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Bernard Williams and the possibility of a realist political theory

Matt Sleat
University of Sheffield

Abstract
This article explores the prospects for developing a realist political theory via an analysis of the work of Bernard Williams. It begins by setting out Williams's theory of political realism and placing it in the wider context of a realist challenge in the literature that rightly identifies several deficiencies in the liberal view of politics and legitimacy. The central argument of the article is, however, that Williams's political realism shares common features with liberal theory, including familiar normative concerns and a consensus view of the political and political legitimacy, which results in it replicating rather than overcoming the weaknesses that other realists have recognized in liberalism, thereby making it vulnerable to the same criticisms. Though these are taken to be significant problems for Williams's theory, the purpose of making this argument is not to undermine the prospects for a realist political theory but to indicate obstacles and difficulties that any compelling account will need to address.

Keywords
Bernard Williams, legitimacy, liberalism, political moralism, political realism

The possibility of developing a form of political theorizing which is more realistic – either in the sense that it is grounded in empirical facts about the realities of political practice rather than idealistic assumptions that bear little resemblance to our experience, or because it focuses on the real pressing political problems of our day instead of abstract and extraneous philosophical concerns – is proving to be a tempting one which several contemporary theorists are pursuing.[1] Key amongst these is Bernard Williams, whose posthumously published collection of papers *In the Beginning was the Deed* represents one of the best accounts of not only why an account of political realism is required in the face of contemporary liberal

Corresponding author:
Dr Matt Sleat, Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield, S10 2TU, UK
Email: m.sleat@sheffield.ac.uk

theory's deficiencies but also offers some important insights as to what such a theory would look like.[2] As such, Williams's work is a valuable starting point for reflecting upon the possibilities and potential for developing a realist theory of politics.

This article endorses the general project of developing a form of political realism which can overcome the deficiencies rightly identified in liberal theory and seeks to continue and encourage this ongoing enterprise. But it essentially argues that Williams's realism shares significant features with liberal theory, in particular common normative concerns and a consensus-based view of the political and political legitimacy, which means that it is vulnerable to the same critique that other realists have made of liberalism on these two fronts. The purpose of making this argument, however, is not to fatally undermine Williams's theory but to indicate the sort of difficulties and considerations that developing a full and compelling account of political realism must address.

Political realism and the basic legitimation demand

In assuming the moral to be prior to the political, Williams interpreted much of contemporary liberal theory to be a version of what he called 'political moralism'.[3] In either its 'enactment' form, in which political action and institutions are intended to express normative principles, concepts, ideals and values and are therefore 'the instrument of the moral', or its 'structural' form, in which morality offers constraints on what politics can rightfully do, Williams believed that political moralism reduced political theory 'to something like applied morality'.[4] A consequence of undertaking political theory in this moralistic manner is that it starts from outside politics, whereby the demands of morality give content to the principles of cooperation or legitimate political action, or political structures and institutions are designed according to prior moral stipulations. Williams wanted to redress this by creating a theory of politics which is more sensitive to the autonomy of the political from the moral, which starts from inside politics itself, and in doing so is better placed to talk to and about the realities of political life.

Williams identified the 'first' political question – first in the sense that a solution to this problem is required all the time (rather than solved once and for all) and a necessary precondition before any other political issues can be attended to – in 'Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation'.[5] However, unlike Hobbes, Williams did not think that any solution to this first question will be sufficient; the demands of legitimacy are such that only certain sort of resolutions will be acceptable. Creating order out of chaos is a necessary but not sufficient condition of legitimacy. Rather, for the solution to the first political question, the state, to meet the 'Basic Legitimation Demand' (BLD) it 'should not become part of the problem', by engaging in the systematic terrorization of its citizens for instance.[6] As such, Williams thought that meeting the BLD 'implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power

to each subject'.[7] For example, if there were a group of individuals within a state who are, as Williams put it, radically disadvantaged relative to others and who have no protection at all from either officials of the state or other subjects, then there are no reasons which could be offered to these persons which explain why life in this state (for them) secures the peace, security and order necessary for an acceptable solution to the first political question. For the BLD to be met such groups must be incorporated into the state as subjects, that is to say as persons who have reasons for endorsing the state as an acceptable solution to the first political question; otherwise they are no better than internal enemies.

For this theory of legitimacy to count as a form of political realism, the BLD must be generated from within politics itself rather than reflect the demands of an external moral requirement. Williams understood the BLD as 'inherent in there being such a thing as politics':

> 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 . . . 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.[8]

So, for Williams, his theory is to be understood as realist because the demands of legitimacy come from within the practice of politics itself.

However, unlike several contemporary liberal theorists, Williams did not think that the only political regime consistent with the BLD is liberalism. Rather what counts as a sufficient justification of political power is going to be heavily contextualized; the supplementary and very stringent conditions which liberals require of legitimacy (i.e. disadvantage in terms of race and gender is invalid, hierarchical structures which create disadvantage are not self-legitimating), and which other regimes are not necessarily required to meet, are given by our historical and social conditions, in particular modernity's undermining of supposed legitimations which are now seen to be false or merely ideological.[9] Accepting the crudity of this way of expressing his ideas, Williams said the slogan 'LEG + Modernity = Liberalism' nevertheless captures the basic structure of his thought. Though any legitimate state must necessarily pass the BLD (and so be LEG) it must also meet the specific and unique demands of the context (modernity), which explains why, now and around here (as Williams often put it) liberal regimes have a compelling claim to legitimacy. This historical consciousness and sensitivity to the specific legitimation demands of each epoch Williams believed addressed political moralism's damaging inability to be able to answer

> . . . the question of why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the question of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European

culture from the late seventeenth century onward, and why these truths have been concealed from other people.[10]

The historical sensitivity of Williams's realist account of legitimacy means that it cannot be the case that reasons which are deemed to be sufficient in one context are automatically and inevitably going to be sufficient in another. Expanding upon this notion, Williams introduced the idea that a structure of authoritative order must 'make sense'[11] to us as such an order to count as legitimate. The idea of making sense is, as Williams put it, a category of historical understanding which draws upon our political, moral, social, interpretative, and other concepts in this particular case to demonstrate whether we can comprehend a political regime as an example of legitimate authoritative order or not. This means that what makes sense to us cannot necessarily be used as the basis for making normative judgements about whether such reasons should guide the behaviour of others in different contexts or should have done so in the past, because what makes sense to them might be different to what makes sense to us. The category of making sense is evaluative when applied to other contexts though it is normative when applied to our own. This is because what makes sense, or makes most sense, to us as a political authority will be viewed as legitimate and guide how we react and respond to it (for example, not resisting or opposing it). Therefore what counts as a sufficient reason for taking the political order to be legitimate will be dependent upon what makes sense as such to persons in their particular contexts.[12]

One final qualification in Williams's realist account of legitimacy is worth noting: 'the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified'.[13] Agreement which was achieved via coercive force cannot be grounds for considering that power to be legitimate. Only freely arrived at acceptance can satisfy the BLD. This Williams called the 'critical theory principle', essentially the idea that we must guard against instances in which power is used to justify power by being able to identify genuine free assent from that achieved via coercion. Williams accepted that, though this is a sound principle, the practicalities of making such a distinction are complex and fraught with philosophical difficulties but, nevertheless, being able to recognize the free assent to a political order from that achieved using coercive power is crucial in identifying what counts as a sufficient response to the BLD.[14]

Liberalism and the realist challenge

Williams's work in developing a theory of political realism was not an isolated endeavour. Several contemporary theorists have been developing similar themes and pursuing common avenues of thought which William Galston identified as 'realist' and Mark Stears has called a 'politics of compulsion'.[15] These theorists

do not see themselves as drawing upon or necessarily contributing to the same tradition in political theory, let alone one called realism (though to my knowledge only Williams and Raymond Geuss have so far explicitly called their theories realist), but nevertheless there are several 'family resemblances' which allow us to reconstruct their work to form what can meaningfully be called the 'realist challenge' to liberal political theory. One of the central facets of this challenge is a critique of the liberal understanding of legitimacy. Williams's work certainly feeds into and develops this critique of liberal legitimacy though it seeks to go beyond it by offering a different (realist) theory of legitimacy in its place. It is constructive where much realist political thought has tended to be more destructive, which is, in part, what makes Williams's theory so important when examining the prospects of political realism.

It is possible to identify in the liberal tradition a common and familiar account of legitimacy: that political power is only legitimate if used according to principles which are justifiable to all those subject to it. Jeremy Waldron argued in his influential article 'Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism' that 'a social and political order is illegitimate unless it is rooted in the consent of all those who have to live under it; the consent or agreement of these people is a condition of its being morally permissible to enforce that order against them'.[16] Nagel likewise suggests that 'the task of discovering the conditions of legitimacy is traditionally conceived as that of finding a way to justify a political system to everyone who is required to live under it... the search for legitimacy is a search for unanimity'.[17] And John Rawls (that arch-moralist) insisted that 'the basic structure and its public policies are to be justifiable to all citizens, as the principle of political legitimacy requires'.[18] Indeed,

> A legitimate regime is such that its political and social institutions are justifiable to all citizens – to each and every one – by addressing their reason, theoretical and practical. Again: a justification of the institutions of the social world must be, in principle, available to everyone, and so justifiable to all who live under them. The legitimacy of a liberal regime depends on such a justification.[19]

This strong connection between universal consent and legitimacy is generated by a particular moral view of the person and the political requirements that this gives rise to. On the one hand, liberals embrace the idea, most systematically expressed by Rousseau and Kant, that persons are free and that this liberty is violated if they are forced to obey rules or laws that they have not made for themselves.[20] Combined with the conviction that all persons are morally equal, and therefore deserving of equal concern, this generates the idea that we respect the freedom and equality of persons by ensuring that state power is only used according to fundamental political principles, constitutional essentials, or laws, that are acceptable to them. By making universal consent a necessary condition of legitimacy we therefore ensure that political power is employed in ways that are consistent with the moral status of persons.

The historical importance of this theoretical move should not be under-estimated. It responded to what was a genuine and often grave concern of many early liberals that the centralized modern state (as we now call it) possessed an immensely unequal degree of power compared not only to the individual but, and more importantly, the local barons and landowners who had up to the seventeenth century represented the main source of security for the majority of subjects and their property against a potentially tyrannical monarch. The crucial question became how the individual could possibly defend him or herself against those agents of the state who have the means to employ overwhelming and irresistible coercive force. The theoretical framework provided by early liberal theorists, such as Locke, bypassed existing social and political structures by offering a political theory which set criteria for the appropriate use of coercive force and standards against which the employment of this power could be assessed. In particular, by restricting (via philosophical argument) the legitimate use of power to that which respects the freedom and equality of persons, early liberals hoped (and ultimately succeeded) to provide a theoretical framework acknowledged by those in power which regulated the rightful use of political coercion.

Further than this, the liberal understanding of legitimacy does not just determine the limits of rightful political action but of politics itself. This is achieved by taking the boundaries of the political as mapping neatly onto those areas and activities in which the use of state power can be legitimately employed. Or, put another way, political relationships are defined as those between the state, or its officials, and its subjects in which the use of coercive state power meets the conditions of liberal legitimacy. This distinguishes politics both from other forms of coercive relationships, in the sense that other forms of coercive relationships are not subject to the same legitimating conditions and are therefore not political (for example, the relationship between a parent and a child), and from acts of simple violence performed by one person or group of persons over another. So the liberal view of politics trades on there being a specific view of political legitimacy which allows us to distinguish between legitimate acts of state coercion, which determine the boundaries of the political, and illegitimate ones, which are therefore outside of the political (though the question of whether they are legitimate or not needs to be determined by the criteria of legitimacy specific to that sphere of activity). If state power cannot be used according to principles consistent with liberal legitimacy then, by definition, it is not a sphere of human activity in which politics can legitimately interfere.

Placing limits on the political is another way in which early liberals attempted to defend individuals from the domination of those with their hands on the levers of state power. But this understanding of politics as an activity which takes place against the backdrop of consensus upon political fundamentals, such as the principles of justice which should regulate the basic structure of society or the purposes to which state power should be put, remains implicit in contemporary liberal theory. This view of the political rests on the assumption that significant agreement on such matters must be in place before politics as an activity can, properly

speaking, begin. Political consensus is, therefore, the precondition of politics, and politics as an activity is carried out in reference to the content of that agreement. Liberalism is therefore essentially a consensual view of the political.

In contrast, a defining characteristic of the realist account of the political is its emphasis on the role that conflict plays both in structuring politics as a distinct activity and giving it content. Chantal Mouffe for example, who has drawn heavily on the work of Carl Schmitt, has continuously argued that conflict is an essential feature of the political[21] and Williams claimed that 'political difference is the essence of politics'.[22] The sort of disagreements which realists are identifying here are not merely the religious and moral conflicts that are widespread in modern democratic societies and with which liberal theory is more than familiar (indeed is largely oriented to manage), but political disagreements regarding the very fundamental principles of politics itself. Whereas liberal theory, in its wide variety of guises, sees the task of political philosophy to resolve, via philosophical argument, many of the key questions of politics, such as the appropriate or correct principles of distributive justice, the conditions of legitimacy, or the proper structure, aims and design of central political institutions, so that these issues are resolved before political activity can begin,[23] realists see disagreement and conflict on such matters as both inevitable and a permanent quality of politics itself. As Stears puts it, 'Politics takes place in the face of inevitable *dis*agreement [about the terms of political life], and . . . is best understood as the functional response to that disagreement'.[24] Insofar as political agreement does exist, it is both necessarily a contingent and transitory occurrence[25] and 'an artefact of the practice called politics', something which has to be forged via the use of coercive political power rather than something that exists prior to that power being employed.[26] To slightly reconfigure Bernard Bosanquet, coercive power is the flywheel of political life.[27]

It would be wrong to assume that realists are of the same opinion as to how politics should proceed in the face of the ineliminability of political conflict and a number of different proposals have been recommended.[28] But there is a general concurrence that in overlooking political conflict and disagreement as an endemic feature of politics itself, and in thinking that fundamental questions of politics can be settled via philosophical argument, liberal theory neglects a crucial and necessary feature of political life. Some have even gone as far as to say that liberal theorists do not, strictly speaking, have a theory of *politics* at all insofar as they settle all the major political questions philosophically and hence politics is made redundant (so it is 'post-political' or politics is 'displaced').[29] So the realist view locates political conflict and disagreement at the heart of politics where liberalism sees fundamental consensus and accord.

This account of the political has important implications for the prospects and appropriateness of liberal legitimacy. At one level, and Waldron has pushed this point most forcefully, the dominant Rawlsian idea that persons can reach a consensus on principles of justice flies in the face of our lived experience of the political, in which disagreement on distributive issues is one of the key features of modern

politics, and overlooks the fact that many of our political institutions (especially democratic ones) are designed specifically to deal with such conflicts. Disagreements about justice are not going to disappear through philosophical argument, no matter how analytically sophisticated it is, and nor should we expect them to given that conflict is an essential and necessary feature of the political.[30] But the deeper point is that the universal consensus upon any political fundamentals, including the conditions of legitimacy or the goods and values upon which political systems ground their legitimation, that the liberal view of politics demands seems both empirically implausible and a theoretical denial of an essential feature of the political. Featuring in this dual manner, political conflict necessarily disrupts and renders untenable the liberal account of legitimacy.[31]

Interestingly, Williams's realist criticism of liberal legitimacy does not take this form; nor was his theory intended to be a serious challenge to liberalism per se (unlike other realists such as Geuss most notably). Indeed it is worth bearing in mind that Williams continuously identified himself as a liberal, albeit one who drew upon Shklar's 'liberalism of fear' and rejected the dominant Kantian tradition of liberalism that he took to be a form of political moralism (which was the target of his critique and what I shall be referring to when I use the term liberalism from here on in). What is wrong with the prevailing form of liberalism, Williams thought, is that it mistakenly elides the necessary and sufficient conditions of legitimacy, which results in a series of important but damaging confusions and misunderstandings about the political. Further than this, liberalism fails to see how the necessary conditions of legitimacy are universal criteria generated from within the political while the sufficient conditions draw upon the contextual demands of specific historical and cultural circumstances. This separation serves to emphasize how the creation and maintenance of order, security and the conditions for cooperation are the first political question and hence undermines the wisdom of the Kantian declaration, which much contemporary liberal philosophy has implicitly endorsed, that 'all politics must bend the knee before right'.[32] Apart from failing to appreciate the autonomy of the political from the moral, such a position, on Williams's view, mistakes the privilege of living in a context of unique stability, in which the background conditions are in place to allow reflection upon the complexities and demands of the right, for a universal foundation of perpetual peace which has once and for all prevailed over the possibility of disagreement, violence and conflict. A more modest and historically aware political theory which recognized the vulnerability and fragility of the liberal settlement would help us appreciate our immense fortune in having inherited a politics which has so far proven to be relatively robust and stable. It would also have the advantage of not requiring political philosophy to provide an error theory which can account for why it is that the truth and unique legitimacy of liberalism has evaded so many people for so long, and continues to do so. Separating the necessary from the sufficient conditions of legitimacy allows us to make the common-sense evaluation that not all non-liberal societies throughout history have been illegitimate while still holding to the thought that liberalism has the best claim to legitimacy for us. This position marks an

advance on John Gray's (realist) theory of modus vivendi which, though it accepts that there are necessary conditions for legitimacy which non-liberal regimes can adequately meet, seems unable to explain why it is that liberal institutions, values and practices seem to have a more compelling claim to legitimacy *for us* than any others.[33]

What Williams's realist theory provides is not so much a rejection of liberalism or liberal legitimacy but a corrective to liberalism's own understanding about the nature of its account of legitimacy. He criticized how we commonly understand the conditions of legitimacy rather than what we take those conditions to be. Williams was more interested in explaining how it is that the specific demands of liberal legitimacy have arisen ('LEG + Modernity = Liberalism') as part of his more general thesis that political theory needs to be sensitive to 'the cognitive status of its own history', both in order to avoid the problem of requiring an error theory as we have already encountered, but also to make it more action-guiding for us here and now.[34] Analysing the coherence or plausibility of liberal legitimacy was not Williams's intention.

That this is the case is not surprising if we view his enterprise in the light of his understanding of philosophy as a humanistic discipline that is 'part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves'.[35] The task of political philosophy is therefore to make sense of our political lives.[36] In this context, the venture of explaining how the principles of liberal legitimacy are the result of 'a complex historical deposit' which gives them meaning for us, rather than subjecting them to critical philosophical or conceptual analysis or engaging in the normative enterprise of replacing them with principles which are 'best from an absolute point of view, a point of view . . . free of contingent historical perspective', is the proper undertaking of the political theorist. As such, a Williamsian response to the realist challenge may well be to argue that it illustrates the need to put the concepts and principles which generate the liberal conditions of legitimacy, such as the moral view of the person, under historical scrutiny to better understand the circumstances in which they were developed, how they have altered in the face of theoretical and practical developments, and how they might need modification (or maybe even rejection as he thought was the case with the liberal Kantian foundational project[37]) to make them more consistent with the demands of our own context.

But nevertheless, the requirement of the BLD that the political regime makes sense to all those subject to it as an authoritative order was presented by Williams as reflecting the fundamental truth of politics that might does not equal right. It is a necessary condition of legitimacy, he thought, which is inherent in there being such a thing as politics in the first place and what distinguishes political relationships from those of tyranny or outright warfare. So while it is the case that the sufficient conditions of legitimacy are for us determined by the historical circumstances of modernity, there is still a basic universal principle of legitimacy which all legitimate states must (at all times and in all places) meet.

Williams's political realism

There are two questions I would like to pose to Williams's theory as a way of analysing it as a potential basis for developing a plausible and coherent theory of political realism: 1) How successful was Williams in providing a theory of politics which is fully autonomous from the moral? and 2) Is Williams's account of legitimacy immune to the objections that other realists have made against liberal legitimacy? In relation to the first question I want to make some observations which are intended to be friendly amendments to Williams's theory consistent with his overall thought and that also speak to some wider general issues in developing a realist political philosophy. But my response to the second question will lead to some more critical comments of Williams's theory while further reinforcing the significance of the realist critique of consensus based theories of politics. They are also intended to draw attention to the significant challenge that any realist theory will need to address of developing a non-consensus vision of the political.

The autonomy of the political

The possibility of political realism depends, on Williams's view, on developing a theory which gives autonomy to politics as a discrete sphere of human activity. Williams sought to address this by engaging in what was in effect a conceptual analysis of the political, the conditions and claims inherent in there being such a thing as politics, which he clearly hoped would therefore leave his theory untainted by the external normative moral considerations liberalism appealed to (as already explored).

Despite these methodological differences, it is striking how similar Williams's realist view of the political is to that of liberalism. First of all, Williams's understanding of politics employs a fairly familiar tyranny/politics or war/politics dichotomy whereby politics is intended to replace the former adverse condition. A situation in which one group of persons terrorize another is not an instance of politics but of war and thus they do not stand to each other as fellow citizens of the same political community but as enemies. Their relationship only becomes political once the conditions of peace, security, order, trust and cooperation are secured. This is done by ensuring that the BLD is met and therefore the use of state power over individuals is legitimated. The BLD also enables another familiar dichotomy between legitimate/non-legitimate uses of coercive power or power/violence (whereby, strictly speaking, if the state's use of coercive force is legitimate then it is power, and if it is not then it is an instance of violence). The utility of this distinction is that it allows us to put limits on the political, the sort of activities that the state can legitimately engage in, by determining where the boundaries of politics lie. If you equate politics with the legitimate use of state power then the political ends where and when it would be illegitimate to employ coercive force.

Of course, all these are intended to be conceptual claims insofar as the BLD is intrinsic to the political rather than expressing an external normative principle which determines the appropriate goal of politics. Liberalism derived similar features of the political via the normative concern that the individual be protected from oppressive state power. But it is intriguing that Williams's account of the fundamental aim of politics, the replacement of anarchy or tyranny with legitimate authority, is very similar, though it only draws upon the 'universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, [and] cruelty'.[38] The end-product view of politics as a relationship between persons in which state power is employed within the limits determined by the conditions of legitimacy is very much like that of liberalism. And it is clear that Williams took politics to be valuable insofar as it alleviates undesirable and asymmetrical forms of (non-political) power relationships between the individual and the state such as that of war or tyranny. Politics protects the weak and powerless from the strong and the powerful. So notwithstanding the different methodology employed, Williams's realist theory of the political corresponds with some of the normatively derived features of the liberal view of politics.

That Williams arrived at familiarly liberal conclusions regarding the political but did so drawing upon resources internal to politics means that in itself this similarity does not undermine the claim that his was a distinctly realist theory. But in order to keep political realism and political moralism distinct it has to be the case that it is possible to fully explicate politics and the necessary conditions of legitimacy without recourse to external moral conditions such as those generated by the liberal moral view of the person. Williams explicitly denies that the BLD is grounded in any such moral view[39] but this begs an important question which it is not clear can be answered without making some normative assumptions which draw upon resources external to the political: why does the BLD require that sufficient reasons be offered to *all* persons subject to state power? Why should we care about the plight of the tyrannized, weak and powerless? It is hard to know how we can answer why we should be concerned about the oppressive and tyrannical use of state power over particular individuals without falling back, as liberals do, upon some foundational moral premise that all persons matter. What is wrong with such policies is surely that they negatively affect or radically disadvantage people who are of moral worth. If slaves are not morally significant then the fact that their slavery is not justified to them is surely irrelevant to the question of whether the state is legitimate or not. Or, in other words, we seek to protect those we think are *deserving* of it from the unequal and potential cruel uses to which state power can be put. Liberalism is explicit in its belief that all persons are of moral worth and thus the justificatory net is cast as wide as possible so as to include each and every person subject to political power. But the net does not have to be cast this wide. It could include, and has done in the past, only those who hold certain religious beliefs, from a certain ethnic group or from a particular class, or those individuals who have access to specialist knowledge (usually religious), a particular skin colour or belong to a certain tribe.

Williams does not attempt to demonstrate how the universal justificatory constituency necessary to fulfil the BLD is generated from within politics, though it is clear that he believed it was.[40] But it is uncertain how the requirement of universality can be so derived without recourse to moral demands and commitments external to the political, in particular the liberal commitment – common to many other political views, though far from all – that all persons are morally equal and deserve to be treated as such.

In light of this, the similarities between Williams's conceptual view of the political and liberalism's normative one look a little more problematic for the prospects of a realist theory of politics. That Williams arrived via conceptual analysis at a relational view of the political in which the individual is subject to the power of a state constrained by principles of legitimacy which liberalism arrived at by a normative route does not look quite so coincidental. It is very possible that Williams ended up with a view of the political not dissimilar to that of liberalism because he began with the moral assumption that all people matter and therefore deserve a justification of the use of coercive power over them. On the one hand, this is nothing other than a now-familiar criticism made of those who claim to have escaped a particular theoretical framework (or, more profoundly, metaphysics) that they have actually failed to do so and, indeed, are simply replicating particular failings in different forms, in this case that Williams failed to escape the sort of fundamental moral assumptions and basic commitments central to liberal theory. But it is intended to be a little more interesting than this insofar as it highlights some fundamental points in realist theory on which further work is clearly required.

If we are to retain the notion that universal acceptance is a necessary condition of legitimacy then the challenge will be to demonstrate how this can be derived by appealing only to resources internal to politics. If this can be done then Williams's distinction between the necessary and sufficient conditions of legitimacy and the nature of their content remains sound and a promising basis for developing a realist political theory. However, assuming, as I think is likely to be the case, that it is not going to be possible to derive universality from a purely conceptual analysis of the political, this nevertheless tells us something important about how we might proceed. We need not reject Williams's useful reminder that politics is primarily a relationship between persons in which the coercive use of state power is employed (or threatened) by one group over another whereby those subject to it recognize the political order as an example of a legitimate authority. But we need to supplement it with the further thought that the question of who deserves a justification for the use of state power is a normative consideration which can only be derived from the historical context. It remains a necessary condition of the legitimacy of a political order that it makes sense to the appropriate constituency of persons as an example of rightful authority but who is included and excluded from that constituency is determined by the conditions here and now. So liberalism, with its moral demand that we recognize the freedom and equality of all persons, demands that the justificatory constituency includes all those subject to the state; in other contexts this

requirement will not be present. From our perspective those states or political regimes which are exclusionary in this sense will undoubtedly be judged immoral and illegitimate, and those who are excluded will no doubt be subject to policies that we would consider oppressive and tyrannical. Yet, and building upon Williams's thought on this point, that such a regime does not make sense to us as an authoritative legitimate political order because it is not fully inclusive is an evaluation we make from our milieu and one that renders such an order void of any normativity (it is not a meaningful option for us). But this does not mean we cannot recognize that the same regime, despite its exclusion of particular individuals and assuming the critical theory test is met, does make sense to those subject to it as a legitimate political authority.

Essentially this is to recommend a minor and friendly amendment to Williams's theory: that the BLD remains the necessary condition of legitimacy while the constituency to whom the political order must be justified becomes a sufficient condition determined by the historical background. This maintains the distinction between the necessary conditions for legitimacy, which are generated from within the political, and the sufficient conditions which come from external considerations. In doing so it also has the advantage of clarifying the nature and extent of politics' autonomy from the moral, albeit in such a way that might suggest that the space for the independence of the political is more limited than a theory of realism might desire.

Finally, it could still be claimed that Williams's conceptual analysis of politics is correct and that the fact that liberalism shares similar structural and substantive features is simply indicative of the fact that liberalism is a theory of *politics*. But the previous discussion points to a simple yet important fact that, despite Williams's use of conceptual analysis which is therefore hopefully devoid of external normative content, it is nevertheless a *theory* of politics. We cannot simply read off from the practice of politics necessary conceptual truths about the nature of the political. Rather all analyses or reflections upon politics will inevitably need to embark upon its endeavour beginning with several theoretical assumptions about what the practice looks like, consists of, where its limits are (or what distinguishes it from other spheres of human activity) and what the appropriate aims of politics are, amongst others. There will be several things that distinguish a realist analysis of politics, including how it attempts to include more in its theoretical framework that is commonsensically taken to be political which is overlooked in other analyses, including liberalism (such as party politics, the use of power and patronage, the role of political leadership, the effect of the passions or emotion in political life, etc.), while also attempting to understand the aims and constraints of politics in a way that is not simply derived from morality. But even within these constraints, there can be several varieties of realist theory. Schmitt's friend/enemy model and Weber's analysis of politics as the struggle for power and the ability to distribute it are both examples of theories which explicitly attempt to stick closely to the real world of political life, though they are clearly different from Williams's realism in several ways. They are also not so easily and obviously

compatible with liberalism. Williams's is a realist theory of a certain sort of politics, one which reflects and replicates familiar liberal normative concerns and structures. And though we might find the theory of politics he advocated attractive, we can only arrive at this via a particular interpretation of the political made possible by drawing upon several normative assumptions which are not internal to politics itself.

Williams's consensus theory of politics

The realist challenge to liberal theory that we have encountered essentially disputes liberalism's consensual view of the political. To recall, according to liberal theory, the legitimate use of state power depends upon it being used in accordance with principles that all persons affirm (and hence politics is a relationship of legitimated power). This consensus is one that liberalism seeks to identify via philosophical analysis and hence prior to politics. The realist response to this is to claim first that politics is inherently and necessarily characterized by conflict rather than consensus and second that to attempt to settle fundamental issues of politics through philosophical argument is to overlook the fact that disagreement about such matters is very much a staple of the political itself.

An interesting and unique feature of Williams's realist theory of politics is that it too is largely consensual, though in a slightly different sense. Taking the slogan 'LEG + Modernity = Liberalism', Williams accepted that the last term really served to delineate a range of options all of which would make political sense to us in the modern world.[41] As such though we might endorse different forms of liberalism, we would nevertheless agree that liberalism best makes sense to us in conditions of modernity as a response to the BLD. But in order for this account to be plausible it has to be the case that people cannot and do not disagree about what the central characteristics of modernity (political, moral, philosophical, social, economic, etc.) are or what demands they generate or constraints they engender in relation to the sufficient conditions of legitimacy. Though Williams explored in several places and in sophisticated detail the nature and limits of philosophy and morality in modernity, he did not say much about the political aspect of modern life, or at least not enough given the central role that it plays in his theory of realism. From some of the essays already cited, as well as 'Modernity and Ethical Life', it is clear that a central feature of modernity he had in mind was how theological and natural law justifications for hereditary or elite rule no longer make sense in a disenchanted or secularized world in which we treat the metaphysical assumptions that these accounts rely upon as highly dubious.[42] Interpreted in this manner, claims regarding natural or divinely ordained inequalities which are used to justify policies of oppression or asymmetry between the rights possessed by members of different groups will be incompatible with the conditions of modernity and hence deemed illegitimate.

But modernity, as a historical epoch, is a highly contestable concept and there are several other aspects, characteristics, or interpretations of modernity which

might not necessarily lead us so straightforwardly to liberalism. To quickly cite but a few: A familiar Marxist argument is that the conditions of modernity, in particular the economic oppression and alienation caused by capitalism, has led to a liberal politics dominated by and geared towards fulfilling the interests of one class at the expense of all others. According to this argument, the demands of legitimacy are only going to be fulfilled in the modern world by a socialist or, at the extreme, communist political order which places property and the means of production in common hands. Much anarchist thought relies upon an interpretation of modernity in which two of the central and defining features of the modern world, the state with its monopoly of power and the value of individual autonomy, are in tension with one another. The modern state, anarchists often contend, cannot be justified because it is necessarily inconsistent with the autonomy of persons that any legitimate state would have to respect. As such, the modern state, including modern liberal states, is not legitimate and only a very minimal (non-state) political order will be consistent with the demands of legitimacy in conditions of modernity. And finally, Nietzscheans and existentialists believe that the pre-eminent feature of modernity is the 'death of God', the absence of any objective telos of humanity, which leaves us free to engage in radical acts of self-creation. The political implications of this position are far from clear and while some, like Richard Rorty, have linked self-creation with liberalism this is far from a necessary connection. Nietzsche's own disavowal of liberal politics, with its egalitarian implications, is well-known.

The list of various interpretations of modernity and their political implications, including those who comprehensively reject that it has any redeeming valuable features, (such as Alasdair MacIntyre), is extensive.[43] The point is that there is a plurality of different and conflicting ways of interpreting and understanding modernity, not all of which when combined with the demands of legitimacy will necessarily lead to liberalism. Further than this, I can understand how many of these (though not necessarily all) *make sense* as an interpretation of modernity and hence how the politics being commended would, from that perspective, seem legitimate or more legitimate than liberalism. I can, for example, understand Nietzsche's philosophy as a series of commitments and beliefs which respond to a particular interpretation of modernity. One may think it over-exaggerates particular aspects of modernity, such as disenchantment and nihilism, at the expense of those which might lead in a more liberal direction, but it certainly makes sense as an interpretation. This does not require us to defend it, nor the anti-liberal politics which follow from it, but it is not clear on what basis one could deny that it makes sense.

It would seem that disagreements and conflicts regarding modernity, and its implications for the conditions of legitimacy, are inevitable and endemic. Or, put differently, there is little reason to think that there will be widespread universal consensus on this matter while all other controversial aspects of our common lives, moral, religious, and political, are the subject of such prevalent and intractable pluralism. The implication of this for Williams's theory is that it undermines the

plausibility and possibility of a consensus on the character and nature of modernity that his realism requires, with the consequence that not only liberalism will make sense, or even necessarily make most sense, as a legitimate political order for us here and now. So in grounding his theory in the hope or actuality of agreement on an interpretation of modernity and the conditions of legitimacy that it generates, Williams's theory becomes vulnerable to exactly the same challenge that other realists have posed to liberalism as a consensus-based theory of politics.

Williams's realism also shares with liberalism the notion that the consensus it requires needs to be in place before politics can properly be said to exist. Though he rightly avows the use of philosophical argument to discover or create this consensus, nevertheless it is the case that a prerequisite of the political as a network of legitimate power relations between rulers and ruled is a background consensus on what the central characteristics of modernity are and what sufficient conditions of legitimacy they generate. Without this there is no common standard of legitimacy which will apply to all subjects within the state.

While as we have just seen there might be good reason to doubt that such a consensus on the interpretation of modernity exists or can reasonably be expected to exist in radically pluralistic societies such as our own, the second prong of the realist challenge to liberalism's consensual theory of politics is essentially that insofar as contingent moments of agreement do occur they are (at least in part) the result of the use of political coercive power which might, as Nietzsche saw, violate liberal ideals.[44] This gives rise to two consequences, both of which are damaging for Williams's realist theory. First, consensus is an 'artefact' of politics and hence cannot exist prior to the political. Insofar as there might be a consensus or even widespread agreement upon what we might call a liberal interpretation of modernity (one which emphasizes aspects of modernity most amenable to liberal philosophy, such as the primacy of the individual or the priority of the right over the good) this comes about via the employment of political power in several varieties (for example, liberal education, the enforcement of the public/private distinction which makes it much easier to live a life according to liberal values than many others). Far from starting from a basis of consensus, politics makes possible widespread and general agreement. Second, that any possible consensus can only be achieved via the use of political power means that such agreement will not be consistent with Williams's critical theory principle. This is problematic for Williams's theory, given that the BLD requires that individuals' acceptance of a justification be freely arrived at rather than achieved via the use of coercive power.

Though these challenges to Williams's theory are derived from critiques made by other realists of liberal philosophy, the fact that his theory of politics shares the need for a pre-political consensus means that it is vulnerable on similar points. The prospects for a Williamsian realist theory of politics will in large part depend upon how well it is able to respond to both of these challenges, which will mean showing how and why we can expect there to be general agreement upon modernity and the sufficient conditions of legitimacy and how this consensus can meaningfully be said

to occur prior to politics rather than being achieved in large part by the use of coercive force.

Conclusion

The possibility of developing a realist theory is important insofar as it has the potential to correct several of liberalism's deficiencies and more complacent assumptions. Williams's theory of political realism is unique in that it offers a realist perspective on central political theory issues, such as the nature of the political and the conditions of legitimacy, rather than simply critiquing liberalism on these fronts. As a guide as to how we might *do* political theory in a realist key Williams's work is of undoubted value. But what has been argued here is that many of the central assumptions of his theory are vulnerable to the same or similar realist criticisms that other theorists have made towards liberalism and that, as such, Williams replicated rather than escaped from the insufficiencies of liberal theory.

Realists are generally sceptical about the possibility of justifying the basic terms of the political and social order (like the conditions of legitimacy) to each and every person subject to it. This is one of their most vigorous and compelling challenges to liberalism. It is also one of the more curious features of Williams's realism that he attempted to develop a consensus-based theory of politics while also agreeing with other realists that political disagreement is a feature of the political itself. These two features of Williams's realist theory quite clearly pull in different directions. And in terms of what we can learn from his work when further developing a theory of political realism, it is difficult to see how a commitment to taking disagreement to be an essential characteristic of the political can be consistent with a consensual view of politics. Yet equally, realists recognize the ways in which coercive political power is an instrument for creating the agreement and consensus necessary for both liberal and Williams's account of legitimacy, thus undermining the notion that such universal harmony on fundamental political matters can exist prior to politics itself. This article's intention has not been to engage in the tremendous task of explicating a theory of politics and legitimacy which can respond adequately to those challenges, be it a liberal or realist theory, but to both reinforce the notion that political theory needs to recognise the import of the realist contribution to the literature and in responding to it avoid replicating the theoretical assumptions, in particular the consensual foundations of politics, underlying the theories that it challenges.

Notes

1. See e.g. John Dunn (2000) *The Cunning of Unreason:– Making Sense of Politics*. London: HarperCollins. Mark Philp (2007) *Political Conduct*. London: Harvard University Press. Raymond Geuss (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Glen Newey (2001) *After Politics:– The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. For my own initial attempt at developing a realist theory of liberal politics see Matt Sleat, (forthcoming) 'Liberal Realism: A Liberal Response to the Realist Critique', *The Review of Politics*.

2. Bernard Williams (2005) *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
3. Ibid. p. 2. Raymond Geuss employs a similar critique of the relationship between politics and morality in contemporary theory, though he calls it the 'ethics-first' view rather than moralism. Geuss (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
4. Williams (n. 2), pp. 1–2.
5. Ibid. p. 3.
6. Ibid. p. 4.
7. Ibid. Emphasis in original.
8. Ibid. p. 5; emphasis in original.
9. Ibid. pp. 7–8.
10. Ibid. p. 9.
11. For further discussion regarding the notion of 'making sense', see Bernard Williams (2002) *Truth and Truthfulness,* ch. 10. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
12. There are further obvious connections between Williams's insistence that the sufficient conditions of legitimacy be generated from more local sources and his numerous arguments regarding the need to engage in theorizing and critical reflection drawing upon 'thick' ethical concepts and shared understandings which command general loyalty. See e.g. Bernard Williams (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* pp. 116–17. London: Fontana.
13. Williams (n. 2), p. 6. See also ibid. p. 27.
14. For further discussion regarding the critical theory test see Williams (n. 11), ch. 9.
15. William Galston (2010) 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory* 9: 385–411; Marc Stears (2007) 'Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion', *British Journal of Political Science* 37: 533–53.
16. Jeremy Waldron (1987) 'Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism', *Philosophical Quarterly* 37: 140.
17. Thomas Nagel (1991) *Equality and Partiality*, p. 33. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
18. John Rawls (1996) *Political Liberalism*, p. 224. New York: Columbia University Press.
19. John Rawls (2007) 'Remarks on Political Philosophy', in S. Freeman (ed.) *John Rawls:– Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, p. 12. London: Harvard University Press.
20. Hence Rousseau famously understood the problem of politics as addressing the difficulty of how 'To find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, *nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before*' whereby 'obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom' (Jean Jacques Rousseau (2006) 'Of the Social Contract', in V. Gourevitch (ed.) *Rousseau:– The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, pp. 49–50, 54; emphasis added. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
21. See e.g. Carl Schmitt (1996) *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chantal Mouffe (2005) *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso. Chantal Mouffe (2008) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
22. Williams (n. 2), p. 17.
23. Bonnie Honig writes e.g. that according to liberal thinking 'the task of political theory is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over, and done with, to free

modern subjects and their sets of arrangements [from] political conflict and instability'. (1993) *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 7. New York: Cornell University Press.

24. Stears (n. 15), p. 545.
25. See e.g. Raymond Geuss (2005) *Outside Ethics*., pp. 19–20. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
26. Stears (n. 15), p. 542. See also James Tully (2008) 'The Agonistic Freedom of Citizens', in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 1, pp. 135–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
27. I would like to thank Andrew Vincent for providing me with the original quotation.
28. See Stears (n. 15), pp. 545–7, for a brief overview of the different political prescriptions offered by various realists.
29. See Newey (n. 1) and Honig (n. 23).
30. Jeremy Waldron (1995) 'Disagreements about Justice', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78: 371–87.
31. Philp (n. 1), p. 10.
32. Immanuel Kant (1999) 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in H. Reiss (ed.) *Kant:– Political Writings*, p. 125. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
33. John Gray (2000) *Two Faces of Liberalism*. New York: New Press.
34. Ibid. p. 9.
35. Bernard Williams (2006) 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', in A. W. Moore (ed.) *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, pp. 182. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
36. See Matt Sleat (2007) 'Making Sense of our Political Lives: – The Political Philosophy of Bernard Williams', *Critical Review of Social and Political Philosophy* 10: 389–98, for a fuller account of the place of Williams's political theory within his wider philosophical thought.
37. Williams (n. 2), p. 25.
38. Ibid. p. 59.
39. Ibid. p. 8.
40. Ibid. pp. 4, 5.
41. Ibid. p. 9.
42. Williams, 'Modernity and Ethical Life', in Williams (n. 2), pp. 40–51.
43. Alasdair MacIntyre (2004) *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth Press.
44. Friedrich Nietzsche (2007) *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.