professor Procrastinate ought to accept the assignment to write the book review. It seems obvious that he ought not to *accept*, given that he will not write the book review. Still, this does not by itself cancel the prior obligation that he ought to *accept* and *write* the assignment. But how is it possible to concurrently hold that Professor Procrastinate ought to accept and write, and that he ought not to accept? Estlund uses the Professor Procrastinate example to point out that the same normative requirement might hold for a society. The fact that people will not comply with a certain principle of justice suggests that institutions ought not to be built by adopting this principle as a guiding idea. Still, this fact does not undermine the obligation that society ought to build and comply with the principle of justice. But how is it possible to concurrently hold that society ought to build and comply (with the principle of justice), and that it ought not to build?

Part of the trouble stems from the logical principle of distributivity over conjuncts. If we start from the assumption that Professor Procrastinate ought to accept and write, and if we think that the principle of distributivity is plausible, then, given that he will not write, we must conclude that he ought not to accept. But this contradicts the starting assumption. One way to get out of this trouble is to reject the principle of distributivity over conjuncts. But Estlund thinks that the solution to this problem does not necessarily require the rejection of a plausible logical principle. He therefore suggests that another, more plausible solution might be to accept the idea of a plurality of ought (or, in my terms, the 'plurality of political normativity'). If we accept this idea, then there might be no contradiction, since different 'oughts' might operate on different levels. In the case of society, the normative requirement that it ought to build and comply belongs to a different level (the abstract level) from the normative requirement that it ought not to build (which belongs to the practical level). This dissolves the contradiction.

Although Estlund suggests that this might be a solution in both the Professor Procrastinate case and the society case, he does not commit himself to the idea of a plurality of ought. Does this mean that he also does not endorse the idea of the plurality of political normativity? I think that other places in his work clearly indicate his implicit acceptance of the levels view and the related idea of the plurality of political normativity. Here is the most pertinent passage for identifying a difference between abstract and practical levels:

> There is a place for non-hopeless theory, but it is not privileged in the way it is often assumed. Non-hopeless theory is what we want when we want to know what we should do, in practice, *given* what people and institutions are actually likely to do and taking those facts as given. This is obviously an important inquiry. We do, after all, have to act one way or another. Acting as if people or institutions will behave in some better way might sometimes be a way of improving them, but even in that case, action is to be guided by what we think the probabilities are. In other words, an action plan that has false premises about how people or institutions are likely to act is unsound and sometimes dangerous. We need to concede these facts in practice, but not in all of our moral conclusions. In addition to nonconcessive theory, then, we also need concessive normative theory. The view I am arguing against holds that hopeless theory is misguided, and based on a mistake about moral thinking. The stance I defend here is inclusive: hopeless theory and concessive theorizing are both perfectly legitimate—there are moral truths and insights of both kinds, and neither enterprise is based on some kind of mistake. (Estlund 2020, 119–120)

So far, I have presupposed a distinctive normativity that is characteristic of political realism and, consequently, for a realistic level of normative political theory. However, it turns out to be difficult to pin down what 'distinctively political normativity' in political realism means.[9] Matt Sleat has recently defended the idea that

9 In a recent paper, Erman and Möller (2022) delineate between what they call 'non-moral' and 'moral' views of distinctively political normativity (which should not be confused with the difference between political realism and political moralism, since both views are characteristic of realist thought). Erman and Möller think that moral views are more promising in this regard.

political realism does not necessarily exclude moral considerations (Sleat 2022). He explains that there are two versions of political realism when it comes to the relationship between morality and politics. Relying on an earlier paper, he calls these the "stronger" and the "weaker" versions of political realism (Rossi and Sleat 2014; Sleat 2022, 470–471). The distinction is explained as follows:

> The strong version insists that it is possible to derive normative political judgments from specifically political values… the weaker version of the realist claim accepts that there is a place for morality in politics but seeks, in Williams' words, to explicate 'an approach which gives greater autonomy to distinctively political thought'. (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 690)

Sleat thinks that the weaker version is the mainstream realist approach and that the stronger version can be criticized for offering an incorrect conception of distinctively political normativity. His main point is that having a conception of distinctively political normativity does not preclude the possibility of evoking moral considerations. It is just that "the normative prescriptions of theory should be filtered through or aligned to the realities of politics" (Sleat 2022, 474).[10]

However, since Sleat connects the mainstream view of realism (which he subscribes to) with Williams's version of political realism, the former inherits the ambiguity between political theory and politics (or political practice), which I identified in the previous section. On the one hand, Sleat says that the mainstream version of political realism is a "political theory that gives politics 'greater' autonomy from morality" and that it is crucially important for this approach "how political theory understands the relationship between morality and political practice" (Sleat 2022, 466). These are obviously claims about (realist) political theory. On the other hand, when discussing the specifics of Williams's view, Sleat says that the BLD is "an evaluative dimension of politics that we can see as coming from within the practice of politics itself," which is obviously a claim about politics (Sleat 2022, 466). The two

10 A similar approach is defended in Jubb (2019).

are even taken to be synonymous in a sentence where Sleat (2022: 471) states that "realists are committed to the idea that we should not reduce political philosophy (or politics) to moral philosophy (or morality)" (Sleat 2022, 471). But these are not the same thing.

It seems that the source of the ambiguity lies in the realist conceiving of politics (or political practice) as an autonomous sphere. The problem is that political realists also think that this view of politics somehow limits or constrains ways of doing normative political theory. So, the claim is now that political realism in normative political theory is autonomous or, at least, "gives greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams 2005, 3). But realists never explain how exactly the view of politics as an autonomous sphere constrains or limits normative political theory (or makes it more autonomous). This creates the ambiguity between political theory and politics that characterizes contemporary political realism. Thus, one of the advantages of the levels view is that distinctively political normativity or the greater autonomy of realist political theory that characterizes the realistic level can be defended without evoking a claim about the political sphere's autonomy, which is what creates the ambiguity.

Another defense of distinctively political normativity from a realist perspective has been proposed by Kreutz and Rossi (2023). One of their main arguments is directed at Leader Maynard and Worsnip's critique of distinctively political normativity. Kreutz and Rossi reconstruct their argument against distinctively political normativity as follows:

> (P1) Just because a moral principle is either true or reasonable it doesn't follow that it is legitimate to enforce it politically. In other (realist) words, even if *A* morally-ought to ϕ it doesn't follow that *B politically*-ought to force *A* to ϕ.
>
> (C1) Political realists can claim to have found a non-moral yet normative political value, legitimacy, and thus to have unveiled a genuine political source of normativity.
>
> (P2) Just because a moral principle is either true or reasonable it doesn't follow that it is legitimate to enforce it politically. In other

> (moralist) words, even if *A* morally-ought to ϕ it doesn't follow that *B morally*-ought to force *A* to ϕ.
>
> (C2) The normativity of (P2), the observation that sometimes a true and reasonable moral principle shouldn't be enforced on others, springs from a moral source of normativity.
>
> (C3) Distinctively political normativity is redundant. (Kreutz and Rossi 2023, 861)

Invoking this argument allows critics of a realist version of distinctively political normativity to hold that moral normativity is sufficient to realize normativity's source in both cases. Simply put, if moral normativity is sufficient as a source of normativity in both cases, then there is no need for either a realist conception of political normativity or distinctively political normativity in general. In this way, Leader Maynard and Worsnip (2018) defend not only political moralism but also what I called 'the monistic view.' This is because one of their argument's aims is to show that political normativity can be reduced to moral normativity.

Kreutz and Rossi defend the political realist's version of distinctively political normativity by arguing that the conclusion about redundancy only follows if one presupposes moral normativity as the default position. They go on to argue that if political realists are not required to assume moral normativity as a default position, then there must be some room for (a realist version of) distinctively political normativity. They write as follows:

> There is no inconsistency nor redundancy in developing a realist account from a set of premises that the moralist accepts… the fact that despite agreeing on the premises (P1 and P2) realists and moralists develop two different accounts just indicates that realism is another prima facie viable position. (Kreutz and Rossi 2023, 862)

It is, therefore, supposed to be possible to "do normative political theory in a different way" (Kreutz and Rossi 2023, 862). However, this only shows that the argument against distinctively

political normativity is not conclusive. It does not establish that it is not valid.

On my view, the counter-argument's strength stems from the plurality of political normativity. Even if political moralism is a viable option, it alone cannot account for the different ways of doing normative political theory. If so, then a better option is to accept the idea of the plurality of political normativity. To the extent that Kreutz and Rossi's argument is successful, it moves in the direction of the levels view. Once again (now from the realist perspective), we arrive at a justification of the different levels of normative political theory by way of the plurality of political normativity.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that some important dilemmas in contemporary normative political theory can be resolved by taking into account the levels view (there are, though, no doubt many other remaining dilemmas to deal with). We have seen that my justification of the levels view is based on the plurality of political normativity. Specifically, I showed that the different ways in which political normativity is defended are not mutually exclusive and that their variety is best captured by the idea of the plurality of political normativity. I also offered reasons for why one should prefer the idea of the plurality of political normativity, which characterizes the levels view, over reductionism and eliminativism in normative political theory. On the proposal that I advance much of abstract, unrealistic, and morality-based ways of doing political philosophy are not undermined by criticism from the perspective of political realism. However, my view on the levels of normative political theory and related idea of plurality of political normativity imply that political philosophy should also contribute to addressing many injustices that we face in the real world.

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