

# Is There a Distinctively Political Normativity?\*

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A slew of recent political theorists—many taking their cue from the political writings of Bernard Williams—have recently contended that political normativity is its own kind of normativity, distinct from moral normativity. In this article, we first attempt to clarify what this claim amounts to and then reconstruct and interrogate five major arguments for it. We contend that all these arguments are unconvincing and fail to establish a sense in which political normativity is genuinely separate from morality.

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Most contemporary theorists of normativity accept that not all normativity is moral normativity. Other candidate kinds of normativity include epistemic normativity, prudential normativity, “aim-given” normativity, and aesthetic normativity. To say that these are different “kinds” of normativity is, very roughly speaking, to say that they involve distinct kinds of ‘ought’, derived from different “sources” of normative force.<sup>1</sup> Each of the candidate kinds of normativity is a *candidate* kind because it is disputable whether its claims are genuinely normative and, if so, whether they are essentially distinctive or a subset of some other kind of normativity. Indeed, one can ask these questions about moral normativity itself.

There is, however, one candidate kind of normativity that is surprisingly underexplored in these debates: political normativity. Yet political

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1. We have more to say about distinguishing different kinds of normativity in the next section.

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normativity has become increasingly salient in methodological debates in political philosophy, with a slew of recent theorists contending that political normativity is its own distinctive kind of normativity, independent of moral normativity. A key source for this view is found in the political writings of Bernard Williams,<sup>2</sup> subsequently developed by several others.<sup>3</sup> Many of these theorists call themselves, following Williams's terminology, "political realists" and characterize themselves as challenging a contrasting "political moralist" paradigm currently dominant in political theory.

The term 'political realism' encompasses a broad range of positive views and negative critiques.<sup>4</sup> Some realists come close to rejecting a con-

2. Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). On some readings, Rawls—particularly the later Rawls—constitutes another source of this view; see John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 223–51; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). But this is debatable; for further discussion, see Williams, *In the Beginning*, 2; Andrea Sangiovanni, "Justice and the Priority of Politics to Morality," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16 (2008): 137–64, 150–52; Enzo Rossi, "Legitimacy and Consensus in Rawls' Political Liberalism," *Iride: Filosofia e Discussione Pubblica* 27 (2014): 37–56; Robert Jubb, "Playing Kant at the Court of King Arthur," *Political Studies* 63 (2015): 919–34; Edward Hall, "How to Do Realistic Political Theory (and Why You Might Want To)," *European Journal of Political Theory* 16 (2015): 283–303, 290–92, and nn. 13 and 24; Robert Jubb and Enzo Rossi, "Political Norms and Moral Values," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015): 455–58, 456 n. 1.

3. See, e.g., Sangiovanni, "Justice and the Priority of Politics"; Glen Newey, "Two Dogmas of Liberalism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 449–65; Mark Philp, "What Is to Be Done? Political Theory and Political Realism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 466–84; Matt Sleat, "Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 485–503; Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory," *Philosophy Compass* 9 (2014): 689–701; Jubb and Rossi, "Political Norms"; Robert Jubb and Enzo Rossi, "Why Moralists Should Be Afraid of Political Values: A Rejoinder," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015): 465–68; Edward Hall, "Bernard Williams and the Basic Legitimation Demand: A Defence," *Political Studies* 63 (2015): 466–80; Hall, "How to Do Realistic Political Theory"; Robert Jubb, "Realism," in *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, ed. Adrian Blau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 112–30. See also Glen Newey, *After Politics: The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Richard Bourke, "Theory and Practice: The Revolution in Political Judgement," in *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Richard Bourke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73–110; William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 385–411; John Horton, "Realism, Liberal Moralism and a Political Theory of Modus Vivendi," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 431–48.

4. Here is a (nonexhaustive) list of other complaints that some realists make against "dominant" or "mainstream" political philosophy: it is too abstract, lacking concrete implications for guiding actual political practice (Horton, "Realism, Liberal Moralism," 436; David Miller, *Justice for Earthlings* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 2–4); it is a

ception of political theory as normative inquiry entirely—as least on a robust construal of ‘normative’ where it means not just “concerned with the norms and values that people hold” but “concerned with what actually ought to be done.”<sup>5</sup> Most realists, however, affirm that political theory is a partially normative enterprise but hold that the kind of normativity involved in this enterprise is not moral but distinctively political. We find this claim interesting and underinvestigated, but ultimately unconvincing. In this article, we try to make progress in assessing it by isolating it from other realist claims as far as possible. Henceforth, we will use the term ‘realism’ to refer solely to the view that there is a distinctively political normativity and ‘moralism’ to refer to the converse view that political normativity is a kind of moral normativity. As we understand the views, any argument for realism is therefore ipso facto an argument against moralism and vice versa.

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mere apologia for the political status quo (Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 32–38; Lorna Finlayson, *The Political Is Political: Conformity and the Illusion of Dissent in Contemporary Political Philosophy* [London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015]); it is unrealistic in its ambitions to radically change the status quo (Horton, “Realism, Liberal Moralism,” 435–37; Hall, “How to Do Realistic Political Theory,” 293, 296; Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, 1–2, 14–15, chap. 10); it marginalizes empirical knowledge as an important constituent of political judgment (Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 33; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 7, 9–10; Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, 32; Bourke, “Theory and Practice,” 100, 105; Glen Newey, “Ruck in the Carpet,” review of *Philosophy and Real Politics*, by Raymond Geuss, *London Review of Books* 31 [2009]: 15–17, 17); it offers no explanatory insight into the nature of politics (Newey, *After Politics*, 2; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 90; Horton, “Realism, Liberal Moralism,” 433; Paul Sagar, “Legitimacy and Domination,” in *Realist Political Thought: Theory and Practice*, ed. Matt Sleat [New York: Columbia University Press, 2018]); it is too universalistic, assuming that a single set of principles apply over too wide a range of space and time (Sangiovanni, “Justice and the Priority of Politics”; Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, chaps. 1–2; Newey, “Ruck in the Carpet”; Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 468); it does not recognize the practice dependence or fact dependence of principles (Sangiovanni, “Justice and the Priority of Politics”; Robert Jubb, “Logical Epistemic Foundationalism about Grounding: The Triviality of Facts and Principles,” *Res Publica* 15 [2009]: 337–53; Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, chap. 1; Edward Hall, “Political Realism and Fact-Sensitivity,” *Res Publica* 19 [2013]: 173–81; Robert Jubb, “‘Recover It from the Facts as We Know Them’: Practice-Dependence’s Predecessors,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13 [2016]: 77–99); it makes overly optimistic assumptions about human nature or the willingness of political actors to follow high-minded principles (Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 469; Horton, “Realism, Liberal Moralism,” 434; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 15, 28–29; Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, 55; Newey, “Two Dogmas of Liberalism,” 460); its methodology of starting with principles and only afterward applying them to concrete political problems is mistaken (Sangiovanni, “Justice and the Priority of Politics,” 157–58; Williams, *In the Beginning*, 1–3; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 1, 6–13; Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 467–74; Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, 17–18). Though we think that several of these criticisms miss their mark, the range of concerns here is too broad to be productively addressed in a single article.

5. See, e.g., Horton, “Realism, Liberal Moralism,” 443. For other allusions to this line of thinking, see Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 9; Newey, “Two Dogmas of Liberalism,” 460–64; Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, 37.

We proceed by first, in the next section, attempting to clarify the essential terms of this debate between realism and moralism. In particular, we need a sharper fix on what it actually means to distinguish or assimilate different kinds of normativity, and thus on what exactly the realist and moralist views are (and are not) committed to. The bulk of the article then reconstructs five potential arguments for realism (and against moralism) on the basis of existing realist writings and seeks to defend moralism against these arguments, showing that they fail. We believe that moralism is the correct view, but our purpose here is not to offer a knockdown positive argument for it. However, our responses to the five potential arguments for realism indicate some positive lines of support for the moralist view.

We emphasize that the five arguments we survey are potential arguments for realism—our best attempts at rendering explicit the variety of considerations that realists have offered in favor of a distinctively political normativity. We do not claim that each argument is unequivocally endorsed by all realists. Moreover, some of the claims that we consider may be rejected by many realists, once made explicit; nevertheless, if it's possible that they are being implicitly relied on, they are worth bringing to light. We also do not deny that other arguments for a distinctively political normativity may be possible. If our consideration of these five candidate arguments pushes realists to articulate a different defense of a distinctively political normativity that we have not considered, we would take this to advance the debate. Finally, we reiterate that our analysis is not a critique of the broader realist agenda, elements of which we agree with. But we think that the attempt to place a distinctively political, non-moral normativity at the core of that agenda—at least on the basis of the arguments thus far offered—is a mistake.

## FRAMING THE DEBATE

Moralists contend that political normativity is essentially a kind of moral normativity, whereas realists contend that political normativity is not a kind of moral normativity, but rather its own distinctive kind of normativity. The substance of this disagreement is, however, not transparent. For a start, while realists regularly state their frustration at the moralist assumption that “political theory is something like applied morality,”<sup>6</sup> we have struggled to find any clear specification of how ‘morality’ is conceptualized by realists or their critics.<sup>7</sup> Neutral bystanders might suspect

6. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 2. See also Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 1.

7. The same might be true of ‘political’; see Elizabeth Frazer, “Political Theory and the Boundaries of Politics,” in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 171–95.

that each side is right on their own terms—in one sense of ‘moral’ (relied on by moralists), political normativity is moral, but in another sense of ‘moral’ (relied on by realists), political normativity is nonmoral. Indeed, what it means more generally for two kinds of normativity to be distinct (or not) is also not obvious. This makes it possible, similarly, that political normativity is a kind of moral normativity on one way of distinguishing kinds of normativity but is also distinct from moral normativity on another way of doing so. If both senses of ‘moral’, or of ‘kind of normativity’, are legitimate, then the debate between realists and moralists might turn out to be merely verbal. This would be a significant disappointment for realism, though rather less so for moralism, since it is realism that has been framed by its proponents as a substantive alternative to the “dominant” or “mainstream” moralist view. “Moralists,” by contrast, rarely self-identify in those terms (the label being largely devised by realists) and typically do not have anything invested in the distinctiveness of their view from realism.

Like realists, we think that the disagreement between realists and moralists can ultimately be rendered substantive and avoid collapse into a merely verbal debate. However, there are ways of understanding the term ‘morality’ that risk such a collapse. If ‘morality’ is construed extremely broadly, moralism becomes trivial. An example of this would be assimilating every potential kind of normativity into one huge category of “considerations about what to do” and labeling that domain the ‘moral’. This would not show that moralism is true in any interesting sense.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, if ‘morality’ is construed extremely narrowly, realism becomes uncontroversial. Realists sometimes, for example, implicitly characterize the moral domain as including only the principles that govern private interactions between individuals.<sup>9</sup> Few moralists, however, contend that political normativity is truly nothing more than private morality writ large.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the assumptions that state agents have role-specific obligations and entitlements that they lack qua private citizens and that political theorizing engages concepts and considerations that are not present in private relations are ubiquitous in the “mainstream” political theory that realists take as their target. Moralist theories do, of course, vary in how significant a gap they create between private and political action, as well as the grounds on which they do so. But this highlights how, as Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift ob-

8. As pointed out by Jubb and Rossi, “Why Moralists Should Be Afraid,” 465–66.

9. See, e.g., Newey, “Two Dogmas of Liberalism,” 449–50, 456; Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 474–75; Jubb and Rossi, “Political Norms,” 457. Such tendencies are not unique to political theory; see, e.g., Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace—Brief Edition*, 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 6–7.

10. There may be some, such as act utilitarians, who would contend this, but many of the thinkers identified by realists as “moralists” clearly do not.

serve, “the specificity of ‘the political’ is in fact a key issue within liberal political philosophy itself.”<sup>11</sup> It is a matter of substantive debate between moralists, rather than something ruled out by their very conception of morality.<sup>12</sup>

Most moralist political theorists, then, endorse some principles that are specific to politics, but hold that these principles still qualify as moral principles.<sup>13</sup> This way of thinking and speaking is not unique to political theory: there are many other examples of principles which are domain specific but still standardly conceptualized as belonging to morality more broadly. For example, in the medical domain, there are certain things that a doctor may legitimately do but a private citizen may not and vice versa. We could say the same of other domains: sexual relations, academic research, parenting, or journalism. Each of these involves particular considerations, values, concepts, and actors that are distinctive of that domain of activity. In a certain, limited sense, one could see each of these domains as having its “own kind” of normativity<sup>14</sup>—medical normativity, sexual normativity, research normativity, and so forth—though one might worry that this results in an almost unlimited proliferation of kinds. But in any case, only an idiosyncratic construal of ‘morality’ or ‘ethics’ would exclude such domains on these grounds: typically, theorists who contend that distinctive principles apply to the medical domain, for example, do not thereby think that ‘medical ethics’ is a misnomer.<sup>15</sup> If it’s only on these sorts of grounds, and in this kind of sense, that realists hold that political normativity is distinct from moral normativity, the debate over a distinctive political normativity is no longer substantive. Most moralists would readily agree with realist claims that politics involves “distinctively political concepts, such as power, and its normative relative, legitimation.”<sup>16</sup>

As examples like medical and research ethics show, to distinguish (in any deep sense) two different kinds of normativity, it is not enough to merely appeal to differences in content, that is, to differences in what they enjoin agents to do, which agents and situations they apply to, and

11. Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, “Ideal and Nonideal Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, ed. David Estlund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 373–90, 381.

12. See, e.g., Michael Walzer, “The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (1980): 209–29.

13. Rawls, “Justice as Fairness”; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Charles Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (2013): 276–306; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 39 (2014): 3–45.

14. Thanks to Elizabeth Frazer for this point.

15. *Pace* Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 475, who floats, in passing, the idea that medicine might be another domain the normativity of which is not reducible to morality.

16. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 77.

which considerations they treat as relevant. We therefore need a different way of distinguishing different kinds of normativity. Moreover, if a collapse into merely verbal debate is to be avoided, this way of distinguishing different kinds of normativity must be able to distinguish the moralist view that political principles are a part of morality, albeit perhaps a distinctive part, from the realist view that political principles are of a different, nonmoral normative kind altogether. Once it is clarified that the moralist can acknowledge that political principles are a distinctive part of morality, one might wonder what this difference really amounts to. This problem presses on moralists and realists equally, if the two views are to be separated.

An alternative approach to the *content-based* approach just criticized, which can (unlike the content-based approach) meet this challenge, is what might be called the *psychological* approach to individuating kinds of normativity. On this view, different kinds of normativity are distinguished by what is psychologically involved in making a normative judgment, or prescribing a normative 'ought', of the relevant kind: for example, by which particular attitudes and emotions each kind of normative judgment is constitutively associated with.<sup>17</sup> Compared with the content-based approach, this proposal stays closer to the guiding idea that we mentioned at the start, namely, that different kinds of normativity involve different usages of the normative 'ought'. After all, it doesn't seem to follow merely from a difference in the content of two normative principles that they involve different usages of 'ought'.

There are different ways of developing the psychological approach. One example is provided by Stephen Darwall's view that a distinctive feature of moral judgment, as contrasted with other normative spheres, is its association with a particular kind of blame, resentment, and holding accountable.<sup>18</sup> This account is intended to distinguish moral normativity from several other kinds of normativity. According to Darwall, when I judge that someone has acted imprudently, failed to believe what they ought to believe, or done something aesthetically distasteful, I may respond to this with contempt, or disesteem. But I will not typically be inclined to blame or resent them in the way that I would if I judged them to have committed a moral infraction. Though it may not be impossible to

17. This approach is often associated with the work of P. F. Strawson; see Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25. It's also advanced by Alain Locke; see esp. Alain Locke, "Values and Imperatives," in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, ed. L. Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 31–50.

18. See Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Stephen Darwall, "Morality's Distinctiveness," in *Morality, Authority, and Law: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics I*, ed. Stephen Darwall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–19. Interestingly, Williams himself conceptually identifies morality as distinctively connected with blame in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), chap. 10.

blame or resent them in such a case, to the extent that I do so, I am at least implicitly moralizing the normative inappropriateness of what they are doing: treating it as if it were a moral infraction, even if I don't explicitly regard it as such. Where this kind of blame and resentment is inappropriate, the normativity in question is not in fact moral in nature.

Of course, Darwall's particular proposal about which kinds of normative judgment are constitutively connected with which attitudes, and exactly how the nature of the constitutive connection is to be understood, is open to debate, and we are not committing to it here. Indeed, we are not committing to the psychological approach more generally, since we want to leave open to our opponents the possibility of arguing for a distinctively political normativity on many different grounds. That said, we'll find it useful to appeal back to it as an illustrative example of a non-content-based approach when we come to the fourth realist argument below. More generally, the psychological approach serves as an example of a way of individuating different kinds of normativity—and the moral domain in particular—that doesn't make either moralism or realism trivial. It doesn't make moralism trivial because it seeks to find constitutive features of moral judgment that distinguish it from other kinds of normative judgment, and thus does not construe morality so broadly as to include all of normativity. It doesn't make realism trivial because it doesn't find a difference between two kinds of normativity any time that there are different normative principles or considerations in two different domains. By the same token, it can make sense of a substantive difference between the claim that the contents of the principles governing the private and political domains differ (but that, as the moralist contends, both are forms of morality) and the claim that the two are different kinds of normativity altogether (as the realist contends).

If realists and moralists could agree on such an account of how to characterize the moral domain, a substantive debate could then proceed about whether political normativity has the features that are, according to the account, associated with morality. That said, it's possible that realists and moralists will not be able to reach a consensus on exactly how to characterize the moral domain. That on its own would not make the realism/moralism debate merely verbal, since the debate on how to characterize the moral domain could itself become a substantive part of the realism-moralism debate, with realists and moralists explicitly articulating different views on this question—all of which should obey the constraint of not rendering either view trivial—and offering positive reasons to accept those views. But it must be stressed that this debate is not advanced by realists simply noting that moralists are working with a nonrealist conception of the moral domain and accusing moralists of therefore "begging the question." Two can (and do) play at that game; moralists have just as strong grounds for making exactly the same accu-

sation, *mutatis mutandis*, about realists. Such exchanges merely amount to games of burden-shifting tennis.<sup>19</sup>

All of this being said, suppose you are not convinced that the realism-moralism debate can be rendered substantive. In that case, you can think of our argumentative strategy in the rest of this article as follows. Each of the five realist strategies we survey below is a way of attempting to isolate a sense in which political normativity is distinct from moral normativity. For each strategy, we'll argue that it either fails to identify a sense in which political normativity is genuinely separate from morality or identifies the distinctiveness of political normativity only in a sense that would be readily admitted by participants on both sides of the debate.

A distinct concern one might have at this stage is that, even if the realism-moralism debate can be rendered substantive, nothing of any importance turns on it. It's a little tricky to answer this concern from a position of neutrality between realism and moralism, and we'll have more to say on it in the conclusion, from a nonneutral, moralist point of view. But let us consider two preliminary points for now. First, we find intrinsically interesting the question of what different kinds of normativity there are. It's widely discussed, for example, whether prudential normativity is a kind of moral normativity, or whether epistemic normativity is a kind of instrumental normativity. The question pursued here is just the same sort of question. Second, realists clearly take the claim that political normativity is distinct from moral normativity to have significant methodological and theoretical implications. While they may not affirm that it's impossible to engage in moral theorizing about politics, they often hold that such moral theorizing either is irrelevant to political decision-making or is, and must be kept, separate from political theory proper.<sup>20</sup> While one can question whether these claims are sound even conditional on the claim that political normativity is distinct from moral normativity, this cannot be evaluated without clarifying in what sense, if any, the latter claim is true.

Two more clarifications are necessary. First, in claiming that political normativity is a kind of moral normativity, moralists are not arguing that either good political decision-making or good political theories involve only moral theorizing.<sup>21</sup> Most obviously, a failure to grasp relevant

19. This problem is visible in the debate between Jubb and Rossi and Erman and Möller; see Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, "Political Legitimacy in the Real Normative World: The Priority of Morality and the Autonomy of the Political," *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (2015): 215–33; Jubb and Rossi, "Political Norms"; Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, "Why Political Realists Should Not Be Afraid of Moral Values," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 40 (2015): 459–64; Jubb and Rossi, "Why Moralists Should Be Afraid."

20. Rossi and Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory," 696.

21. Stemplowska and Swift, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," 377, 379–80, 386.

empirical information or to understand how one's decisions will play out in practice will likely lead to bad political decision-making. But that is true of moral decision-making more generally: someone with good moral instincts can make bad moral decisions for such reasons. For example, in moral decisions concerning meat eating, they may lack accurate information about the conditions under which different kinds of animals being raised for food are typically kept. While this empirical information does not itself consist of moral claims, the final normative 'ought' that it is relevant to (e.g., "you ought not to eat factory-farmed meat") remains moral in character. In the political domain, the relevant, nonmoral empirical information is vast and complex, and we fully agree with realist claims that political theory therefore requires much more than the identification of moral ideals and principles.<sup>22</sup> But that thought is entirely compatible with the claim that what gives political theory its normativity is still morality.

Second, there is one reading of the term 'political normativity' that we find comprehensible and that would render it clearly distinct from moral normativity: namely, where 'political normativity' means something akin to "doing what you should do to further your self-interest (or personal ends) as a political actor." But this does not seem to be what realists typically mean by 'political normativity'. This is unsurprising, for while this definition does render political normativity separate from moral normativity, it does so by making it simply a kind of prudential (or instrumental) normativity, and thus it also fails to carve out a role for a distinctively political normativity.

#### ARGUMENT 1: THE ILLEGITIMACY OF ENFORCING (SOME) MORAL CLAIMS

We begin by briefly dealing with an argument that is probably not the core realist rationale for a distinctively political normativity, but which occasionally seems implicit in realist writings. This argument starts from the idea that just because a moral principle is reasonable or true, it does not follow that it is legitimate to enforce it politically. Such an argument might be inspired by Williams's claim that the "basic legitimization demand" requires that states be able to give a "justifying explanation" of their power and claims to authority, as well as the uses to which they put it.<sup>23</sup> For Williams, it is not enough that this justifying explanation accords with any particular moral standard. Rather, for the exercise of political power to be legitimate, the justifying explanation must actually be

22. We also agree that some moralist political theories may be deficient in this respect, although this may partly reflect a hope for a division of labor between more and less ideal theories.

23. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 4–5. See also Hall, "Bernard Williams."

acceptable, in some sense, to the concrete people whose allegiance the state demands.<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, Andrea Sangiovanni writes, “The crucial point is that [political disagreements] are not *merely* about moral, ideological, interpretative, or evaluative questions. They are not merely disagreements about sentiments or beliefs—X is right, good, true, best, genuine—but, more fundamentally, about how those sentiments or beliefs justify *the exercise and command of political power*.”<sup>25</sup> One might be tempted, then, to draw the following inference:

**(Premise)** Some moral principle may be reasonable or true but nevertheless illegitimate to enforce through politics—for example, when the principle is not (sufficiently) accepted by those subject to this power, or where there is deep disagreement about the principle.

So,

**(Conclusion)** Morality underdetermines the justifiability or legitimacy of political action. Thus, political legitimacy is a normative concept that is not (purely) moral in character.

We entirely agree with the premise of this inference. Several realists seem to think that the premise is denied by moralists. Jubb and Rossi, for example, claim that “moralists . . . demand that politics accord with their private moral views,”<sup>26</sup> while Edward Hall suggests that moralism involves “treating our fellow citizens as moral interlocutors whose objections we can discount because they are intellectually mistaken.”<sup>27</sup> These are inaccurate caricatures.<sup>28</sup> There is widespread consensus that it is not always

24. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 6. We discuss Williams’s arguments pertaining to the basic legitimation demand in more detail in the section on argument 5.

25. Sangiovanni, “Justice and the Priority of Politics,” 157. See also Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 471.

26. Jubb and Rossi, “Political Norms,” 457. In a trivial sense, of course, simply holding a view about what should be done involves thinking that one’s view is authoritative—but that applies to any view that one holds to be correct, including those about what is required by political normativity.

27. Hall, “How to Do Realistic Political Theory,” 293.

28. More generally, as Alice Baderin nicely puts it, realists frequently caricature moralists as would-be philosopher kings who believe that politics should simply be a matter of the mass public submitting to their blueprints or doctrines; see Alice Baderin, “Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 13 (2014): 132–53, 138–39. Paul Sagar, e.g., implies that moralists hold “the vain (in both senses) hope that it is *philosophers alone* who will do the emancipating of . . . people by simply telling them, from the armchair, that their beliefs are malformed” (Sagar, “Legitimacy and Domination”), while Hall claims that moralism “contains within it the (at the very least suspect, and quite possibly indecent) desire to configure the psychology of every person on the planet so that they would act as we please” (Hall, “How to Do Realistic Political Theory,” 295).

legitimate to use public power to enforce moral doctrines—even when those moral doctrines are reasonable or true—and respecting rather than overriding one’s fellow citizens’ moral doctrines is an extremely familiar concern of contemporary political theory.<sup>29</sup> Martha Nussbaum, for example, has a broad swathe of recent theorists in focus when she writes that “we see more clearly today . . . [by contrast with nineteenth-century liberals] that respect for one’s fellow citizens as equals requires not building the state on the ascendancy of any one particular comprehensive doctrine of the purpose and meaning of life, however excellent.”<sup>30</sup> So the premise above is not distinct to realism or arguments for a distinctively political normativity.

What we reject, instead, is the inference from the premise to the conclusion. The impermissibility of forcing citizens to abide by private moral doctrines can itself be moral in nature.<sup>31</sup> This is just a special case of the more general point that it can be true that actor *A* morally ought to do action *X*, while also being true that actor *B* morally ought not to force actor *A* to do action *X*. Since this possibility is evidently coherent, even reading both ‘oughts’ as moral, there is no need to introduce a distinctive political ‘ought’ to make sense of such a structure. We need not be “reigning in” the reach of morality when we conclude that the state cannot rightly force agents to abide by particular moral doctrines; rather, it can be moral demands that constrain the state not to do so.

## ARGUMENT 2: THE NEED FOR POLITICS TO RESOLVE DISPUTES

The first argument for a distinctive political normativity reflects, in part, a broader realist concern with the ubiquity and depth of moral disagree-

29. See, e.g., Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xv–xxviii, 8–15, 18–19, 24 n. 27, 63, 77–81, 133–44, 154–58; Ronald Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic, 1974), 6; Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 17–34; Joshua Cohen, “Procedure and Substance in Democratic Theory,” in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 95–119; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics and What Should Be Done about It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

30. Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism,” 21–22.

31. Williams recognizes this but suggests that a “moral doctrine” of this form would object to anyone coercing another agent—if the concern is more specifically with state coercion, then this is a “political doctrine” rather than a “moral” one (Williams, *In the Beginning*, 130–33). As we have pointed out, however, a moralist can have moral reasons to object specifically to the state acting in a certain way that do not apply to private actors. This is clear, e.g., from the lengthy nonrealist literature on state neutrality; for an overview, see Will Kymlicka, “Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality,” *Ethics* 99 (1989): 883–905.

ment. This concern is more persistently articulated, however, through a separate claim: that when there is deep disagreement over moral questions, morality cannot resolve what to do. Hence, Rossi and Sleat write, "If ethics could effectively regulate behavior in political communities . . . we would not require politics. We need politics in part precisely because of the ubiquity of moral disagreements about what we collectively should do, the ends to which political power should be put, and the moral principles and values that should underpin and regulate our shared political association. As such, politics cannot be a domain that is straightforwardly regulated by morality."<sup>32</sup> We take this to also be the thrust of Williams's oft-cited comment that resolutions to political disagreements "cannot be established on the model of interpreting a constitution. . . . We and our opponents . . . are not just trying to read one text."<sup>33</sup> Different political factions, Williams is emphasizing, do not have a shared set of moral principles that they just need to work out how to apply in practice. Instead, they subscribe to different underlying moral principles.

At first glance, the use of such claims to argue for realism seems to run into an obvious problem. Suppose that the principles governing the political domain are distinctively political, rather than moral. What reason is there to think that such distinctively political principles will not also be deeply contested? And if such distinctively political principles are themselves deeply contested, why are they any better suited than moral principles to resolving disagreements? In response, the realist might reply that the relevant political principles are in some way normatively thinner, and consequently less contentious, than moral principles. Perhaps, for example, they only impose constraints on political processes, without directly mandating any particular outcome. However, numerous moralists also make this move. Proceduralist forms of moralism claim that the fundamental principles governing the political domain apply, in the first instance, to procedures rather than to outcomes; at the same time, they maintain, these principles are nevertheless moral principles.<sup>34</sup>

32. Rossi and Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory," 691. See also Marc Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," *British Journal of Political Science* 37 (2007): 533–53, 541–42; Mark Philp, "Realism without Illusions," *Political Theory* 40 (2012): 629–49, 634; Hall, "How to Do Realistic Political Theory," 284; Jubb, "Realism," 112–13.

33. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 77–78.

34. Rawls's early view—in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971)—is plausibly a form of proceduralist moralism, as are those found in Cass Sunstein, "Agreement without Theory," in *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 123–50; Estlund, *Democratic Authority*; and Larmore, "What Is Political Philosophy?" See also Williams's discussion of "structural" moralist theories (Williams, *In the Beginning*, 1–2). Proceduralist moralism need not be ad hoc: it's possible to be a proceduralist about morality in general, holding that all primary moral principles govern procedures for decision-making. See, e.g., John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory," *Journal of Philoso-*

It may be possible to reach a greater degree of consensus on such procedural principles than on principles that apply in the first instance to outcomes. Thus, even if one feels the need to identify principles upon which consensus can be engendered, it's still not clear why realism is better off than proceduralist moralism.

The realist might now reply that the problem is that even the proceduralist moralist's moral principles are cut off from concrete political practice. Although moralist proceduralism proposes procedural principles that (it is said) all "reasonable" people "could" agree to, this doesn't ensure that people actually do so agree. Consequently, such moral principles fail to provide the sort of practical resolution of disagreement that real political processes—and principles that arise imminently from such processes—can.<sup>35</sup> As Marc Stears puts it, "politics is a process through which agreement is forged . . . rather than a process which is dependent upon agreement before it begins. . . . Agreement, in so far as it exists at all, is an artefact of the practice called politics."<sup>36</sup>

Though this line of thought is tempting, it rests on a misconstrual of the role that moralists want their moral principles to play. Such principles are not offered as alternatives to political processes for reaching resolutions of disagreements in practice. Rather, they are offered as normative tools for evaluating such political processes and their outcomes in terms of their justice, rightness, and so on. The difference between proceduralist moralism and nonproceduralist moralism is that the former gives priority to evaluation of the processes (and evaluates outcomes derivatively on evaluation of the processes), whereas the latter reverses this order of priority, evaluating outcomes in the first instance (and evaluating processes derivatively in terms of the outcomes they produce). Neither of these views proposes that morality, as an abstract entity, can in some way replace political processes.

This point can be obscured by the ambiguity of the word 'resolve'. In a purely normative sense of 'resolve', a principle resolves a disagreement when it yields an answer as to which party or parties to the disagreement (if any) are right. But this doesn't entail that the disagreement is *de facto* "resolved," in the sense that there is actual agreement that this answer is correct. Moralists claim that their principles resolve disagree-

*phy* 77 (1980): 515–72; Thomas E. Hill, "Kantian Constructivism as Normative Ethics," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 1 (2011): 26–50.

35. Jubb, "Realism," 124.

36. Stears, "Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion," 542. See also Williams, *In the Beginning*, 2, 85; Horton, "Realism, Liberal Moralism"; Hall, "How to Do Realistic Political Theory," 287–88; Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears, "The New Realism: From Modus Vivendi to Justice," in *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 177–205.

ments in the normative, not the de facto, sense.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is not totally clear what it would even mean to attribute the power to resolve disagreements in the de facto sense to abstract entities like ‘morality’ or ‘moral principles’. Perhaps the idea would have to be that morality has a kind of truth-will-out force where, given enough debate, the moral truth always wins acceptance. We certainly agree that this Whiggish claim is very empirically dubious, and if there are some moralist political theorists that make such a claim, we disagree with them. However, to claim simply that moral principles can normatively resolve disagreements does not commit one to this Whiggish claim.

Equivocation between the normative and de facto senses of ‘resolve’ (and other related terms, such as ‘govern’) recurs persistently throughout realist writing. For example, Williams writes, “A very important reason for thinking in terms of the political is that a political decision—the conclusion of a political deliberation which brings all sorts of considerations, considerations of principle along with others, to one focus of decision—is that such a decision does not in itself announce that the other party was morally wrong, or, indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that *they have lost*.”<sup>38</sup> Here Williams implies that his opponent, the “moralist,” thinks otherwise. But again, a moralist makes no commitment to saying that the de facto resolutions of real-world conflicts always reflect the moral truth, and so no commitment to saying that the losing party in such disputes was morally wrong (or wrong at all).<sup>39</sup> What the moralist holds is only that the question of how such conflicts ought to be resolved is a moral question.

Similar points apply to the oft-repeated realist claim that moralists need an “error theory” to explain why past peoples have not all believed

37. Again, this is so even for a proceduralist form of moralism. The second-order, procedural principles that such theories offer might be called “principles for resolving disagreements,” where ‘resolving’ appears to be used in the de facto sense. But the idea is still not that the principle itself (de facto) resolves the disagreement, in the (absurd) sense that the principle’s truth, or the announcement of its truth, makes the disagreement simply evaporate away. Rather, proceduralist principles make a proposal as to how the disagreement normatively ought to be (de facto) resolved, that is, as to what concrete political processes should be followed in attempting to de facto resolve the disagreement, or at least what constraints such processes should have to meet.

38. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 13. See also Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 15, 28–29; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 9–10, 15; Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, 55; Bourke, “Theory and Practice,” 78, 97–100; Newey, “Ruck in the Carpet”; Newey, “Two Dogmas of Liberalism,” 460; Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 469; Hall, “How to Do Realistic Political Theory,” 292–93, 296; Sagar, “Legitimacy and Domination.”

39. See also Patrick Tomlin, “Should We Be Utopophobes about Democracy in Particular?,” *Political Studies Review* 10 (2012): 36–47, 41; Stemplowska and Swift, “Ideal and Non-ideal Theory,” 387.

in the particular moral theories that moralists subscribe to.<sup>40</sup> This claim assumes that if a moral doctrine provides normatively correct prescriptions for political processes, then we should predictively expect that people will actually believe in these prescriptions—or, at least, it should be our default assumption that they will do so, such that their not doing so would call out for special explanation. This returns us to the Whiggish assumption that the moral truth “will out,” which, again, is no commitment of the moralist view. Indeed, it is no necessary premise of arguments in any field of human knowledge that conclusions, even if “universally” correct, are universally obvious. Many basic empirical truths, after all, have not been accepted in other times and places—but few think that, without further argument, this undermines their status as truths.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps what really explains these misconstruals of the moralist view is a basic skepticism on the part of some realists as to whether the purely normative, non-de facto reading of terms like ‘resolve’ and ‘govern’ is actually coherent. Above, we said that a principle normatively resolves a disagreement by identifying who (if anyone) in the disagreement is right. This assumes that, at least in some normative political disagreements, some interlocutors are right and others wrong. Moreover, a principle’s normative resolution of a disagreement is a matter of it supplying the correct resolution to that disagreement. Thus, the purely normative usage of ‘resolve’ presupposes something like correctness and incorrectness, being right or wrong, in the normative domain, beyond de facto states of affairs like who is perceived as right or wrong or who wins or loses political contests. Those who are skeptical that these notions find application in the normative domain might therefore doubt the coherence, or at least the intellectual respectability, of the purely normative reading of terms like ‘resolve’. They might find the de facto reading of such terms to be the only one they can make sense of, and this may lead to them reading moralist usages of such terms in the de facto sense.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, these questions cannot be resolved without getting deep into the main problems of metaethics. In this context, it suffices to note three things. First, very simply, it is not warranted for the realist to just

40. See Williams, *In the Beginning*, 8–9; Sleat, “Bernard Williams,” 492; Jubb, “Playing Kant,” 923; Hall, “Bernard Williams,” 469; Jubb, “Realism,” 115.

41. See also Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” 292.

42. Something similar might be behind some of the passages suggestive of argument I, which we considered above—it would explain why realists think that moralist arguments are “insisting on the absolute authority of our private moral views” (Jubb and Rossi, “Why Moralists Should Be Afraid,” 467). If there are no correct moral principles, but only the principles that private individuals happen to hold, then any claim that a political process should be regulated by a moral principle looks like the “enforcement” of someone’s private point of view.

assume the impossibility of correctness in the normative domain, or to take the converse view to be an obvious mistake. Only detailed metaethical argument could establish this.<sup>43</sup> Second, if the disagreement between the realist and the moralist boils down to a disagreement about the possibility of normative truth or correctness, then we have moved away from the original realist argument presented in this section. This objection was that moralists ignore the need for politics to (de facto) resolve disputes. But the moralist, as we have stressed, does not deny that politics is needed to de facto resolve disputes. This remains the case notwithstanding the separate question whether a contrasting notion of normative resolution is intelligible. Of course, the moralist is in trouble if the notion of normative resolution is unintelligible; however, this problem for moralism is not a distinctively new, realist one, but a very general and long-standing one for all normative theories that countenance the possibility of normative correctness.

This leads on to the third point, which is that the realist is flirting with danger in resting her view on outright skepticism about the possibility of correctness in the normative domain. For the realist—or, at least, the kind of realist we are focused on in this article—still contends that there is such a thing as genuine political normativity. This seems to require the realist to think that her (distinctively) political principles offer genuine normative resolutions to political problems and conflicts—they are not merely descriptive statements about political states of affairs. So if there is no such thing as correctness in the normative domain generally, this threatens to be a problem not only for the moralist but also for the realist.

The realist might reply here by taking a more moderate stance. Rather than casting doubt on the very intelligibility of normative correctness, she might instead claim that such correctness is not fully independent of actual processes of de facto political negotiation, so that the sharp separation between the normative and de facto senses of ‘resolve’ that we have been presupposing cannot be effected. But as long as this strategy does not entirely collapse the normative and the de facto senses of ‘resolve’—as long as there can be some resolutions of conflicts that would be morally acceptable but are not effected and some resolutions

43. Note that the bare claim that there is such a thing as correctness in the normative domain is not yet to subscribe to a robust kind of moral realism (see our discussion in the next section). Many opponents of moral realism try to make possible a notion of normative correctness and thus to avoid normative nihilism; see, among many others, Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Simon Blackburn, “How to Be an Ethical Anti-realist,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988): 361–75. Of course, whether these attempts succeed is another matter.

that are effected but not morally acceptable—it is not clear why this creates a problem for moralism.

To illustrate this, consider again a proceduralist form of moralism. On this view, morality specifies a set of rules that constrain the institutional procedures that may be used to resolve disagreement, rather than specifying fully determinate solutions to all of a society's problems. That refusal to specify moral answers to every question is not a concession to realism, if we hold that there is a conditional moral truth of the form that if some resolution to a disagreement is reached from a (morally) legitimate political procedure, then the participants in this procedure (morally) ought to accede to this resolution. This allows us to acknowledge the possibility of different legitimate outcomes of the procedure, as well as latitude for political actors to make decisions through actual political processes that affect what ought to be done, while holding that the final 'ought' that results from this process remains a moral one. It also illustrates how moral principles can ground the rightness of political arrangements, without such principles specifying the details of institutional design for each possible political context. Thus, as we claimed in our preliminary remarks, moralists can readily affirm that political theory is not exhausted by moral theory, even while holding that all political normativity is moral normativity.

### ARGUMENT 3: A METANORMATIVE DIFFERENCE?

As just suggested, realists often hold that correct answers to questions about what politically ought to be done are "practice dependent": they depend on our culture and institutions, our patterns of endorsement, and our volitional political activity.<sup>44</sup> On one interpretation, this is a view about the *metanormative* status of normative political claims (where the term 'metanormative' is a generalization of 'metaethical' beyond the ethical domain). Such a view, which might be called *constructivism* about political normativity, contends that while normative political claims can be true or false, they cannot ever be true (or false) in a way that is entirely independent of our minds (including our attitudes, beliefs, endorsements, and volitions) and actions. It is always, at least in part, our own minds and actions that make normative political claims true (or false).

44. See esp. Sangiovanni, "Justice and the Priority of Politics." See also Miller's defense (Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, esp. chap. 2) of what he calls "contextualism" and his endorsement of the claim that justice is "a human invention" (3). Philp, "What Is to Be Done?," defends a similar view. For a practice-dependent reading of Williams, see Jubb, "Recover It from the Facts." Sangiovanni ("Justice and the Priority of Politics") suggests a practice-dependent reading of Rawls, which fits much of what he has to say in "Kantian Constructivism," "Justice as Fairness," and *Political Liberalism*.

Through our attitudes, volitions, and actions, we “construct” normative reality within the domain of the political.<sup>45</sup>

The political realist might try to leverage this constructivism about political normativity to provide another argument for realism. Perhaps political normativity should be understood in a *constructivist* manner, while moral normativity should not be understood in a constructivist manner. Consequently, the realist might argue, political normativity must be distinct from moral normativity, because the two have different metanormative statuses.<sup>46</sup>

A major challenge for a realist pursuing this line of argument, however, is to explain why, if political normativity is constructed, moral normativity is not. After all, constructivism is a prominent view within the metaethical literature.<sup>47</sup> To be clear, we are not suggesting that a political realist cannot endorse constructivism about both political normativity and moral normativity. But in that case, the constructed nature of political normativity cannot be what distinguishes it from moral normativity. A realist who wants to distinguish the two in this way must explain why moral normativity is not also constructed.

The most obvious alternative to constructivism about morality is the view that moral truths (or, at least, the most fundamental moral truths) are objective and independent of human beings, their minds, and their practices, that is, moral realism (a view completely distinct, lest there be any confusion, from political realism). But we doubt that political realists would endorse such a stance. Many political realists object to what they perceive as morality’s hold over political philosophy in part precisely because they doubt its claims to universality and objectivity.<sup>48</sup> So it is not obvious how the realist attracted to constructivism about political normativity can resist constructivism about moral normativity. Moreover, such a realist will also have to explain why whatever grounds she has for rejecting constructivism about moral normativity don’t provide reasons to reject constructivism about political normativity.

45. As we say, this is only one interpretation of the claim of practice dependence; we’ll argue below that one can accept a certain kind of “practice dependence” without accepting constructivism about political normativity.

46. Thanks to Harjit Bhogal for this suggestion and for subsequent discussion.

47. See esp. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*; Christine Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), chap. 10; Sharon Street, “Constructivism about Reasons,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3 (2008): 207–46; Sharon Street, “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason,” in *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, ed. James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40–59.

48. See, e.g., Williams, *In the Beginning*, 10; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 10; Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, 44–45; Newey, “Two Dogmas of Liberalism,” 463–64; Jubb, “Realism,” 115. Note also Williams’s long and complicated history with moral objectivity; see, e.g., Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chaps. 8–9.

The grounds that political realists do offer for constructivism about political normativity are, moreover, questionable. It is an obvious truth, denied by no one, that the formulation of real-world political solutions in situations of moral conflict—what we called in the previous section the “de facto” resolution of disagreement—is a constructive process and that the actual solutions pursued will depend on the human actors involved and their practices. What is distinctive of constructivism is the much more controversial philosophical claim that there are no normative truths about how such conflicts ought to be resolved, independent of this real-world constructive process, or independent of us and our practices.<sup>49</sup> The second, controversial claim cannot be supported merely with reference to the first, obvious one. Granted, a shift from the first claim to the second may seem justifiable to someone who already accepts constructivism. But as an argument for constructivism it straightforwardly begs the question. For the transition from the first claim (a claim about actual human practices) to the second claim (a claim about normative truth) is only licensed on the prior assumption that normative truths cannot be independent of actual human practices, that is, on the assumption of constructivism.

Finally, an important kind of “practice dependence” can be accounted for without endorsing metanormative constructivism. It is highly plausible that what is legitimate, morally speaking, often depends on the self-understandings and values of those involved. One can acknowledge this without admitting constructivism if one sees particular instances of practice dependence as being derived from or explained by principles that are not themselves practice dependent. For example, one might think that there is a practice-independent principle that puts prohibitions on imposing certain kinds of restrictions on individuals without their consent. Since what individuals consent to will be influenced by their self-understandings, this more general, practice-independent principle will yield different particular restrictions on conduct depending on the nature of such individuals’ self-understandings. There is nothing here that commits one to constructivism, at least in any sense of that term that conflicts with moral realism. The vast majority of normative views make what it is right to do sensitive to circumstances in various ways.<sup>50</sup> This is a truism of normative ethics, not a distinctive metanormative view.

49. This second claim is, in turn, not to be confused with the still bolder claim that there are no normative truths simpliciter, nor the (related) claim, considered in the previous section, that the de facto sense of ‘resolve’ is the only intelligible one.

50. Consequentialist views provide the most obvious example, but plausibly Kantian views in normative ethics make circumstances (and consequences) relevant in certain ways. See, e.g., Allen W. Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 15.

Indeed, some opponents of constructivism go on the offensive and argue that the only way to make sense of practice dependence is by explaining it in terms of practice-independent principles in the background.<sup>51</sup> It would take us too far off course to try to resolve this debate here.<sup>52</sup> Suffice it to say that nonconstructivists have a candidate account of why the answers to particular normative questions are practice dependent and why people's self-understandings can shape what ought to be done. The controversy here relates closely to a more general worry about constructivism, namely, that if constructivists are to put any restrictions on what a constructive procedure must look like to yield binding normative principles (e.g., that the actors must be placed behind a veil of ignorance, or that they must endorse the principles they pick as binding all citizens equally), this raises the question of what further principles ground such restrictions.<sup>53</sup> If these further principles are true independently of any constructive procedure, then the constructivism of the account appears compromised, or amounts to a first-order, normative position that is nevertheless compatible with (and arguably even requires) moral realism at the metanormative level. If they are not, then there are worries about an infinite regress, since the same questions can be raised with respect to the constructive procedure that yields these principles, and so on. Again, we don't present this argument as decisive, but it is telling that this objection is prominent in the literature on constructivism about moral normativity as well as that about political normativity.<sup>54</sup> So it reinforces the suspicion that the two stand or fall together—which darkens the prospects of the political realist distinguishing moral and political normativity by their metanormative status.

51. See esp. G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), chap. 6.

52. For discussion, see Miller, *Justice for Earthlings*, chap. 1; Jubb, "Logical and Epistemic Foundationalism"; Hall, "Political Realism and Fact-Sensitivity"; Andrew T. Forcehimes and Robert B. Talisse, "Clarifying Cohen: A Response to Jubb and Hall," *Res Publica* 19 (2013): 371–79.

53. Williams's "critical theory principle," discussed in the section on argument 5, is a similar restriction and thus also raises this question. See Williams, *In the Beginning*, 6; Alex Bavister-Gould, "Bernard Williams: Political Realism and the Limits of Legitimacy," *European Journal of Philosophy* 21 (2011): 593–610; Hall, "Bernard Williams"; Sagar, "Legitimacy and Domination."

54. See, e.g., Nadeem J. Z. Hussain and Nishi Shah, "Misunderstanding Metaethics: Korsgaard's Rejection of Realism," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 1 (2006): 265–294, 290–93; Roger Crisp, *Reasons and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 53–55; Robert Stern, "Freedom, Self-Legislation and Morality in Kant and Hegel: Constructivist vs. Realist Accounts," in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), 245–66, 252; Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. 3, *From Kant to Rawls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 960–61. For an application of something like this argument to the political realist view, see Erman and Möller, "Political Legitimacy," 220–21.

ARGUMENT 4: A NORMATIVE DIFFERENCE?

Perhaps, though, the difference between moral normativity and political normativity is more normative than metanormative, that is, perhaps it is found in the substantive normative principles that characterize the two domains. Mark Philp, for example, contends that politics is “a domain that is systematically more consequentialist in orientation than is the domain of private morality,” and he argues that political virtue is distinct from moral virtue. For example, political virtue may require lying and deceiving, whereas moral virtues such as modesty and generosity are not political virtues.<sup>55</sup>

As we argued in our section on the framing of the debate, differences in the content of the principles that regulate the private and political domains do not automatically show that the latter principles are not moral in character. However, Philp might argue that the differences in content of private morality and political normativity are so great that the two cannot plausibly be regarded as belonging to the same genus or overarching category. Given that private morality is unquestionably a part of morality, then, political normativity cannot be a part of morality.

One way to resist this argument is to argue that differences between the normative constraints on political actors and those on private actors can, at least to some degree, be explained by overarching principles that apply to both domains, plus important empirical differences between the two. For example, lying is plausibly more often justified in politics than in private interactions because politicians are frequently in situations where telling the truth would have disastrous consequences, whereas this is rarer for private individuals. If this is so, a single overarching moral principle (“do not lie unless it is required to avoid disastrous consequences”) could explain the difference in final verdict between the two domains.

Moreover, we suspect that Philp overstates the extent of the normative differences between the private and public domains. It’s hard to settle this issue here, since it requires a lot of substantive moral and political theory. But Philp’s claim that political normativity is more consequentialist than private morality is questionable on both sides: it is highly unobvious both that private morality is nonconsequentialist at root and that political normativity is consequentialist at root. To the extent that one finds it plausible that there are side constraints on what private actors may permissibly do, regardless of consequences, such a general claim seems to us equally plausible in the political arena.

55. Philp, “What Is to Be Done?,” 474–75. See also Richard Bellamy, “Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves: Liberal Ideals and Real Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9 (2010): 412–30.

There is something of a tendency—in public discourse more than in actual realist writings, though still occasionally in the latter<sup>56</sup>—to associate ‘morality’ as conceptually tied up with a rather narrow range of extreme inflexible deontological prohibitions. On this way of thinking, consequentialism doesn’t seem like a moral view—its concern with consequences leaves the domain of the moral and enters the domain of being “pragmatic.” Though Philp does not endorse this crude view, echoes of it can nevertheless be found in his treatment of lying. Philp portrays a situation where a politician is required to lie—not just to save his own skin, but for the greater public good—as one where the politician has to set aside morality for the sake of a political demand. But one might just as easily cast the enjoinder to pursue the public good, even where it requires lying, as itself moral in nature.<sup>57</sup> The aforementioned psychological approach to individuating kinds of normativity may be of help in adjudicating between these views. For example, on the view of Darwall’s that we sketched earlier, if we blame and resent the politician (in, perhaps, a distinctive way) for not lying, then we are effectively treating the politician as morally obligated to lie. And similarly, if we would not blame and resent the politician for lying, then we are not really treating the politician as morally obligated not to lie. We submit that in any case where we really see the politician’s lie as normatively justified, we would not be inclined to blame or resent them for doing so. So, at least on Darwall’s account, the correct description of the case will be the one that casts the enjoinder to lie as moral, rather than one that casts it as a political obligation to set moral considerations aside.

Philp is still right in one sense that there are “political virtues” that are not moral virtues—if we construe “political virtues” as including the broad skills that make someone an instrumentally effective political actor: someone who can effectively get things done, persuade others, broker compromises, and generally advance their political agenda. These kinds of skills are, we agree, not moral virtues as such. But as we said in our preliminary remarks, our claim is not that being morally virtuous suffices for being a good political actor (in the broadest sense), but rather that the nature of the normative demands on political actors is moral.

56. See Bourke, “Theory and Practice”; Philp, “What Is to Be Done?” It is more common in the distinct but intellectually related realist tradition in international relations scholarship; for examples and critical commentary, see Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 6. Ambiguities on this point can also be found in Weber’s political writings; for discussion, see Elizabeth Frazer, “Max Weber on Ethics and Politics,” *Politics and Ethics Review* 2 (2006): 19–37, 26–29.

57. For some other possible ways of resolving these sorts of dilemmas—conceptualized explicitly as moral dilemmas—see Torbjørn Tønnsjø, “Moral Conflict and Moral Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 113–17, 113–14.

To explain this view further, it is important to distinguish the *evaluative* from the *normative*. One can identify features that make individuals good at a certain activity, but this does not (without supplementary normative claims) establish that they ought to engage in the activity. For example, it is possible to evaluate someone as a good craftsperson while completely bracketing whether they are using their time well—whether they are doing what they ought to be doing. While the evaluation of someone's skill as a craftsperson is a distinctive kind of (non-moral) evaluation, there is no need to introduce a distinctive kind of normativity, "craft-making normativity," into our taxonomy of kinds of normativity.

We think that the same is true of nonmoral political skills. Someone's actions may manifest a great deal of political skill, and this can be evaluated positively. But whether these actions are what the person ought to be doing depends on what agenda they are put to the service of—and these kinds of political skills can be deployed in the service of any agenda whatsoever. This kind of view can be traced back to Aristotle,<sup>58</sup> and it continues through many recent accounts of instrumental normativity, which hold that our having reasons to perform instrumentally efficacious actions is parasitic on our having reasons to achieve the ends that these actions serve; instrumental normativity is primarily a matter of the transmission of reasons, so to speak, from ends to means rather than of the creation of reasons *ex nihilo*.<sup>59</sup> If this is so, then the reason to take the means inherits the character of the reason to achieve the end: specifically, if the reason to achieve the end is moral, then so is the reason to take the means.

Thus, the moralist should say the following. There are various normative, moral demands on political actors to achieve particular ends—upholding order, promoting individual rights, advancing social prosperity, and so forth. In achieving those ends effectively, the actor will need to employ various nonmoral political skills.<sup>60</sup> But the enjoinder to employ those nonmoral skills is still a moral one, derivative on the moral demand to achieve the end. Without any such moral demand to achieve the end, there is no normative demand of any kind (save those of indi-

58. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence H. Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 1144a.

59. For a very helpful overview of the relevant literature, see Niko Kolodny, "Instrumental Reasons," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, ed. Daniel Star (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), chap. 4; Joseph Raz, "The Myth of Instrumental Rationality," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1 (2005): 2–28; Korsgaard, *Constitution of Agency*, chap. 1.

60. Indeed, as we observed earlier, nonmoral skills are also needed to achieve moral ends in the private sphere.

vidual self-interest) to employ the nonmoral skills. Thus, though we have allowed for nonmoral political virtues (in the sense of skills), we have not allowed for any distinctively political normative demands.<sup>61</sup>

One might wonder, at this point, whether political normativity can be construed as a special kind of collective instrumental normativity.<sup>62</sup> On such a view, there are certain ends that we have collectively as a political community, and political normativity concerns the realization of these ends. It is surely right that we can hypothetically talk about what would be rational from the point of view of advancing ends that a collective shares. However, in order for these collective ends to have any normative authority over the actions of political actors, such that they really ought to do what advances those collective ends, there must be a claim that such actors are obligated to take into account the ends of the community as a whole, and not simply to pursue their own private ends. And that claim takes us beyond the domain of instrumental normativity. Moreover, there are surely repugnant collective ends, such as mass violence, exploitation, or repression, which we would not accept as supplying genuine normative 'oughts' just because they are collectively desired. So, like individual instrumental normativity, it seems that collective instrumental normativity inherits its normativity from some other, external normative demand.

Of course, when moral ends are relatively uncontroversial, they may effectively be "in the background" of much decision-making. For example, it may be a widely shared assumption that goals like reducing unemployment, countering crime, or maintaining a minimally stable political system are ones that communities should pursue. With such assumptions in the background, working out what ought to be done may mainly be a matter of figuring out how to achieve these goals, such that relatively little political reasoning is recognizable as moral reasoning as such. Nevertheless, the normativity of the conclusions of such reasoning is still ultimately inherited from the underlying moral assumptions, however uncontroversial they may seem. Moreover, it is important not to lose sight of backgrounded assumptions altogether, since even apparently uncontentious moral assumptions are often contestable. Upholding order or re-

61. One might wonder whether a nonmoral but political normative demand might arise in a different way from the nonmoral political virtues or skills. Perhaps the demand is not on the politician but rather, e.g., on those who might vote for the politician; her having (nonmoral) political skills is a (nonmoral) political reason to vote for her (thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion). However, we think it is more plausible to say that the politician's having (nonmoral) political skills is a moral reason to vote for her (when her general agenda is morally good), since her having these nonmoral skills will enable her to achieve morally good outcomes more effectively.

62. Thanks to Dan Singer for this suggestion. See also Newey, "Two Dogmas of Liberalism," 454–56.

ducing unemployment may uncontroversially be morally good, but when they come into conflict with other goals, the question of how morally important they are compared with these other goals makes a real difference to what ought to be done. Losing sight of our moral assumptions does not get rid of them but simply allows them to govern our actions implicitly, uncritically, and without challenge.

#### ARGUMENT 5: THE RELATIVE “PRIORITY” OF POLITICS AND MORALITY

We will consider one final line of thought in favor of a distinctively political normativity. This takes its cue from Williams’s contention that political theory should be more concerned with the way states answer the “first political question,” that is, how they secure “order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation,” without which one cannot even begin to answer any other political questions.<sup>63</sup> To be legitimate political orders, states must not only provide a solution to the first political question but also meet the basic legitimation demand (BLD), which Williams explicates as follows: “Those who claim political authority over a group must have *something to say* about the basis of that authority, and about the question of why the authority is being used to constrain in some ways and not others. Moreover, there is a sense in which, at least ideally, they must have something to say *to each person* whom they constrain. If not, there will be people whom they are treating merely as enemies in the midst of their citizens.”<sup>64</sup> This is not merely a descriptive claim—which would not conflict with moralism—but, for Williams and his followers, a foundation for a realist form of normative inquiry about legitimacy. As Williams explains, “It may be asked whether the BLD is itself a moral principle. If it is, it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics: in particular, because it is inherent in there being first a political question. The situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation: it is, rather, the situation which the existence of the political is supposed to alleviate (replace).”<sup>65</sup>

In this passage, it seems that Williams’s view that the BLD is “a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics” amounts to, or at

63. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 3.

64. *Ibid.*, 135.

65. *Ibid.*, 5. See also Hall, “Bernard Williams,” 468–69; Jubb and Rossi, “Political Norms,” 456–57. Sangiovanni also uses the language of the “priority” of politics and morality in the title of his influential article “Justice and the Priority of Politics,” but in his case the claim that politics is “prior” to morality seems to amount to an assertion of the practice dependence of political normativity. We have already addressed this metanormative case for a distinctively political normativity in the section on argument 3.

least entails, the claim that the BLD must be satisfied in order for a situation to count as political. Hence, situations that do not satisfy the BLD (e.g., “one lot of people terrorizing another”) are not truly political situations. Williams intends this requirement to be relatively minimal. For Williams, legitimacy is scalar, and satisfying the BLD (to the extent required simply for a situation to count as political) does not require that everyone be satisfied by the state’s justifications, nor that those who are satisfied be fully satisfied.<sup>66</sup> Williams does, however, attach one further rider to the BLD in the form of the critical theory principle: “the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified.”<sup>67</sup>

From the premise that minimal satisfaction of the BLD is inherent in the very definition of politics and political relationships, Williams concludes that the BLD is a demand from within politics itself and thus represents a distinctively political normativity, rather than a moral requirement that can be conceived of as “external” or “prior” to politics.<sup>68</sup> This argument, we contend, does not succeed. We’ll begin by putting some pressure on its premise and then turn to the inference from the premise to the conclusion.

Williams’s premise entails a very restrictive conception of politics. If it is constitutive of politics that it involves claims of authority, legitimating justifications, and an absence of brute coercion, then it would seem that ‘political terror’ and many (though not all) forms of ‘political violence’ are misnomers, that war is rarely if ever political, and that swathes of international politics—occurring between states which are sovereign equals and without formal claims of authority over each other—are not correctly described as politics at all.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, as Williams himself notes, this conception of politics entails the unconventional claim that anarchism is not a political viewpoint at all.<sup>70</sup>

66. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 136. See also Hall, “Bernard Williams,” 472–75.

67. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 6.

68. For similar interpretations of Williams’s argument, see Sleat, “Bernard Williams,” 487; Hall, “Bernard Williams.”

69. See also Baderin, “Two Forms of Realism,” 140.

70. Williams, *In the Beginning*, 85. See also Hall, “Bernard Williams,” 473. Jubb and Rossi suggest that if we do not build satisfaction of the BLD into our definition of politics, then a moralist view “would have to think of itself as the justification of brute force through that force’s realization of certain moral ends” (Jubb and Rossi, “Political Norms,” 457). This does not follow. We can resist building the satisfaction of the BLD into our definition of politics while still acknowledging it as a principle that ought to regulate politics. In this way, we can avoid any need to justify brute force that fails to satisfy the BLD. Similarly, Jubb and Rossi suggest that their distinction “between politics and sheer domination” is necessary, because otherwise one is forced to concede that “all orders are unmitigated domination,” with moralists forced to see their theories as justifying such orders. This straightforwardly commits the fallacy of composition. To say that politics includes sheer domination does not mean that all politics is sheer domination.

Even if this restrictive definition of politics is ultimately defensible, it is clearly and crucially a normatively “thick” conception of politics, as opposed to a thinner, more inclusive one.<sup>71</sup> This raises the question of what grounds its normative content and, turning to the inference from Williams’s premise to his conclusion, whether such grounding does not require moral foundations.<sup>72</sup> According to Williams, even if the BLD is a moral principle, it is not a moral principle that is “prior to politics.” But a moral principle that must first be satisfied in order for a situation to count as political—in order for politics, properly speaking, to begin—seems in one very natural sense prior to politics.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, regardless of this language of ‘priority’, a moral principle that must inherently be satisfied (at least minimally) for a situation to count as political is still, it would seem, a moral principle, and we see no obvious reason to hold that it is moral in some less deep or genuine sense.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, for many clearly moral principles, one could imagine defining some practice or activity partially in terms of the satisfaction of that principle. For example, one can define the practice of employment (as contrasted with forced labor) partly in terms of the satisfaction of the principle that people should not be compelled into employer/employee relations against their will. Similarly, one can define the practice of a sexually intimate relationship partially in terms of the satisfaction of a principle that requires consent, by contrast with sexual exploitation. There is no obvious sense in which the possibility of such definitions makes these principles less deeply moral in character.

Perhaps what Williams is thinking is better understood as follows. If the BLD is built into the definition of politics, then the normativity, or normative authority, of the BLD is supplied by politics itself. It thus does not stand in need of justification by a moral rationale that is “external” to politics. It is in this sense that it does not represent a morality that is “prior” to politics, and that it does represent a distinctively political normativity.

However, this argument is based on a subtle but fatal equivocation. What is built into the definition of politics, by the lights of Williams’s premise, is that the BLD must be satisfied: a situation will not count as political unless the BLD is (minimally) met. But there is a clear distinction between whether a putative principle has been satisfied and whether

71. See Williams’s own discussion of thick and thin concepts in Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

72. See also Bavister-Gould, “Bernard Williams.”

73. For a more detailed examination of the different notions of ‘priority’ that might be at work in realist texts, see Erman and Möller, “Political Legitimacy,” 224–26.

74. Larmore’s critique of Williams is similar to our argument here; see Larmore, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” 290–92.

it has been justified. A putative principle is satisfied when its normative demands are met, that is, when it is adhered to. By contrast, it is justified when it is shown to have normative force, that is, when it is shown why it ought to be adhered to. Evidently, a putative principle can be satisfied without being justified. Consequently, to show that the satisfaction of the BLD is built into the definition of politics is not to show that politics justifies the BLD, or accounts for its normativity or normative force. It does not answer the question of why we should adhere to the BLD.

On the contrary, to build the satisfaction of a constraint like the BLD into our definition of politics is simply to push the normative question back from “Why, in a given situation, should we practice politics in one way rather than another?” to “Why, in a given situation, should we practice politics, rather than something else?” Crucially, because the concept of politics involved is now much thicker, the latter question has become much more normatively substantive. Instead of merely asking something like “Why should we escape from a Hobbesian state of nature?” it now amounts to “Why should we, in a given situation or toward a given group of fellow human beings, engage in relationships of authority justified by a legitimating story that meets the critical theory principle?”<sup>75</sup> Political relations, in this thicker sense, are not necessary for there to be a social order. Again, the analogy with other constitutive normative principles illustrates the point here. Employment, as opposed to forced labor, may constitutively require consent—without consent, a labor relation may not count as employment. But that fact does not, in itself, show why consent is normatively important, for it is not incoherent to claim that we should not care about whether we are engaging people in employment rather than forced labor. We still have to give a further, external justification for why consent matters, and thus for why we should engage people in employment rather than forced labor. Similarly, once one’s concept of politics becomes relatively thick, it can no longer just be taken as given that one must engage in such politics rather than something else, independently of any prepolitical reasons to do so.

It is thus a tempting but ultimately chimerical ambition to think that we can justify a putative normative principle simply by saying that it must be satisfied in order for a situation to count as political—as if that brings the possibility of further normative interrogation of such a principle to an end, or normativity can be got out of the definition of a term. To say that a particular social order would be “nonpolitical,” rather than “wrong,” is at most to conceal the need for normative justification, not to make it disappear. Given this, the justification of the BLD cannot be generated merely from the fact that its (minimal) satisfaction is inherent to a

75. We thank an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point.

political situation—even if this were so.<sup>76</sup> It needs some further justification. Admittedly, this does not in itself show that such justification must be moral in character.<sup>77</sup> But it does show that the claim that (minimal) satisfaction of the BLD is “inherent” to politics does not entail a distinctively (nonmoral) political normativity.

## CONCLUSION

Political realism may be seen as part of a broader “methodological turn” in contemporary political theory that has forced theorists to reflect more deeply on the way normative prescriptions about politics are formulated.<sup>78</sup> The appearance of such issues on the agenda is a step forward; indeed, recent trends in real politics provide important impetus for such methodological debates. In the face of widespread polarization in Western politics, with many on the left and right united only by their strident opposition to any ideological compromises, there is ample reason to worry about excessively “idealistic” approaches to political theory that abstract away from such disagreements.

Consequently, as we emphasized at the outset, our concern in this article has not been to advocate a form of political theory that is abstract, utopian, or empirically disengaged, nor to reject all of the claims associated with ‘realism’ in its broadest sense. Instead, we have sought to focus on one of the principal claims that realists have sought to make in proposing an alternative approach to political theory: that political normativity is distinct from moral normativity. Rejecting this claim, we have argued, does not commit the moralist to many of the views that realists impute to them. It does not entail that politics is simply a mechanism for enacting comprehensive moral blueprints for social life, or that political theory involves nothing more than articulating moral principles, or that we may ride roughshod over moral disagreements, or that political prescriptions should be insensitive to context. Much preexisting moralist political philosophy explicitly disavows these claims. With the commitments of moralism clarified, we have argued that what remains of the case for a distinctively political normativity is unconvincing.

The five arguments that we have considered reconstruct, we contend, the most prominent and interesting rationales for a distinctively

76. See also Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, “Practices and Principles: On the Methodological Turn in Political Theory,” *Philosophy Compass* 10 (2015): 533–46, 540–42; Eva Erman and Niklas Möller, “Why Political Realists Should Not Be Afraid,” 462.

77. See Jubba and Rossi, “Why Moralists Should Be Afraid,” 467.

78. See David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Erman and Möller, “Practices and Principles”; Adrian Blau, ed., *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

political normativity discernible in current realist writings. But we do not claim to have surveyed every potential argument. The claim that there is a distinctive political normativity is, we find, sometimes a frustratingly moving target, both in terms of what it ultimately means and in terms of the arguments offered for it. This allows for a situation whereby, whenever one pins down a concrete argument and argues against it, it is protested that the really promising argument has been overlooked or misunderstood. We can only invite those who remain committed to the idea of a distinctively political normativity to construct clear arguments for it that avoid the problems with the arguments that we have identified. Only then can such arguments be productively engaged.

Though we think that the relationship between different kinds of normativity is of intrinsic philosophical interest, we believe that there are deeper reasons to worry about any effort to isolate political normativity from morality. Most importantly, such an effort can serve to insulate political decision-making or political theory from distinctively moral criticism—taking it out of the space of moral justification. Admittedly, defenders of a distinctively political normativity might claim that politics can still be evaluated by both moral and (distinctively) political principles.<sup>79</sup> But it is highly unclear how such principles would interact, and while realists sometimes admit such a possibility, they typically seem to see the moral evaluation as being at best optional and at worst a kind of category mistake when applied to politics.<sup>80</sup> The way realists typically claim that certain normative conclusions can be derived directly from definitions of ‘politics’, purported “political necessities,” or very general political needs for “order” reinforces this concern.<sup>81</sup> Such claims mask prior normative (and plausibly, we claim, moral) judgments that are built into those definitions of politics, assertions of what is politically necessary, or prioritization of particular forms of order.<sup>82</sup> A failure to recog-

79. Thanks to an associate editor of *Ethics* for pressing this criticism. This editor suggested an analogy: legal positivists may think there’s a distinctively legal normativity, but they often do so precisely so as to make possible distinctively moral criticism of legal practices that is not framed as a matter of what the law does in fact prescribe. However, it’s not obvious that legal positivists do think that there’s a distinctively legal normativity. As the name suggests, they may be better interpreted as thinking that the question of what the law prescribes is a positive, descriptive question—and thus not normative at all.

80. Hall, “How to Do Realistic Political Theory,” 290; Williams, *In the Beginning*, 8; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 99; Rossi and Sleat, “Realism in Normative Political Theory,” 696.

81. This phenomenon is sometimes known as “cryptonormativity” (or perhaps more specifically, in this case, “cryptomorality”). See Alex Worsnip, “Cryptonormative Judgments,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 25 (2017): 3–24.

82. Relatedly, witness realist enjoinders to focus on “what works”; e.g., Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 47. Something’s “working” is always a matter of it advancing some particular end, so the question whether to care about the end is always present, even if hidden.

nize such judgments obscures the need to justify them and the possibility of contesting and critiquing them.

Real politics provides cautionary tales for such realist ways of thinking about morality and politics, just as it does for overly idealistic ones. Influenced by a strand of realism in international relations theory that is distinct but related to that in political theory, foreign policy makers have adopted similar arguments in contending that politics, or international politics, is a sphere in which moral notions are essentially subordinate to political and purportedly nonmoral purposes. As George Kennan, one of the most influential figures in US foreign policy after World War II, illustratively argued, “The interests of the national society for which government has to concern itself are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life and the well-being of its people. These needs have no moral quality . . . [for them] the government needs no moral justification, nor need it accept any moral reproach for acting on the basis of them.”<sup>83</sup> Needless to say, such doctrines have proved extraordinarily permissive.

As the international relations theorist Jack Donnelly points out, “Kennan’s ‘necessity’ is not a matter of physical compulsion or impossibility. . . . Beneath Kennan’s ostensibly neutral appeal to unavoidable necessity is an implicitly ethical notion of the national interest.”<sup>84</sup> Recognizing this, and seeing political normativity as part of rather than alien to morality, forestalls any effort to rule out moral claims as, from the start, inadmissible or subordinate in political reasoning. It also avoids fragmenting normative political theory into two camps that supposedly speak entirely separate languages, instead recognizing them as—though sometimes pursuing distinct approaches and projects—ultimately part of a shared conversation regarding what ought to be done in politics. That conversation is an evolving one and needs to deepen, in various ways, its engagement with concrete political realities. But this should not come at the cost of denying its ineliminable roots in morality.

83. George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 64 (1985): 205–18, 206. For numerous other examples, see Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, 161–65.

84. Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations*, 164.