

A Renaissance of Realism?

Recent Contributions to the Realist Tradition in Political Philosophy

Hans-Jörg Sigwart

Working Paper.

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The term “realism” has got a broad variety of meanings, encompassing, to name but a few, its everyday use as denoting an unsentimental down-to-earth-perspective on practical matters, its use in political science where it is usually understood as a label for a certain pragmatic and self-interested type of political agenda or, alternatively, for a specific tradition of IR-theory, or, finally, its meaning as a general philosophical concept, then mostly denoting a complex epistemological position regarding the relation between human consciousness and the phenomenal world. But what does the term “Realism” mean if taken as a *terminus technicus*, as it were, of *political philosophy*? This question, after having been rather absent from the mainstream debates within political theory during the past decades, has recently regained considerable significance. In the past years, a number of political theorists and philosophers have emphatically argued for the need to rediscover the “forgotten tradition” of political realism.¹

In the following pages I want to examine some of these recent contributions to the realist tradition, particularly those made by some English political philosophers, namely by Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, and John Gray. These contributions have attracted considerable attention particularly within the European political theory discourse, but partly also in the US, and they seemingly have (at least temporarily) succeeded to reintroduce the term “Realism” into the current theoretical debate as a term that indeed represents a distinct political philosophy, one which especially offers an alternative to the presumably still dominant model of liberal political theorizing as it is associated most prominently with the work of John Rawls.

In reviewing some of these recent variants of realist thought I will try to sketch a number of concepts and questions which are considered by the respective authors to be characteristic

¹ For an overview of this current debate on “political realism” see the summary by William Galston: *Realism in Political Theory*, in: *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (4) 2010, p.385-411

to political realism as a distinct and genuine perspective in political philosophy. Above all, I want to suggest that the core idea of realism which they, partly explicitly, partly only implicitly, put forth is a certain type of ethical theory. In spite of the notorious polemic against “idealism” and “moralism” in politics as it is characteristic for realist thinkers since Machiavelli, and in spite of the fact that realists consequently stress the emancipation of the Political from any form of abstract and absolute morality or ethics, political realism itself nonetheless is not to be understood as an amoral, or strictly fact-oriented, or “value-free”, or even as a cynical perspective on politics, but rather as a perspective which itself is eventually founded on a philosophical conception of political ethics, yet on a quite peculiar one.

Such a foundation in a specific conception of ethics – a political ethics of responsibility, as Max Weber famously termed it² – may indeed be a general feature of the realistic philosophical tradition in general. In order to understand realism as a political philosophy it may be crucial to understand this peculiar ethical foundation of it. And those most recent forms of realism as promoted by Williams, Gray, and Geuss, since they are expressively aimed against the supposedly mistaken “moralism” or “humanism” or “ethics-first” approaches in current mainstream political theory, are, so I want to argue in the following, especially interesting to consider in this respect.³ To this purpose I will at first give a brief general sketch of the debate under consideration (I.) and then try to elaborate some of its ethical themes. After examining the ethical or normative implications of the realist critique of current liberalism (II.), I will focus on the crucial role which is ascribed by the authors at hand to the concept of “legitimacy” (III.). Finally (IV.) I will outline the concluding thesis that the most important trait of the realist understanding of political ethics is what can be termed its “heroic” nature which derives from the realist conviction that the relation between ethics and politics eventually is paradoxical.

² Max Weber: *Politik als Beruf*, in: *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, 5th Edition, Tübingen (Mohr) 1988, pp. 505-560; here: pp. 545 ff.

³ This is true with regard to the current discourse on political realism in general in which a number of other prominent theorists play an important role. (For an overview in this respect see again Galston’s essay quoted above, p. 386.) I will for the most part of my paper nonetheless concentrate on the three mentioned exemplary contributors because their texts are in my opinion particularly interesting with regard to this question. Not only are their attempts to reformulate fundamental realist ideas directly confronted with the fundamental question of the general relation between politics and morality or ethics, due to their specific critical orientation against the presumably “moralistic” “ideal theory” of philosophical liberalism. (This is the case with the broader current debate on realism in general.) They also consciously, and more expressively than others, articulate the idea that this relation appears to be way more complex and ambiguous from a realist perspective than their obvious critique of moralism may indicate at first sight.

I.

What can be said about “realism” as a concept of everyday language, holds true also with regard to its recent use as a label for a new trend within political theory: It comprises a rather complex and manifold, partly even contradictory variety of arguments, topoi, texts and authors. Consequently, the meaning in which this label itself has been recently used by the various interpreters of these arguments and authors is equally manifold, and partly even more contradictory. What nonetheless renders this label immediately plausible, however, is the fact that it is used as a common self-description by the respective authors themselves – a self-description which is underscored by frequent pertinent references to notoriously “realistic” classical authors such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and others.

While the authors at hand thus explicitly claim that their partly quite idiosyncratic versions of political realism are to be understood as an articulation of a general philosophical theme with a long tradition, they at the same time often emphasize that their plea for realism is also an articulation of a quite particular historical experience. In its self-perception, the current neo-realist political philosophy is explicitly rooted in the specific historical context of the beginning 21st century – a context which the authors often characterize as the post-911-situation, both in political and intellectual terms. It is this peculiar present situation which authors like Raymond Geuss or John Gray emphasize as the basis of their explicitly historically bounded perspective. Consequently, instead of being a mere historical coincidence, the revival of realism they argue for is understood as a peculiar option, and in a certain sense also as a peculiar product of this present situation, at least as a peculiar philosophical reaction on the major historical constellations that characterize the current situation within Western societies. This is not only obvious in the diagnosis of an inner crisis of the dominant Western worldview of philosophical liberalism (or “humanism”, or “moralism”) they put forth. It is also discernible in their quite complex understanding of “political realism” itself as the alternative intellectual perspective, non-conformist and substantially critical in nature, they argue for in this situation.

Consequently, the notion of realism put forth in this current debate combines such immediately present references and motivations with a broad variety of historical self-contextualizations, some of them obvious, some of them rather surprising. Among others the philosophical contextualism and the understanding of historical hermeneutics as articulated by the “Cambridge School” plays a role for most authors, and so does Michael Oakeshott’s political theory. In terms of crucial topics, the debate does not only involve political as well as

epistemological, and even ontological questions. It also seems to bear some quite exceptional religious (particularly somewhat neo-pagan) undertones as well as some sort of a revived “fin de siècle”-ambience.⁴ Quite frequent are references to the German philosophical discourse of the 19th and early 20th century. Raymond Geuss, for instance, one of the most prominent of the current promoters of realism in political theory, emphasizes, besides his references to classically realistic thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche or Max Weber the crucial influence on his realist perspective of the “nineteenth- and twentieth-century German practical philosophy”,⁵ particularly of the critical theory of the early Frankfurt School.⁶ He also affirmatively refers to a rather vague tradition “of radical practical thinking that descend(s) from Paul and Augustine through Hegel to Adorno and Heidegger”⁷ and, finally, supplements these (partly deliberately equivocal and confusing) self-contextualisations with some evenly confusing and deliberately provocative references to rather dubious political figures such as, for instance, to Lenin and his power-oriented and elitist political ideas.⁸

I cannot elaborate here these rather complex and partly contradictory references and undertones present in Geuss’s, Williams’s and Gray’s texts. My impression is, however, that in doing so one could, notwithstanding its apparent diversity, reconstruct a rather coherent intellectual constellation – one which in my impression in its self-perception predominantly oscillates between a peculiarly “Neo-Renaissance” type of mindset on the one hand and a critical Anglo-American revision and adoption of late 19th and early 20th century Continental philosophy. Yet, if we leave aside these rather complex connections and backgrounds here – I will at least briefly come back to some of them occasionally – the self-perception of the current form of political realism may at first best be described as an uncompromisingly skeptic, expressively post-totalitarian and anti-utopian type of political thinking that emphasizes the overall significance of power, interests, and the stability of order in politics and that particularly focuses on a critique of certain liberal forms of political and moral philosophy.

⁴ In both respects John Gray is the most expressive author: See, for instance, his reference to ancient animism in John Gray: *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and other Animals*, London (Granta Books) 2002, pp. 17 ff. and 33 ff. and, respectively, John Gray: *Heresies. Against Progress and other Illusions*, London (Granta Books) 2004, pp. 100 ff. where Gray parallels his somewhat *fin-de-siecle* perspective with the one assumed in the work of Joseph Conrad.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See also Raymond Geuss: *The Idea of a Critical Theory. Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1981.

⁷ Geuss: *Outside Ethics*, p. 65.

⁸ Raymond Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 2008, pp. 23 ff.

In this sense, the authors at hand, despite their rather disparate references and the significant conceptual differences between their works, can be understood as promoting a common realist philosophical worldview. And they all claim that this worldview (or philosophy) can be clearly located within the context of a distinct and, as one of their interpreters notes, a very “powerful (...) tradition of reflecting on the character and conditions of political activity” – a tradition which encompasses “the approaches of thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli and Nietzsche, Michael Oakeshott and Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron and John Dunn, and Bernard Williams and James Tully, to mention but a few”.⁹ The conspicuous diversity of this list of classical philosophical realists – and I think, by the way, there are indeed some good reasons to add Eric Voegelin to it, although his genuine understanding of spiritual realism is more comprehensive and even contradicts in some respects the neo-realist position I will sketch in the following – is quite striking, and it above all urges the question of what it exactly is that constitutes the unity of this obviously heterogeneous philosophical “tradition” to which the authors at hand refer when they advocate political realism. Besides being an important “dissenting opinion” against the currently dominant version of philosophical liberalism: What are the characteristic features which *positively* define realism as a distinct political philosophy?

There are a number of pertinent aspects in this respect which can be gathered from the current debate. William Galston, in his essay on “Realism in Political Theory”, published 2010 in the *European Journal of Political Theory*, in which he reviews the neo-realist philosophies we are concerned with here, suggests the following as typical realist assumptions. For Galston, political realism is, not surprisingly, above all characterized by its awareness of “deep disagreement” as the most fundamental condition of politics, and, consequently, by its focus on the most basic conditions of social coordination and on political stability.¹⁰ In facing the basic fact of conflict and disagreement as the natural conditions of the social life of human beings whose actions are predominantly driven by self-interest and irrational passions,¹¹ the “core challenge to politics” from a realist point of view is to establish and maintain order in society. Since this most fundamental task of political action to a certain

⁹ David Owen: *Die verlorene und die wiedergefundene Wirklichkeit. Ethik, Politik und Imagination bei Raymond Geuss*, in: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie 58 (3), 2010, pp. 431-443; here: p. 432. The English version of this article is to be found on http://soton.academia.edu/DavidOwen/Papers/326716/Reality_Lost_Reality_Regained_Ethics_Politics_and_Wishful_Thinking_in_the_Imagination_of_Raymond_Geuss (August 04, 2011), the quotation on p. 3 f.

¹⁰ Galston: *Realism in political theory*, 396 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

degree always “require(s) coercion or the threat of coercion”,¹² the art of politics can be summarized as the constant attempt “to overcome anarchy without embracing tyranny”.¹³ As a consequence, furthermore, realism pays peculiar attention to the crucial role of “institutions”, their various political functions within society, their complex inherent cultural logic, their dynamic development over time, and, above all, their comprehensive integration into the specifically modern comprising institutional patterns of sovereign “states”.¹⁴

In sum, according to Galston, these various realist assumptions about the nature and conditions of political action coincide in the fundamental realist claim of the “autonomy of politics”. The political constitutes a distinct social sphere with its own and peculiar logic of action and judgment. And this, most importantly, implies a particular understanding of the significance of morality or ethics within this distinct social sphere of the Political. Philosophical realists argue that the distinct logic of the political and the necessary conditions of collective political action “often require leaders to employ means that would be forbidden in other contexts”, wherefore “political morality is not the same as individual morality and may often contradict it.”¹⁵ As a consequence, realism implies the assumption that there is a specifically *political* morality, or that “normativity” as far as political theory is concerned, rests on a distinct form of ethics that applies only to those moral questions which arise within the sphere of politics and its specific rationale of collective action or “corporate agency”.¹⁶

In my opinion, with this latter question Galston touches upon the most interesting aspect of the current neo-realist philosophical argument. Yet, it remains rather unclear in his brief discussion of this question what such a distinctly political form of “morality” or ethics is exactly supposed to mean, despite the fact of its distinctiveness from a more general understanding of morality. In the following passages I will try to further clarify this crucial point, or at least some aspects of it. In order to do so, it is helpful to at first examine a little more elaborately the realist critique of current liberal philosophy.

¹² Ibid., p. 390.

¹³ Ibid., p. 391.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 393 f.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 392.

¹⁶ On the traits and the specific logic of “corporate agency” described from a realist perspective see Glen Newey: *Two dogmas of liberalism*, in: *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (4) 2010, pp. 449-465.

II.

What indeed most clearly sticks out as a specific trait of the currently evolving realist discourse is its genuinely critical motivation against the presumably dominant mainstream positions both in political philosophy and in the current public discourse of Western societies. The main objection of these realist critiques against the presumably liberal “zeitgeist” is that it is based on peculiar forms of “wishful thinking”¹⁷ and on (mostly pseudo-religious) moral and political “illusions” which systematically eclipse the actual realities of social and political, but also of intellectual life. Regarding this critical orientation, political realism first and foremost has to be understood as the philosophical practice of unmasking the various functional “illusions” that form the basis of the dominant self-perception in any given society – the unmasking at least of those among these illusions which are in danger of becoming dysfunctional or even destructive for certain reasons.

Critique in this sense can indeed be considered as another important, even defining characteristic feature of political realism in general. In so far as realism is the philosophical practice of unmasking certain mainstream convictions as illusions, it by necessity is only possible from a marginal position. “Critique” is not merely one possible aspect, it is a necessary premise of realist political thinking. This marginal, anti-mainstream character, its nature as a necessarily “dissenting position”¹⁸ goes together, in terms of language and theory style, with a genuinely polemical and provocative character of realism as well as with its frequent tendency towards popular forms of philosophizing which deliberately address a wider public.

The overall significance of the critique of liberalism in the current realist discourse, thus, is no coincidence. Besides the rather formal characteristics just mentioned, this systematically critical orientation also has got important conceptual implications which quite clearly echo some core ideas of the classical realist tradition. This comes to the fore most expressively in John Gray’s critique of the dominant self-perception in Western societies. Gray’s critique of

¹⁷ See, for instance, Raymond Geuss: *Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie*, in: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie 58/3 (2010), pp. 419-429.

¹⁸ For the quotation see Galston: *Realism in Political Theory*, p. 386. See also Raymond Geuss’s idea of critique which he develops in his reflections on Adorno’s “negativism” in Raymond Geuss: *Outside Ethics*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 2005, pp. 161 ff. and 234 ff. (See on Geuss’s understanding of critique also Christoph Menke: *Neither Rawls nor Adorno. Raymond Geuss’ Programme for a Realist Political Philosophy*, in: European Journal of Philosophy 18 (1), 2010, pp. 139-147.) Quentin Skinner, by the way, in his study on Machiavelli argues that a fundamentally *dissenting position* against the dominant humanist discourse of his time, is a crucial feature to be considered in order to understand Machiavelli’s fundamentally polemical style of philosophical argument. (See Quentin Skinner: *Machiavelli*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 1985.)

what he calls “liberal humanism” and modern “utopianism” renders the indispensable negative background of his argument for a rediscovery of the “lost tradition” of political realism.¹⁹ In his studies in which he, by the way, occasionally also uses Eric Voegelin’s concept of political religions,²⁰ Gray renders maybe the most radical realist critique of the present philosophical and public discourse in Western societies. The major target of this critique is the modern idea of progress and its underlying understanding of political history. While the idea of progress makes sense and is a real experience in the fields of science and technology, as Gray asserts, it does not make any sense, but rather becomes a dangerous “illusion” as soon as it is applied to the spheres of politics and ethics:

“In science progress is a fact, in ethics and politics it is a superstition. (...) Post-modern thinkers may question scientific progress, but it is undoubtedly real. The illusion is in the belief that it can effect any fundamental alteration in the human condition. The gains that have been achieved in ethics and politics are not cumulative. What has been gained can also be lost, and over time surely will be. (...) The error is not in thinking that human life can improve. Rather, it is imagining that improvement can ever be cumulative. Unlike science, ethics and politics are not activities in which what is learnt in one generation can be passed on to an indefinite number of future generations. Like the arts, they are practical skills and they are easily lost.”²¹

Against these progressivist illusions of liberal philosophy, Gray not only underscores the *practical* nature of political rationality. He particularly questions the idea of a linear, overall meaningful structure of history altogether. Underscoring the monotheistic, particularly Christian origin of this idea, Gray characterizes progressive humanism as nothing but another political religion of historical salvation:

“The idea of progress, which animates all parties today, is a hollow replica of a Christian conception of history. In a Christian view, history cannot be without meaning. It is a tale of sin and redemption written by God – even if much in it is bound to remain mysterious.

¹⁹ John Gray: *Black Mass. Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, London (Penguin Books) 2008, pp. 271 ff. Gray is emeritus for political philosophy at the London School of Economics and considered as one of the most influential but also one of the most controversial current public intellectuals in Great Britain. He considers realism not only to be one of the most important classical positions within the history of Western political thought but also to be the position most apt to balance and to tame the various utopian reductionisms and extremisms characteristic both for the philosophical and the political history of Western modernity in general and for some dominant tendencies he sees involved within current developments in particular. For critical assessments of Gray’s political theory see John Horton/Glen Newey (Eds.): *The Political Theory of John Gray*, New York (Routledge) 2007.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 96.

²¹ Gray: *Heresies*, pp. 3 f.

The risk of any historical religion is that it ends by giving too much importance to time and too little to that which is eternal. Traditional Christianity – the faith of Augustine, for example – sought to avoid this danger by denying that the workings of providence can be known to human understanding. It was a wise precaution, but it did not prevent the rise of millenarian movements in the late medieval ages, or the mutation of Christianity into the militant political religions of modern times.”²²

Also liberal humanism is such a “secular rendition of a Christian myth” in which the substantial realist “truth in the myth has been lost on the way”: “In many ways humanism is not much more than secular Christianity; but it has suppressed the profound insights into the contradictions of human nature and the ambivalence of knowledge that were preserved in the Christian tradition.”²³ Against this post-Christian humanist illusionism, but partly also against Christianity itself, Gray argues for a realistic, i.e. a Machiavellian or neo-pagan idea of history: “For the pagans of pre-Christian Europe, history was an unending succession of cycles, no different from those in the natural world”, and it is such a cyclical idea of history which for Gray correctly describes the course of politics and ethics and the crucial role of contingency within the history of human affairs. The fundamental features of political history are constituted by the various life cycles of concrete societies, by their founding, their flourishing and eventually by their inevitable decay and disintegration. In political and ethical terms, history is a story of gain and loss, not of progress:

“History is not an ascending spiral of human advance, or even an inch-by-inch crawl to a better world. It is an unending cycle in which changing knowledge interacts with unchanging human needs. Freedom is recurrently won and lost in an alternation that includes long periods of anarchy and tyranny, and there is no reason to suppose that this cycle will ever end.”²⁴

This skeptical understanding of history and the very ambivalent perspective on the political role of religion (and particularly of Christianity) – which clearly echo classical realist topoi, albeit in a quite idiosyncratic manner – is finally supplemented in Gray with the equally idiosyncratic version of a decidedly pessimistic anthropology that he mainly unfolds in his bestselling (and for some reviewers: scandalous) 2002 monography *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and other Animals*. The mentioned neo-pagan and neo-renaissance underpinnings of

²² Ibid., p. 13.

²³ Ibid., p. 8 and 6.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

his argument are clearly present also in this anthropology,²⁵ and his unorthodox and deliberately provocative philosophical essays, notwithstanding their quite radical and also highly idiosyncratic character, appear to me to be exemplary for the realist tradition also in this respect.²⁶

These reformulations (partly alterations, radicalizations, and modernizations, respectively) of a number of classical realist ideas within the context of a radical critique of present liberal philosophy eventually result in a specific understanding of the relation between politics and ethics in general. This is most clearly articulated in Raymond Geuss's essay "Philosophy and Real Politics". In his essay, published in 2008, Geuss (political philosopher at Cambridge University) puts forth a fundamental critique especially of Rawls's political philosophy as the paradigmatic example of what Geuss describes as a certain Neo-Kantian type of political theorizing. In Geuss's representation, the fundamental mistake of Neo-Kantianism as the dominant paradigm in present political theory is that it considers politics to be nothing else than the secondary application of abstract moral or ethical principles in given circumstances:

"A strong 'Kantian' strand is visible in much contemporary political theory, and even perhaps in some real political practice. This strand expresses itself in the highly moralized tone in which some public diplomacy is conducted, at any rate in the English-speaking world, and also in the popularity among political philosophers of the slogan 'Politics is applied ethics'."²⁷

This idea of "politics as applied ethics" fundamentally misrepresents, so Geuss's argument, the real relation between ethics and politics. Yet, although it may seem to be the case at first sight, Geuss does not exactly promote the alternative of a radical emancipation of the latter from the former as it is considered to be the classical realist take of this problem. Rather than arguing for such a radical separation, Geuss suggests that, while the relation between ethics and politics is indeed characterized by an inseparable connectedness, it is a specific implication of this connectedness itself which is disregarded by liberal theory. What

²⁵ Gray: *Straw Dogs*, especially pp. 16 ff. and 33 ff.

²⁶ This exemplary character of Gray's radicalized version of realism becomes obvious particularly if we compare his arguments with those of other realists with regard to the general orientation of his understanding of history and religion. For very similar arguments in this respect see, for example, Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 68 ff.

²⁷ Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*. In his essay Geuss partly reformulates ideas that he already discusses in some of his earlier writings. See, for instance, Raymond Geuss: *Morality, Culture, and History*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1999 and *Outside Ethics* (quoted above).

is implied in this connectedness is that politics does not merely regard the application of ethical principles, but has to be considered as the given *premise* of such principles. Geuss does not suggest a radical separation of ethics and politics, but a reversion of the successive order between the two in the moral reflections pursued in political theory. Consequently, instead of abandoning the role of normative questions in political theory altogether, the realist critique of “ethics-first” approaches implicitly argues for a “politics-first” type of morality.

It thus in the first place is a philosophical *priority problem* which lies at the heart of the question – a priority problem more complex than liberal political philosophy is ready to concede.²⁸ Geuss’s critique, similarly to the classical communitarian critique of Rawls, above all aims at this crucial question, namely at Rawls’s principle of the priority of the right over the good. Geuss, however, extends his critical argument against this priority to a point where it applies not only to Rawls, but to his communitarian critics as well: From his realistic point of view, liberal moralism (and with respect to this point the communitarian critique is itself a “moralist” position) not only claims the priority of the right over the good, but more generally: the priority of morality and ethics in general over political “reality”. The fundamental flaw in mainstream political theory as seen by Geuss is its overall assumption of the priority of the right *and* the good, as it were, over the political.

Consequently, the most characteristic feature of this in Geuss’s view not only quite influential, but also problematic, because distorted and actually apolitical type of theory and its respective understanding of political action is its axiomatic and de-contextualized account of moral philosophy as “an ideal theory of ethics”. This “ideal theory” derives its universal principles of political action from mostly non-empirical, abstract reflections on “historically invariant” first axioms (or intuitions).²⁹ It is this peculiar “Kantian” type of theory – a theory which from a realist point of view eventually represents nothing else than the “desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics”³⁰ altogether – against which Geuss argues for a more contextualized and historically based realist type of political theory. Such a realistic theory for Geuss underscores the focus of politics on “action” (not just on principles or even “mere believes and propositions”),³¹ it highlights the practical and experiential nature of political

²⁸ John Rawls himself stresses in the *Theory of Justice* that such priority problems not only belong to the most intricate and complex questions in political philosophy, but also that the respective answer of his own “ethical” theory, namely his lexical ordering of the principles of justice, but in certain respects also his principle of the priority of the right, claims only to be preliminary in nature. See, for instance, John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge/Mass. (Harvard University Press) 1971, pp. 31, 39 ff., 303.

²⁹ Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 6 f.

³⁰ Galston: *Realism in Political Theory*, p. 386.

³¹ Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 11.

rationality³² and, above all, it emphasizes the primacy of the Political as a first rank philosophical problem in the first place. As a consequence, especially the relation between ethics and politics has to be understood in a substantially different way than the presumably dominant “applied ethics” or “ethics-first” political philosophy of “high liberalism” suggests. Moral or ethical questions and considerations in political theory or philosophy for Geuss not only must be empirically grounded and embedded in concrete political practices and social circumstances and be reflected within the horizon of concrete politics and its indispensable premises of power, interest, conflict, and the quest for stability. Moreover, they have to be reflected under the premise of a certain priority of the political over good and right.

Although it is not very clearly articulated by Geuss, such a peculiarly realist version of a priority-thesis is in my opinion the core argument of his critical account of Rawlsian liberalism.³³ What this thesis implies in more concrete positive terms, becomes clearer if we try to examine the ethical implications of realism’s strong emphasis on the concepts of power and self-interest, and, as a consequence, on security and stability. To this purpose I turn to an especially interesting essay by Bernard Williams, surely one of the most profound and most influential thinkers within the current realist discourse.

III.

As has been said before, the vicissitudes, insecurities, and constant conflicts inherent in collective political action for realists demand its clear focus on the basic and fundamental task to sustain political order within society. What, in terms of concrete content, distinguishes “political realism” from “political moralism” is the former’s clear focus on what Bernard Williams calls “the first political question”:

³² Geuss’s account in this respect resembles Michael Oakeshott’s understanding of political rationality. See *ibid.*, p. 15 f.: “(P)olitics is more like the exercise of a craft or art, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied. It requires the deployment of skills and forms of judgment that cannot easily be imparted by simple speech, that cannot be reliably codified or routinised, and that do not come automatically with the mastery of certain theories. (...) One of the signs that I have acquired a skill, rather than that I have been simply mechanically repeating things I have seen others do, have been applying a handbook, or have just been lucky, is that I can attain interesting and positively valued results in a variety of different and unexpected circumstances.” For Oakeshott’s respective argument see Michael Oakeshott: *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Indianapolis (Liberty Fund) 1991, pp. 5 ff.

³³ See also the respective inversion argued for by Glen Newey who, to be sure, seems to radicalize this argument to the point where its specific argument for a genuinely political ethics gets substituted by an unlimited moral relativism: “Liberal political design takes morality as fixed, and politics as negotiable. (...) One can equally well take the facts of corporate existence as given, and morality’s standing and content as variable.” (Newey: *Two dogmas of liberalism*, p. 463.)

“I identify the ‘first’ political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation. It is ‘first’ because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others. It is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again. This is particularly important because, a solution to the first question being required *all the time*, it is affected by historical circumstances; it is not a matter of arriving at a solution to the first question at the level of state-of-nature theory and then going on to the rest of the agenda.”³⁴

Again, at first sight also this argument seems to promote a radical emancipation of power-politics from any “unrealistic” moralistic restraints. And indeed, Williams stresses that any possible solution of the “first political question” in one way or the other demands power and coercion as necessary means. Yet, these obvious implications are easily misinterpreted if considered too superficially. Contrary to the reductionist understanding of power-politics as “Realpolitik” of which these assertions may remind us, neither the realistic general emphasis on action, power, and self-interest as the real empirical media and motivations of political practice nor Williams’s rather logical “first-political-question”-argument are meant to confine political theory to a merely “value-free” and presumably cynical analysis of the powers that be,³⁵ consequentially promoting either “an inactive or functionalist conservatism that has to take existing ethical ideas as they stand”³⁶ or an irrational decisionism which simply follows the individual “demon”, as Max Weber put it, of one’s personal conviction without being able to justify it with reasonable arguments. Rather than excluding normative questions from consideration, Williams’s argument tries to focus the discussion of ethical problems more clearly on their specifically political significance. Rather than arguing for a merely descriptive theory, Williams suggests a fundamental shift of perspective regarding normative questions.

The crucial concept which sets this *political*, i.e. realist normative focus is “legitimacy”. The primary ethical question in politics from a realist point of view does neither regard an abstract determination of “ideals” or “principles” of action, nor the liberal category of “rights”, nor, at least not primarily, a comprehensive idea of the (common) “good”. It regards the peculiar problem of the normative basis of politics as the peculiar practice of coordinating human action and social relations by means of state institutions, including processes of

³⁴ Bernard Williams: *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, in: Bernard Williams: *In the Beginning Was the Deed. Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton/Oxford (Princeton University Press) 2005, pp. 1-17; here: p.3.

³⁵ See, for instance, Geuss’s assertion that studying politics can never be a “strictly value-free enterprise” (*Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 1).

³⁶ Bernard Williams: *Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism*, in: Williams: *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, pp. 29-39; here: p. 37.

institutional reorganization and political change. Raymond Geuss defines legitimacy in this sense (with explicit reference to Max Weber) as follows: „(W)hat is at issue in politics“ are the various „legitimatory mechanisms available in a given society“ and the practical political „attempts to provide legitimacy ... for any kinds of collective action ... or ... for any arrangements that could be seen as capable of being changed, controlled, modified, or influenced by human action. This will include institutions, patterns of distribution of access to resources, and other similar things.”³⁷ It is the problem of “legitimacy” thus understood, i.e. the specific question (and from the perspective of a general moral philosophy this is a quite narrow question) of the normative foundations or the moral “back-up”, as it were, of political, particularly state institutions and of the “collective” form of action enabled by them, at which the ethical implications of politics coincide and at which therefore also the various questions of “normativity” in political theory have to be focused.

That this concept of legitimacy indeed has got normative implications – contrary to Max Weber’s merely descriptive understanding of the category – is particularly obvious in Williams’s essay where he directly connects the question of legitimacy with his “first political question”-argument. The latter does not only state the priority of stability, social coordination and collective agency in the political sphere of human action, it also sets the peculiar ethical framework that derives from these priorities. Since on the one hand solving the “first political question” necessarily and always involves power and coercion, since on the other hand “(o)ne thing can be taken as an axiom, that might does not imply right, that power itself does not justify,”³⁸ politics itself renders “a genuine demand for justification”. This is the case because the most fundamental category inherent in the political logic of collectively organized action in order to establish and maintain order is not mere coercion, but the claim for authority:

“A coerces B and claims that B would be wrong to fight back: resents it, forbids it, rallies others to oppose it as wrong, and so on. By doing this, A claims that his actions transcend the conditions of warfare, and this gives rise to a demand for justification of what A does. When A is the state, these claims constitute its claim of authority over B. So we have a sense in which [state power] itself requires a legitimation to be given to every subject.”³⁹

³⁷ Geuss: *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 35.

³⁸ Williams: *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, p. 5.

³⁹ Ibid., p 6.

Consequently, since it always involves questions of legitimacy and authority in this sense, the Political for Williams does have ethical implications,⁴⁰ but these implications are themselves of a specifically political kind, not only in their conceptual focus, but also regarding their logical or semantic structure. Contrary to ethical principles based on abstract moral philosophies (on “ideal theories of ethics” in Geuss’s or on “political moralism” in Williams’s or on modern “utopianism” and “humanism” in Gray’s terms), the concept of “legitimacy” as put forth by a realist theory of political ethics “does not represent a morality which is prior to politics”. It is instead itself derived from the political realm, or better: It “is inherent in there being such a thing as politics: in particular, (...) it is inherent in there being a first political question.”⁴¹

Thus, in Williams’s first political question-argument and in the respective realist understanding of legitimacy Geuss’s at first merely critical priority thesis is turned into a positive normative argument. In a way, it reverses the successive structure of normative reflections so that the practical, immediately political problems of application are turned from secondary questions into primary premises of ethics.⁴² “Freedom”, for instance, understood as a concept of a political ethic does neither denote an abstract moral principle nor, as John Gray asserts in a short essay from 2002 entitled *Back to Hobbes*, the “normal human condition” or even man’s “natural condition that develops spontaneously as soon as government repression is removed”, but rather “an extremely complicated and delicate construction that can be maintained only by making continuous adjustments.” According to Gray liberty is an “artifact of state power”, and as such it is not only meant to be “applied” in politics, it rather is, in its very content and meaning, politically *constituted* in the first place. Rather than being a pre-political norm, it is substantially determined by and thus only comprehensible under the primary premises and conditions of the collectively organized processes of political action.⁴³

Thus, since the political in a way is the given premise for any form of political ethics, the latter is only meaningful within the equally given premises of its “application” through

⁴⁰ See also *ibid.*, p. 12: “I want a broader view of the content of politics, not confined to interests, together with a more realistic view of the powers, opportunities, and limitations of political actors, where all the considerations that bear on political action – both ideals and, for example, political survival – can come to one focus of decision (...). The ethic that relates to this is what Weber called *Verantwortungsethik*, the ethic of responsibility.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴² In its logical structure this argument resembles the understanding of the philosophical status of the problem of „application“ as put forth in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy. In contrast to Geuss’s respective argument, however, in Gadamer the paradigmatic model of “application” in this sense is either philological, theological or jurisprudential in its inherent logic, not political. See Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Wahrheit und Methode*. Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 1, 6th Edition, Tübingen (Mohr) 1990, pp. 312 ff.

⁴³ Gray: *Heresies*, pp. 109, 114.

collective action. Political theory as “applied ethics” is fundamentally mistaken because the problem of political “application” thus understood, instead of constituting a secondary level of merely practical considerations, renders the most fundamental philosophical premises or axioms when it comes to political ethics; it sets the horizon of meaning in which ethical questions can occur at all as far as political theory is concerned. Contrary to mainstream analytical philosophy which “conceives of its activity as that of ... proposing and justifying normative principles and standards independently and in advance of the conditions of their application, most basically the conditions of political agency”,⁴⁴ political realism claims this relation to be exactly reverse: political norms of right and wrong, ethical principles of political action are not prior to, but they *emerge* from critical reflections of practical political application problems. They are *inherent implications* of the fundamental political question of application – or maybe more precisely: they are inherent principles of the practical political *given premise* of collective “realization”.

This logically/epistemologically reversed perspective indeed renders a substantially different idea of political ethics than the ones promoted by universalistic liberal philosophies. The priority of the political over the moral does not only emphasize the primary significance of practical questions of organized “application”, it at the same time also emphasizes the principal limitations of any possible form of political ethic, both regarding its origin and its possible goals. Any possible political ethic, since it emerges from the conditions of political action, is historically embedded. It is the ethic of a concrete society, wherefore it can only render concrete, contextual norms and justifications, as opposed to the supposedly “universal” principles of abstract moral philosophy. More generally speaking, it is not abstraction but emergence, not Kantian morality, but Aristotelian ethics, or maybe even more appropriately: it is some sort of a Neo-Hegelian idea of “Sittlichkeit” (which actually appears partly quite statist in character in the texts at hand, yet, to be sure, bared from any progressive undertones and speculations on the meaning and end of world-history) which renders the foundation of political legitimacy and political ethics from a realist point of view.

Finally, the realist thesis of the priority of the political underscores the limitations of any political ethics also in terms of scope, i.e. regarding the question of what kind of “good” can be possibly achieved with political means at all. It is not only because of merely practical “application” problems that the idea of “salvation”, for instance, or the various versions of modern progressive “illusions” lie outside the possible scope of political, i.e. of collectively

⁴⁴ Owen: *Die verlorene und die wiedergefundene Wirklichkeit*, p. 431.

organized action. Moreover, the priority-thesis renders these ideas virtually logically incomprehensible as components of an authentically political ethic. The most fundamental reason for the clear limitations regarding the possible content of the policy goals and of the “common good” of a politically organized society, seems to be virtually epistemological in nature.

The neo-realist priority-thesis therefore also illustrates why the political for most realists implies a rather a-religious form of ethics, or at least why also many classical realist authors particularly see the political role of Christianity as substantially ambivalent. To be sure, the major significance of the question of religion and politics is emphasized also in the current realist discourse, and the perspective of the respective authors on this question is particularly complex and equivocal. Yet, notwithstanding the crucial political role which Gray, for instance, ascribes to religion, and notwithstanding his harsh critique of modern secularism, he also stresses that as far as religion is concerned with absolute truth and absolute individual goodness or salvation, its logic is inherently apolitical.⁴⁵

IV.

This plea for the limitations of the ethical goals of politics, however, is not yet the final word of realism on the question of political ethics. Its most profound argument is that the political not only necessarily implies a limited, but also a *paradoxical form of ethics*, one that is characterized by moral complexities which eventually cannot be solved. The “vanity of politics”⁴⁶ has to be understood not only in practical, but also in ethical terms. Politics always deals not only with limited, but also with eventually “unsolvable” problems – and this holds true also with regard to their ethical implications. For the very reason that individual morality and politics sometimes contradict each other, the latter, politics, in its inherent meaningful structure, is not only distinct and relatively autonomous, but it is also “morally ambiguous”.⁴⁷ Not only does “the basic point and structure of politics (create) a qualitatively different set of challenges to which individual morality offers an inadequate guide”.⁴⁸ This specific structure of politics, more profoundly, necessarily creates ethical contradictions, it confronts political

⁴⁵ Gray: *Heresies*, pp. 1 ff; Gray: *Black Mass*, pp. 260 ff. See also the highly interesting discussion of this problem in Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, ..., pp. ... ff.

⁴⁶ Gray: *Straw Dogs*, p. xiv.

⁴⁷ Galston: *Realism in political theory*, p. 393.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

actors – i.e. anyone who is ready to get involved with the demonic forces of politics, as Max Weber famously put it – with serious moral dilemmas “for which there is no solution”.⁴⁹

What realism clearly distinguishes as an ethical theory is the fact that it claims to clearly bring to the fore this basic and uncomfortable truth about politics.:

“Realism is the only way of thinking about issues of tyranny and freedom war and peace that can truly claim not to be based on faith and, despite its reputation for amorality, the only one that is ethically serious. This is, no doubt, why it is viewed with suspicion. Realism requires a discipline of thought that may be too austere for a culture that prizes psychological comfort above anything else, and it is a reasonable question whether western liberal societies are capable of the moral effort that is involved in setting aside hopes of world-transformation.”⁵⁰

In the face of these uncomfortable basic truths about politics, realism as the uncompromising critique of the functional illusions within social life, pursued for the sake of a rediscovery of the true nature of political reality, turns out to eventually be a heroic enterprise: for the political thinker because it demands the “intellectual honesty” to seek truth while truth is unsettling and disharmonious; for the politician because it demands his readiness to bear the personal responsibility for the inevitable moral dilemmas he will face. And this holds true also under the most favorable conditions of modern liberal democracies, as Michael Walzer already in an essay from 1973 on the “problem of dirty hands” in politics argued. I will close with a glance at this essay where Walzer outlines the ethical basis of a peculiarly democratic version of political realism which in my opinion points out very well the final practical consequences of the realist ethics I sketched here.

Also in a liberal democracy the fundamental moral paradoxes and contradictions within any form of political ethics, as Walzer argues here with reference to Machiavelli, Max Weber, and Albert Camus, cannot be dissolved; yet they can be rendered legitimate by democratizing the responsibility for their consequences. In a democracy, the community of citizens holds its political leaders responsible for their action – well knowing that any political action involves insolvable moral dilemmas. Knowing that not only any “good politics is shabby and makeshift”,⁵¹ but also that any good policy can only be brought about on the price of “getting one’s hands dirty”, notwithstanding, finally, of the advantages the society as a whole may

⁴⁹ Gray: *Black Mass*, pp. 277 ff.

⁵⁰ Gray: *Black Mass*, pp. 272 f.

⁵¹ Gray: *Straw Dogs*, p. xiv.

gain from such successful political leadership, the public must punish the moral ambiguities by which it is inevitably accompanied. “We would simply honor the man who did bad in order to do good, and at the same time we would punish him. We would honor him for the good he has done, and we would punish him for the bad he has done.” This, however, is exactly the crucial process, as Walzer asserts, in which the responsibility for the presumably unsolvable moral dilemmas of politics is democratized, because “we [the citizens, H.S.] won’t be able to do that ... without getting our own hands dirty, and then we must find some way of paying the price ourselves.”⁵²

Being a citizen in a democracy seems as well a heroic enterprise – not just because it demands the ability to face the ongoing struggle over competing interests and powers and the ability to compromise even over the most principled questions, but primarily because any attempt to realize ethical principles in this world by the political means of coordinated action is morally ambiguous. Being a citizen means to actively participate politics by one way or the other, and this at the same time means to take one’s share of responsibility. To be a morally self-reliant citizen in terms of political ethics, however, above all means to shoulder one’s part of the guilt that politics necessarily involves – to pay the moral price, as it were, for the existence of a peaceful collectively organized order in society.

The ethical theory of this democratic version of realism, so it seems, eventually demands an uncompromisingly anti-illusionist attitude from every citizen, a specifically democratic “discipline of thought” which, however, is neither primarily based on moral relativism or even cynicism nor, at least not primarily, on a traditional understanding of *common sense* or on practical reason in the classical sense of the term, but rather on a peculiar understanding of political and intellectual heroism: *vincit mundus* or *vincit civitas, et pereat veritas!* – this seems to be the inevitable final conviction at which any consequent realist political ethic of responsibility rests. In my opinion, this conviction on the one hand may in part entail the most profound and quite unsettling truth which political realism has to offer. On the other hand it also indicates the reason why plain realism cannot be the final word in political philosophy.

⁵² Michael Walzer: *Political Action. The Problem of Dirty Hands*, in: Michael Walzer: *Thinking Politically. Essays in Political Theory*, New Haven/London (Yale University Press) 2007, pp. 278-295; here: pp. 292 ff.