What is Political Moralism?

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1 Introduction

One of the foremost methodological debates in contemporary political theory pits 'political realists' – who advance political theories that are attentive to "that which is distinctive about political practice" (Sleat 2022, 472) – against 'political moralists' – who argue that "political justification is irreducibly moral" (Erman and Möller 2015b, 2). But the debate is nebulous. In part, this reflects its recent origins. While 'moralistic' has a meaning in lay discourse, 'moralism' was not a prominent methodological term in political theory until coined by realists to label approaches they reject. Partly in consequence, the realist-moralist debate has largely comprised (a) realist critiques of so-called moralism (Williams 2005; Geuss 2008; Jubb and Rossi 2015), (b) critiques of realism by theorists who *might* be identified as moralists (Erman and Möller 2015b2015a; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018; Estlund 2017), or (c) positive efforts to flesh out realism (Prinz and Rossi 2017; Hall 2017; Sleat 2018b; Rossi and Argenton 2021; Hall 2020). What is missing is any positive statement of political moralism itself.[1]

Such a statement is necessary, because while realists have presented moralism as the "mainstream" (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 690; Hall 2020, 2) and "dominant" (Jubb 2015, 919) paradigm of contemporary political theory, the substance of the moralist approach remains unclear (Erman and Möller 2015b, 2). In his original essay on 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,' Bernard Williams spends just two pages describing moralism (Williams 2005, 1–3), citing only one specific example of a moralist thinker (John Rawls). His basic definition of moralism – "views that make the moral prior to the political" – is also cryptic. As Sleat (2018a, 17), a leading realist, acknowledges: "it is never quite clear exactly what is meant by saying that morality has priority over politics or vice versa". Sleat (2022, 472) suggests that Williams' key distinction is that "moralism assumes a '*basic* relationship' between morality and political practice… [whereas] realism seeks a more complex account of that relationship [that] gives appropriate space and weight to that which is distinctive about political practice." But since most moralists agree that politics is distinctive, this contrast remains vague.

It is therefore worthwhile considering how moralists *themselves* articulate their approach – what 'actually-existing moralism,' as it were, really is. This paper does so, in four parts. In Sect. 2, I provide a definition of political moralism and explicate moralists' rough meaning of 'morality'. In Sect. 3, I emphasise what political moralism is *not*, disassociating it from some stances critics might assume moralists endorse. In Sect. 4, I suggest how a moderate form of political moralism can be defended. In Sect. 5, I conclude by arguing that my preceding discussion can help clarify ways in which political moralism might be excessive – i.e., how political theories might be problematically 'moralistic'.[2]

Why does this matter? I argue that the picture of 'mainstream' contemporary political theory found in many recent realist writings is inaccurate. But there is a further upshot. One way of understanding the realism-moralism debate is as essentially *technical* and *dichotomous*: to be a realist is to

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[1] Estlund's 'Methodological moralism in political philosophy' might seem an exception but remains a critique of realism that avoids "mounting a substantive defense of the moralist position" (Estlund 2017, 386). The same is true of Estlund (2020, ch.3).

[2] Some scholars treat 'moralism' as definitionally pejorative, e.g.: Driver (2005); Coady (2008); Taylor (2012). I am obviously not employing 'moralism' this way (and nor are most critics of 'political moralism').

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see moralism as methodologically mistaken and vice versa. Realists sometimes imply this by presenting moralism as committing a fundamental "misunderstanding of ethics" (Hall 2020, 2), "category mistake" (Jubb 2015, 919; Prinz and Rossi 2017, 351), or set of "fallacies" (Favara 2023, 12). I argue that this is erroneous: wrongly construing differences between realists' and moralists' *substantive* goals or values as *technical* disputes about normative reasoning. This is ideologically dubious for both camps: masking substantive normative choices under the guise of methodology, so that one's opponents seem like they can simply be dismissed given their supposedly faulty methods.

As such, while this paper is critical of some realist portrayals of 'moralism,' my aims are integrative. Realism and moralism do represent distinct methodological impulses guided by different *critical priorities* – i.e. different kinds of methodological failures they seek to minimise. But I argue that a moderate form of moralism is compatible with most (though not all) forms of realism. Many realists might welcome this. Realism is a broad family of views, in which many take no issue with 'moralism', while even those who do still typically acknowledge some role for morality in political theory (Hall 2020, 13 & 18; Sleat 2022; see also: Coady 2008, 13–15). Realists who *do* construe moralism as the form of political theory they oppose might object that if I depict moralism as compatible with realism, then I am mischaracterising moralism as they mean it. But my argument is that if moralism is *not* as I describe it, then it cannot be the 'mainstream view' of modern political theory in the way those realists suggest.

2 Defining Political Moralism

I define political moralism as the view that proper practical normative judgements about politics – about what political actions or norms or institutions are good, right, or permissible – depend, *in some sense*, on moral judgements.[3] Political moralists consequently hold that moral reasoning is a necessary, though not sufficient, task of political theory – whether as a positive basis for justifying our political judgements or for the more critical interrogation of the moral assumptions they involve.

This dependence on moral judgements takes at least three forms:

i. Normative judgements about politics may *directly express* moral judgements. For example, a political party may deem welfare provision via private insurance unjust.

ii. Normative judgements about politics may *draw their normative force* from a moral judgement plus an instrumental judgement. For example, a political party may wish to implement a carbon tax, because a carbon tax is an instrumentally effective way of countering climate change, which is a morally important goal.

iii. Normative judgements about politics might neither constitute nor draw their normative force from moral judgements yet remain *regulated by* moral judgements that restrict their scope and conditionality. For example, assessments of a political party's strategically best course to winning an election are not moral: even a party lacking moral goals has reasons to act in its strategic interest. But moral judgements limit what a party can do in pursuing such interests: for example, ruling out the propagation of false claims that the party won an election to disenfranchise its opponents. This is not because such acts are not in the party's self-interest (they could be) but because some moral reason prohibits such actions.

In short, political moralism holds that practical normative political judgements depend on moral judgements for their *contents*, *grounds*, or *limits*. As I clarify in Sect. 3, however, this does not imply that the *only* reasons for political action are moral reasons, or that politics is nothing but "a sphere for enacting prior moral values" (Hall 2020, 10).

The substance of this view obviously depends on what is meant by 'morality'. This is remarkably underdiscussed in the realism-moralism debate, given that the whole controversy turns on it, and given the lack of consensus on morality's definition (Gert and Gert 2016). Williams famously articulates a specific conception of morality as a "sub-system" of ethical thought characterised by its almost exclusive focus on *obligations* (Williams 1985/2006, ch.10). But most political theorists do not use 'morality' in this way, instead understanding it largely interchangeably with 'ethics'.[4]

Moralists might sometimes be misread as conceiving of morality as defined by its *specific normative content* – as involving particular duties of, for example, interpersonal fairness or respect. Moralists might then seem to dubiously *assert* that this body of particular duties has overriding authority over politics, with the implication that more 'political' values like legitimacy, stability and mutual accommodation must be subordinated. But this is not how moralists

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[3] I focus on practical normativity, concerning action, as opposed to theoretical normativity, concerning belief. Theoretical normativity is relevant for some realists (e.g.: Aytac and Rossi 2023) but outside my scope, since almost no moralists focus on morally evaluating belief-formation. There is a specialist literature on moral and epistemic normativity in epistemology, see: Worsnip (2016).

[4] E.g.: Singer (1980, 1). Even philosophers who tie morality to notions of obligation (e.g. Darwall 2013, xi-xiv) emphasise that such obligations do not exhaust our important ethical considerations.

generally understand morality. Morality is not *content-defined*: its content is a matter of deep debate, and many would see it as encompassing considerations like legitimacy, stability and mutual accommodation (Nagel 1987). Instead, moral judgements represent a class of normative judgements distinguished by the *kinds of reasons* involved. This extends across other kinds of normativity. The notion of an 'instrumental' reason for action denotes reasons that bear on an agent by virtue of the action's utility for the agent's other interests or goals. Judgements of 'etiquette' denote reasons that bear on an agent by virtue of the local codes to which they are subject.[5]

What about morality? While theorists vary in how they characterise morality, there is a dominant conceptual core. It is sometimes articulated through the language of 'universality', but this is misleading in making morality seem intrinsically insensitive to context, practice, and culture. Yet contextualist, practice-dependent and even culturally relativist understandings of morality are well-established parts of existing philosophical debates (Harman 1996; Korsgaard 1996; Timmons 1999). As Floyd and Stears (2011, 3) observe, there is "a spectrum which ranges from understanding morality as a universal and singular blueprint to seeing it as composed of an incommensurable plurality of local codes." An alternative definitional claim, that moral reasons are 'other-regarding' or 'impartial', better captures prevailing conceptions of morality, but must be understood in a specific way. 'Other-regarding' does not mean that *only* the interests of others (as opposed to those of the agent) are taken into consideration, and 'impartial' does not mean that moral reasons are blind to special relationships or collective interests. The contention that agents can have moral reasons to further their own interests, and that particular relationships or groups are morally significant, is commonplace within ethical and political theory (e.g. Walzer 1980; Hills 2003; Miller 2007; Coady 2008).

The core idea involved in notions of morality's 'other-regardingness' or 'impartiality' is that moral reasons bear on us in virtue of our capacity to consider what should be done *with regard to* the interests and status of others (Nagel 1989, 907-8).[6] Scanlon cashes this out by conceptualising morality as bound up with outwards justification: "moral standards… arise out of our interest in acting in ways that we can justify to others. An action is wrong, in this view, if a principle that permitted it would be one that others could reasonably reject." Rawls (1975, 18) similarly argues that in reasoning morally we aim to be "persons who accept responsibility for

their fundamental interests over the span of a life and who seek to satisfy them in ways that can be mutually acknowledged by others." Strawson presents morality as involving reactive attitudes which are capable of being "vicarious": felt on behalf of another (Strawson 1962/2008, 15). Williams' (1985/2006, 13) conception of 'ethics' is similar: "we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and, generally, the lives of other people."

This all reflects an understanding of moral reasoning's place in human nature. The understanding is not the naïve one that humans are 'naturally' morally good, but only that humans have a vital *capacity* for moral reasoning (Neiman 2008; Haidt 2012). We are not, 'by nature', pure egoists, and human life and civilization would look extremely different if we were. We possess *moral agency*: a form of choice making that can consider the right thing to do from a perspective that is not limited to the partial promotion of our own interests.

I remain neutral, here, between the different specific ways of cashing out morality's other-regardingness described above. What matters is that all understand morality (and/or ethics) *capaciously*. They encompasses views ranging from moral realism/objectivism (the view that agent-independent moral facts exist, see: Shafer-Landau 2003) all the way through to moral fictionalism (the view that moral talk is a useful but mythical performance, see: Campbell 2014).[7] Most moralists fall between these poles. Many reject the idea (derided by realists, see: Williams 1985/2006, 126) that some bedrock of undeniable ethical truths is what gives authority to moral arguments. "The non-existence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts," Singer (1980, 8) emphasises, "does not imply the non-existence of ethical reasoning" (see, likewise: Scanlon 1998, 2; Goodin 1992, 156 fn.15; Kelly 2011, 27–37). Rawls (1975, 8), noting that his procedure of reflective equilibrium does not exclude the possibility that "one's moral conception may turn out to be based on self-evident first principles," nevertheless deems this "unlikely." Moralists' concept of morality is compatible, then, with a wide range of metaethical views about moral claims.

In this understanding, *most* practical reasons that are not egoistic/prudential/instrumental (aesthetic reasons or etiquette reasons and similar aside) seem moral *by definition*. "The measure of morality," writes Goodin (1992, 153), "lies precisely in the gap…between what ethics requires of one,

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[5] Although etiquette's normativity is questionable, see: Wodak (2019).

[6] Whether this feature of moral reasoning is 'second-personal' or 'third-personal' is a key debate in moral philosophy, see: Darwall (2006; 2013). Here, I remain neutral on that debate.

[7] Certain forms of 'minimalism' about evaluative concepts might be even broader, accepting no restrictive criteria on the extension of terms like 'morality' or 'ethics' beyond their functions of expressing our intention or motivational states to do so something – see: Gibbard (2003); Schroeter and Schroeter (2009). This remains a minority interpretation, however, so I set it aside in this paper.
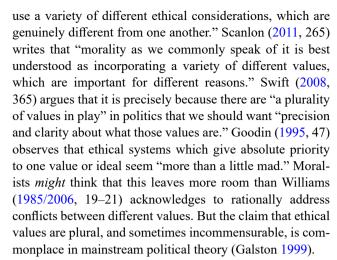
over and above what mere prudence would recommend." As a result, many of the substantive reasons for action political realists are interested in – if they are not merely instrumental – might simply be classified as moral reasons by moralists. This is not 'begging the question': it is not that some *substantive* conception of morality is *assumed* to cover political reasons. It is that those political reasons *definitionally qualify* as moral reasons. Some realists might, of course, want to employ a narrower conception of morality, such as Williams'. But then much of the 'disagreement' between moralists and realists becomes semantic – just about whether we label a particular reason 'moral' or not – and the actual subset of contemporary political philosophers who employ the notion of morality *as defined by realists* is substantially constrained.[8]

3 What Political Moralism is Not

Having defined political moralism, I now stress three positions that – though they have been prominent objects of critics' frustration with 'moralism' – are not generally supported by political moralists as such.

First, political moralism does not imply *normative monism* – i.e. the idea that all relevant reasons are of one (moral) type.[9] When Erman and Möller (2015b, 2) contend, for example, that "political justification is irreducibly moral" they immediately clarify that they mean this "in the sense that moral values are *among the values* that ground political legitimacy" [my emphasis]. Indeed, distinctions between political self-interest, legal restrictions on politics, and political morality are routine in political theory. It is not even widely accepted that moral reasons necessarily trump other kinds of reason. "If each of us wants the last life jacket for his child as the ship goes down," Nagel (1989, 908-9) argues, "we may not be able to switch off the effects of this personal motive… And in some ethical theories this would be counted not as a moral failure, but as an inevitable limit on the claims of impartiality and equality within morality." Moralists might think that non-moral considerations rarely generate *all things considered* reasons, and see "the evaluation of political practices and institutions [as] (primarily) a moral matter" (Estlund 2020, 41). But that does not mean that non-moral reasons do not exist in politics.

Political moralists are not even committed to *moral monism*: the contention that all moral reasons can be distilled into a single shared normative currency. Many endorse Williams' (1985/2006, 18) contention that: "We

use a variety of different ethical considerations, which are genuinely different from one another." Scanlon (2011, 265) writes that "morality as we commonly speak of it is best understood as incorporating a variety of different values, which are important for different reasons." Swift (2008, 365) argues that it is precisely because there are "a plurality of values in play" in politics that we should want "precision and clarity about what those values are." Goodin (1995, 47) observes that ethical systems which give absolute priority to one value or ideal seem "more than a little mad." Moralists *might* think that this leaves more room than Williams (1985/2006, 19–21) acknowledges to rationally address conflicts between different values. But the claim that ethical values are plural, and sometimes incommensurable, is commonplace in mainstream political theory (Galston 1999).

Thus, when realists talk, as Sleat (2022, 471) and Hall (2020, 13) put it, of politics being "irreducible to morality," this does not seem like a stance most moralists dispute. Part of the problem, here, is that Sleat and Hall do not clarify what they mean by 'irreducibility.' Politics is obviously not 'reducible' to morality in the sense that it is conceptually or empirically nothing but morality. Nor does political theory involve nothing but moral argument – moralists accept that empirical and social scientific knowledge and practical judgement also come into play (e.g. Simmons 2010, 19; Swift and White 2008). Sleat and Hall must mean that politics is *normatively irreducible* to morality: that some considerations other than moral ones exist in politics. Thus Hall (2020, 9) contends: "political recommendations cannot be exhaustively determined by moral considerations." Again, though, it's unclear who disagrees with this. Who would deny, for instance, that there are pragmatic reasons for political parties to use certain election-winning political manoeuvres? Who could deny that there are some prudential or instrumental considerations to bear in mind when considering matters of practical policy?

Moralists might nevertheless be criticised on the grounds that, while they *acknowledge* non-moral reasons for political action, they do not *theorise* them adequately. How weighty a criticism this is depends on the substantive account of moral and non-moral reasons that could be given. Moralists might argue that their neglect of non-moral reasons reflects the fact that the strongest instrumental reasons for political action (e.g. to consolidate regime stability) are *also* morally significant reasons for action. Still, I don't dismiss this critique. But it is not a critique of any methodological *commitments* of moralism – at most, it represents a more 'vocational' objection concerning where most moralists focus their attention. I'll return to this kind of concern (which I sympathise with) in my conclusion.

Second, political moralism does not imply a kind of *normative universalism* that is blind to the relevance of

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[8] Rossi (2019, 640) appears very close to accepting this, at least once one recognises that most moralists do not deny the ethical distinctiveness of political contexts – see Sect. 3 below.

[9] Certain kinds of utilitarianism may be an exception.

historical, cultural, and political contexts. A significant strain of realist thought concerns the relevance of such contexts. The effort to seek some sort of universal, practice-independent ethics divorced from "an actual social location" is at the heart of Williams' frustrations with what he came to call political moralism. He argues:

> [D]ifficulties arise from any attempt to see philosophical reflection in ethics as a jump to the universalistic standpoint in search of a justification... The belief that you can look critically at all your dispositions from the outside, from the point of view of the universe, assumes that you could understand your own and other people's dispositions from that point of view without tacitly taking for granted a picture of the world more locally familiar than any that would be available from there; but neither the psychology nor the history of ethical reflection gives much reason to believe [this] (Williams 1985/2006, 122-3).

Some contemporary philosophers may remain vulnerable to this kind of argument, which Williams makes most forcefully against Sidgwick's utilitarianism (Williams 1995a). It is also linked to Williams' broader and complex concern with the excesses of theory and "cool and articulated reflection" (Williams 1995a, 167). But, without dismissing that concern, I suggest that Williams is constructing something of a straw man of the rationalist picture of ethical inquiry, at least as most contemporary political theorists practice it.

Being concerned with moral reasons involves, by definition, a concern with thinking from a perspective that goes beyond one's *private interests*. It may, depending on the kind of ethical theory one adheres to, also involve going beyond one's cultural mores and contingently dominant local ideas and practices, although that is a hugely debated issue in contemporary moral and political theory (Walzer 1994; Sangiovanni 2016; Erman and Möller 2019; Kelly 2011). In this sense most political theorists are committed to the rationalist project of replacing *prejudices* with judgements that we might have greater confidence in, via various procedures that subject our judgements to critical scrutiny (Blau 2017; Cath 2016; List and Valentini 2016).

But in political theory (as in science) there is no suggestion that scholars have superhuman abilities to achieve such reasoning. Objecting to Williams' rejection of the idea that individuals might simultaneously treat their intuitions as relevant moral data while also critically reflecting on those intuitions, Hare (1981, 52) writes: "I do my own moral thinking in [this] way... not like an archangel...nor like a prole,[10] but doing my best to employ critical and intuitive

thinking as appropriate." It is this kind of critical rational inquiry that characterises most mainstream political philosophy: not the wildly ambitious belief that moral theorising can "eliminate and resolve all conflicts and unclarities in the world of practice" (Williams 1995a, 168) or "identify a timeless moral solution to the question of how political societies should be organized" (Hall 2020, 6).

Indeed, "most contemporary political philosophers," as Kelly (2011, 13) observes, "acknowledge the importance of history and contingent circumstances in thinking about politics and moral life." This includes communitarian political theories (Sandel 1998 [1982]), moralist forms of ideology and social critique (Haslanger 2012), or approaches such as Michael Walzer's, which seek to make sense of moral discourse of both a 'thin' and 'thick' form. As Walzer (1994, 15) writes:

> [We might] acknowledge the great diversity of historical processes, and look for similar or overlapping outcomes: locate commonality at the end of the point of difference. Often, certainly, we put together the moral minimum by abstracting from social practices reiterated in many countries and cultures... The practice of government, for example, brings with it ideas about the responsibility of governors toward the governed. The practice of war brings with it ideas about combat between combatants, the exclusion of non-combatants, civilian immunity... All these ideas are ineffective much of the time, no doubt, or they work only within highly elaborated cultural systems that give to each constituent practice a radically distinct form. Nonetheless, the ideas are available for minimal use when occasions arise to use them.

Rawls, indeed, famously *denied* that his theory of liberal justice was a timeless blueprint for all societies, and stressed that "a political conception of justice is built up from the political (moral) ideas available in the public political culture of a liberal constitutional regime" (Rawls 1999, 15). Goodin (1992, 156 fn.15) likewise emphasises that: "The moral sense...does not necessarily deliver verdicts about true and false facts concerning moral realities that are fixed independently of any given human society" (see also: Goodin 1995). "It is," Estlund (2020, 51) more emphatically observes, "preposterous to hold that one could attain strong epistemic justification for moral views, even for those that would bear on politics, entirely before considering what they would imply in political contexts." In short, almost all political theorists are contextualists to some degree (Lægaard 2019).

Political moralists typically also affirm the relevance of *distinctly political contexts*. This distinctiveness has been

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[10] A reference to the politically pacified 'proles' in George Orwell's *1984*.

the central concern of realist political theory from at least Williams' (2005, 3) call for political theory to give "greater autonomy to distinctively political thought." Rossi and Sleat (2014, 690) present realism as stressing the need to: "appreciate the manner in which politics remains a distinct sphere of human activity, with its own concerns, pressures, ends and constraints which cannot be reduced to ethics (nor law, economics, religion, etc.)". Jubb's (2019, 362) contention that politics is normatively distinct likewise boils down to his claim that "the weight, direction and relevance of different considerations would all systematically be altered by politics' constitutive features." Realists often suggest that moralists deny this. Hall (2020, 1–2), for example, argues that for moralists:

> many widely acknowledged features of politics – that much political activity is concerned with either pursuing or exercising power; that history amply reveals persistent fundamental disagreement among well-intentioned citizens on both the good life and principles of justice; and that severe conflicts of interest and principle often have to be coercively resolved before they become utterly destabilizing – are not believed to affect the philosophical theorization of the principles that ought to govern politics.

Rossi (2019, 639) similarly claims that, for moralists, "the normative standards that appropriately regulate personal interactions should also regulate political life," as though moralists are committed to denying any ethical distinction between politics and private interpersonal behaviour.

Yet very few contemporary political theorists fit this picture. Vast swathes of moralist political theory invoke normative "concerns, pressures, ends and constraints" – such as intercultural accommodation, democratic representation, state authority, legitimacy, sovereignty, national identity, legal compulsion and so on – that scarcely have any meaning, let alone applicability, in non-political domains (Walzer 1980; Nagel 1987; Kymlicka 1995; Estlund 2017, 387; 2020, 50). Far from "imagining away moral disagreement, conflict, and a lack of compliance" (Hall 2020, 12), most moralists affirm that "politics is as often the scene of conflict as cooperation" and that, as such, "we are looking for principles to deal with conflict… [that] give authority to results which are reached in accordance with them, even if those results do not in themselves command unanimous support" (Nagel 1989, 907; see also: Watson and Hartley 2018, ch.2). Most moralists consequently emphasise that political theory is not "merely the application of individual morality to group conduct" (Nagel 1989, 915). There may be exceptions, in the form of some utilitarian theories or highly individualist moral theories. *In what sense* politics

is distinctive is also not obvious. But this all affirms that, as Stemplowska and Swift (2012, 381) observe, "the specificity of 'the political' is in fact a key issue within liberal political philosophy itself," not a point of disagreement between realists and moralists as a whole.

Third, and relatedly, moralist political theory is not committed to a kind of *naïve intellectualism* that treats philosophical inquiry as an unimpeachable form of purified reflection that occurs free from the influence of broader social and psychological processes. Such processes are critical to a more historicist, genealogical or ideology-critical strand of realism. As Hall and Sleat (2017, 282) stress, "ethics is a deeply socially embedded and practical activity," or, as Geuss rather more acerbically puts it, "ethics is usually dead politics." Sleat (2022, 473) elaborates how, for Williams:

> we need to appreciate that [moral principles] are historical developments whose existence, and our commitment to them, is deeply entwined with the politics that they seek to speak to. The difficulty with moralism is that it fails to recognise how political morality actually is. Or, put differently, what is wrong with political moralism is not that it represents a form of political theory that 'starts' outside of politics, but that it *thinks* it does.

Dannenberg (2023, 4–5) similar argues that: "morality is first and foremost to be conceived as a social and historical phenomenon." Rossi (2019, 641) stresses that "morality is influenced by political power [so] moral advocacy for political actions and institutions should be the object of critical suspicion." Again, the allegation is that moralists deny this. Dannenberg (2023, 5) suggests that for moralists, morality is "unconditioned by society, any especially realistic psychology, or facts about our history." Rossi (2019, 641) suggests that the kind of ideology critique of moral claims he favours is "more…than most mainstream, ethics-first political theory allows." The same line of thinking underpins the claim by several realists that moralism requires an 'error theory' to explain why many groups and societies over history do not adhere to the moral conclusions that moralists advocate (Williams 2005, 8–9; Hall 2015, 469; Sleat 2010, 492; Jubb 2017, 115).

In their most straightforward interpretation, such arguments commit a basic category error. No-one disputes that people's *moral beliefs*, which are empirical features of human beings' mental states, are causally conditioned by contextual social and psychological processes. This is a good reason to critically scrutinise the possible motives, interests, and culturally contingent assumptions behind all moral claims – and, indeed, all normative claims of any

kind. But theorising the causal origins of moral beliefs is distinct from studying *the normative content of those moral beliefs*, i.e. the networks of meanings and propositions the beliefs comprise (Cath 2016, 222-3). Moralist political theories are theories about that normative content, and involve no assumptions about the reliability of the moral beliefs people happen to empirically hold (Kelly 2011, 29 & 35 − 6). "Nothing in this method," as Estlund (2020, 52) emphasises, "commits us to the view that generally accepted moral views are likely to be even remotely close to the truth. Rather it can be a way of scrutinizing them." What moralists contend, Estlund (2020, 54) continues, is that:

> A causal diagnosis of moral thought…simply does not engage any moral question, nor does it engage, much less damage, the view that political arrangements are properly subject to moral standards. [Thinking otherwise] commits a genetic fallacy. Analogously, we know that arguments in criminal court are overwhelmingly self-serving, and often produced for that reason. This should alert us, but it does not somehow sidestep the pressing issue of whether the defendant's arguments can be answered

Moralists do not, therefore, have a naïve faith in the practical epistemic or persuasive power of moral arguments alone, nor assume that the best moral arguments always prevail in practice. On the contrary, as Floyd (2009, 518) observes: "*all* contemporary theorists *now* seem to accept [that] there is simply *no* historical evidence to suggest that some or other combination of inevitable forces is pushing us towards universal and irreversible convergence at the level of moral and/or political values" [emphasis in original], (see also: Neiman 2008, 9). Moralists do not, contra Hall (2020, 5), deny that "the world is…resistant to philosophical righting", nor do they generally couple the "captivating hope of realising a scheme of justice" with a "sacrifice [of] all realistic sense of practical possibility," as Bourke and Geuss (2009, 11) allege.

Nor do moralists suggest that moral inquiry alone can "solve political problems" (Rossi 2019, 640) or "regulate behaviour in political communities" (Rossi and Sleat 2014, 691) in the *practical* sense alleged by some realists – i.e. so as to make all conflict or disagreements disappear. In fact, moralists regularly stress that "merely moralizing about the matter will not, in and of itself, necessarily suffice to move people" (Goodin 1992, 4) since "clever proofs and close logic-chopping [often] simply get no motivational grip on people in the real world" (Goodin 1992, 150). They emphasise that "an ideal, however attractive it may be to contemplate, is utopian if real individuals cannot be motivated to live by it" (Nagel 1989, 904). To actually achieve good

political outcomes, therefore, "calls for political wisdom, and success depends in part on luck" (Rawls 1999, 93).

Rather than denying that power, motivated reasoning, and history shape prevailing moral ideas, moralists simply argue that this doesn't render moral inquiry futile, any more than the fact that power, motivated reasoning, and history shape prevailing scientific beliefs renders scientific inquiry futile (Strawson 1962/2008, 26; Nagel 1989, 905-6). On the contrary, it renders it necessary: it is precisely the dubious nature of many extant moral views that requires us to interrogate, theorise, and debate them in detail.

Once more, there is a different kind of possible critique here: that in practice, many moralists are *insufficiently* critical of their own moral intuitions, beliefs and culturally-specific standpoints (Williams 1995b; Floyd 2017; Handby 2022). Some moralists, I suspect, do assume that ever more rigorous philosophical and logical analysis is always the best defence against moral error. For Geuss, Williams, Sleat, Rossi and Dannenberg, this is inadequate: one needs critical methods involving historical awareness, empirical interpretation, contextual reflexivity, and social critique to get to grips with the contextual embeddedness of philosophical thought. I share this view – which has many proponents beyond political realists (e.g. Goodhart 2018; Ackerly et al. 2024; Haslanger 2012; Floyd 2017). But, again, the problem here is neither shared across nor distinctive to moralism, and it is hard to identify any moralists who believe that a kind of ideology critique of *actual moral claims made in real politics* is inappropriate. Indeed, many moralists strongly argue that: "political philosophy must step back and take a critical view of [moral reasoning], including what comes to count as a commonsense moral conviction under certain historical conditions" (Estlund 2020, 52). Achieving this should be part of the craft of political theory for all major methodological approaches and is not something that most moralists reject.

4 Two Motivations for Moralism

Moralists contend, then, that practical normative judgements about politics depend on moral judgements for their contents, grounds, or limits, and that theorising moral judgements about politics is a necessary task for political theory. What justifies this stance?

That question partly depends on the broader normative relevance of moral reasons – the ancient question of, as Singer (1980, ch.12) puts it: "Why Act Morally?" As Singer (1980, 315) observes, one possible answer "is the claim that our ethical principles are, by definition, the principles we take as overridingly important." Hare (1981, 52 − 7) argues, for example, that moral judgements differ from
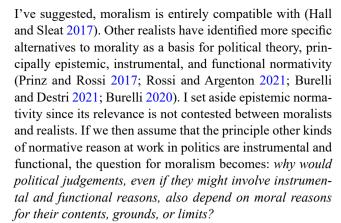
other evaluative judgements, by definition, in their "over-ridingness". I share Singer's view, however, that overridingness should not be made a definitional predicate of moral reasons, not least because it misleadingly shoves questions about the status of a given moral claim into its definition, creating "correspondingly greater difficulties in establishing any ethical conclusion" (Singer 1980, 315).

Working with more capacious definitions of morality like that described in Sect. 2, philosophers have offered numerous substantive justifications for morality's normative force. Some take a rather Kantian form: the claim, for example, that moral reasoning is an inescapable component of rational autonomy. As Gert and Gert (2016) phrase this position: "Morality is the one public system that no rational person can quit." For Sidgwick, similarly, it is a "self-evident principle that the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other…and *it is evident to me that as a rational being I am bound to aim at the good generally*" (cited in: Williams 1985/2006, 117).[11] But moralists have offered other answers, perhaps less irksome to realists. Singer defends moral goals as crucial for a life that has more that transient hedonistic meaning (Singer 1980, 322 – 35). Many moralists may sympathise with Williams' contention that, while there are limits to the ultimate philosophical justification for ethics, its relevance lies in the way it makes sense of our collective life (Williams 1985/2006, 27–33). For some, such as Neiman (2008, 4), our moral needs are both "grounded in a structure of reason" and rooted in "the need to see our lives as stories with meaning." For Scanlon (2011, 259), the relevance of ethics derives from the fact that "we care about whether our actions are justifiable to others" (see, similarly: Nagel 1989). Given the recent realist interest in 'functional' normativity as an alternative to moral normativity, it is ironic that several scholars see the normative force of morality as functional. Copp (1995, 3) argues, for example, that "society needs to have a social moral code as part of its culture in order to enable us to get along together in our social life. It is because of this need that certain moral standards are justified and hence that certain moral claims are true."

Beyond these comments, I set aside the question of why moral reasons are *generally* relevant because, aside from being ancient, it is also not the question realists pose, since most are not sceptical of ethical inquiry altogether. Their focus is on politics, and the limits of moral inquiry in addressing normative questions about politics. It's not always clear what *beyond morality* realists are appealing to here. Some, again, are interested in a kind of socially embedded, historically-informed critical reflection – which,

I've suggested, moralism is entirely compatible with (Hall and Sleat 2017). Other realists have identified more specific alternatives to morality as a basis for political theory, principally epistemic, instrumental, and functional normativity (Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi and Argenton 2021; Burelli and Destri 2021; Burelli 2020). I set aside epistemic normativity since its relevance is not contested between moralists and realists. If we then assume that the principle other kinds of normative reason at work in politics are instrumental and functional, the question for moralism becomes: *why would political judgements, even if they might involve instrumental and functional reasons, also depend on moral reasons for their contents, grounds, or limits?*

I suggest two major moralist answers to this question. Both revolve around the idea that a politics without moral contents, grounds or limits would be either impossible or immensely unattractive. Let's call that kind of politics *political prudentialism*: a politics revolving purely around the question of most effectively realising some given set of self-interested concerns.[12] Now, I recognise that most realists do not seek a prudential politics *entirely divorced* from morality in this way (Hall and Sleat 2017, 278 – 80; Sleat 2022). But since moralists likewise do not claim that moral reasons are the *only reasons* for political action, this leaves the gap between such realists and moralism unclear. This isn't a problem for my argument, since my concern here is simply to sketch out the moralist position, which I see as committed to the wrongness of political prudentialism, but compatible with many forms of political realism. My explication of these two arguments for moralism is far from definitive: my aim is simply to clarify the main lines on which moralism might constitute an appealing stance for 'mainstream' political theorists.

First, moralists should argue that *moral limits* on political action are indispensable since prudential calculations alone will inevitably prove too normatively permissive. Political prudentialism may have a certain kind of realistic appeal, in presenting politics as a clash of different interest groups in which the principle positive reasons for political action are instrumental or functional. Perhaps, just as realism in the international sphere "refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe" (Morgenthau 1948/1993, 13), so too should we see appeals to morality by domestic political factions as essentially an ideological veneer for self-interest.[13]

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[11] For Williams' response, see: Williams (1995a, 161-2 & 169 – 71).

[12] Though it skates over some conceptual nuances, I here treat political prudentialism as incorporating both instrumental and functional normative arguments – see Burelli (2020); Burelli and Destri (2021).

[13] This is, however, a widely rejected view in political science and political psychology – where the motive power of ethical beliefs, even when they run counter to self-interest, is well established. See: Jost and Major (2001); Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004); Haidt, Graham, and Joseph (2009); Atran and Ginges (2012).

However, if this view is understood not merely as an *empirical* claim about what *does* guide political actors, but a *normative* claim about what *should*, both the international and domestic versions of this stance will struggle to avoid some deeply implausible conclusions.[14] Without moral limits, political actors are normatively constrained only by prudential considerations, and these are not going to consistently rule out the most abusive and harmful political activities. To be sure, some forms of atrocity – such as Nazi Germany's treatment of the territories it occupied in the Soviet Union, or the Khmer Rouge's catastrophic 'autogenocide' of Cambodian society – may be self-defeating, weakening their perpetrators. Yet many other political atrocities, which almost all political theorists would deem illegitimate, are nevertheless not *imprudent*. For countless brutal authoritarian regimes, such as those in North Korea, Francisco Franco's Spain, Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, Vladimir Putin's Russia or Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus, human rights abuses, arbitrary 'disappearances,' and mass killings represent functional components of the system of political rule. Indeed, dominant theories of atrocity in political science emphasise the potential instrumental reasons perpetrators may have for such violent policies (Valentino 2014; Davenport 2007).

There are some prominent realist claims that might seem to save prudentialism from this problem, but they collapse on close inspection. Williams (2005, 5) claims, for example, that: "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)." But this is not a normative argument yielding a conclusion but a normative conclusion in need of an argument. It is far from a self-evident understanding of politics: Williams is in fact arguing *for* such a definition on the basis of an underlying value-judgement that has little to do with any prudential claim (Bavister-Gould 2011; Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 781-3).

Perhaps, it might be thought, some more robust 'functional' account of politics could rule out such atrocities. Yet the most prominent formulation of realism along functional lines (Burelli 2020) cannot do so. Burelli (2020, 4) suggests two criteria for functions: they (a) must be typically displayed by the phenomenon they are purportedly functional for and (b) they must causally contribute to the existence of such phenomena. Many forms of brutal political repression arguably meet these two criteria even for *politics as a whole*. But it is even clearer that specific *sub-types* of politics – such as authoritarian rule – typically display and are causally sustained by such abuses. And a central weakness in any account of 'functional normativity' is that it cannot tell us *which phenomenon we ought to be functionally sustaining* in the first place: 'politics' as a whole, 'democratic' politics, 'authoritarian' politics, or whatever.[15]

Moralists suspect that this inability to robustly reject arguments for political atrocity will recur across any view which eschews moral limits on political action. A collective actor with sufficiently sectarian interests – with an entirely autarkic image of social development or an ethnically exclusive image of the political community, for example – can simply have *no instrumental or functional interest* in the welfare of those outside the collective. Now, obviously many such groups are also unlikely to be *practically moved* by external moral arguments, but this is not my point. The point is that prudentialism cannot even yield the conclusion that such behaviour constitutes an abuse in the first place. To do that, we have to appeal to some kind of other-regarding (i.e. moral) reason as having proper scope to the actions of these regimes. Moreover, to the extent that one *is* more interested in practical outcomes, movements pressing for the recognition of fundamental rights and a gradual expansion of moral concern away from pure sectarianism have been critical to the path away from brutal authoritarianism in many countries around the world (Risse-Kappen et al. 1999; Sikkink 2011).

For moralists, acknowledging such moral limits on politics does not mean *ignoring* the importance of prudence or self-interest. It simply involves asking how one may act, including in pursuit of self-interested goals, *given* the interests and status of others. Our resulting behaviour therefore involves: "a constant overlap of impersonally [i.e. morally] supported practices and individual [i.e. non-moral] aims, with the impersonal requiring us to restrict or inhibit the pursuit of the personal *without giving it up…*" (Nagel 1989, 909) [my emphasis]. Moral inquiry simply challenges the assertion that self-interest should prevail over moral restrictions, or the interests and rights of others, by partisan fiat.

Second, moralists should make a more specifically *political* argument: that real-world politics, as a collective practice of managing human communities, necessarily implicates positive moral judgements about the means we employ and ends we pursue. Political prudentialism involves effectively seeing politics as governed by a kind of collective interest calculation: we work out what to do politically, not by any appeal to other-regarding moral arguments, but by working out what best serves our collective interests. Moralists' dissent from this position can take a weaker or stronger form.

On a weaker form, moralists might concede that the prudentialist approach is *possible*, but only for an extremely thin form of politics akin to establishing the bare bones of a liveable social order. To avoid an existentially threatening

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[14] The critique of the international version of this argument is long-standing, see: Walzer (1977/2000); Donnelly (2000, ch.6).

[15] For a more detailed critique of functional normativity in realism, see: Erman and Möller (2023).

Hobbesian anarchy is an interest almost every individual has, so if a most prudentially effective path out of such anarchy can be identified, individuals might all share prudential reasons to contribute to that pathway. But what the moralist, in this weaker guise, will argue, is that this kind of minimal prudentialism is only going to be able to address a very small number of political questions. As soon as we move *beyond* the formation of a minimal social order (as most societies have) and ask any question on which members of the political community do not all share the same interests, we have to ask how to weigh up competing interests.

That question can take both individual and collective forms. As an individual, we ask why we should make any sacrifices of our own interests to any collective political goal – all collective action requiring, at some point, at least short-term sacrifices by some individuals relative to alternative distributions of benefits from other possible collective actions (Olson 1965/1971). As a collective, we face questions as to what our collective goals, and preferred ways of realising those goals, should be. Any answer, the moralist will argue, is going to logically rest on some other-regarding judgements: about why certain people's interests should prevail over others, or why certain procedures represent the most appropriate way to adjudicate competing political claims. Political prudentialism is therefore too indeterminate for most political questions, where interests are multiple, competing and up for debate (Erman and Möller 2022, 440-1). In this sense, as Nagel (1989, 907-8) argues: "An arrangement of the Hobbesian type, in which the state provides a basic framework of security that is of value to everyone, and everything else is left unspecified, does not demand enough from political institutions, or therefore from us."

Depending on one's political theory, the moral judgements involved in answering such questions may, again, be highly contextualist, and could be relatively minimal. The moralist may accept (as many, notably Rawls, do) that, given the ubiquity of *moral disagreement*, we cannot legitimately answer such questions by appealing to highly contentious thick moral worldviews – as several realists also argue (Stears 2007; Rossi and Sleat 2014, 691). But that doesn't escape the fact that we are still *making moral judgements* – judgements about how to address others' interests and status – in however we do address the problem of disagreement. The ubiquity of moral disagreement is, at most, an argument for some kind of morally thinner proceduralism in politics. It doesn't magically evacuate moral assumptions from any specific proceduralist solution.

Some moralists, though, are going to push for a stronger conclusion. Even the minimal establishment of social order is something that may be attempted in a range of ways, which will affect individuals' private interests differently, and which they will therefore have competing views about. As Swift (2006, 5–6) expresses this idea:

> The state, as philosophers think about it, isn't – or shouldn't be – something separate from and in charge of those who are subject to its laws. Rather it is the collective agent of the citizens, who decide what its laws are. *So the question of how the state should treat its citizens is that of how we, as citizens, should treat each other…* It's [a question] not just about what people ought to do, it's about what people are morally permitted, and sometimes morally required, to make each other do.

It may be possible (and perhaps necessary) for some subsection of society to impose its preferred solution to the creation of political order. But this is a de facto exercise of political fiat, not a justification (or even legitimation) of the outcome in question (Kelly 2011, 21). To build legitimacy for any political order – i.e. to provide those subjects who do not benefit from it (relative to possible alternatives) with reasons to accept it – one cannot just appeal back to the subjects' self-interest, since their self-interest may be better served through alternative political arrangements.

The moralist need not be optimistic about the power of moral argument to identify either singular or immensely persuasive answers to these fundamental questions. On the contrary, the stance of the moralist may essentially be *critical*: arguing that all political recommendations necessarily involve underlying moral judgements which, far from providing an unassailable foundation for political action, should be exposed, interrogated, and opened to contestation (Swift 2006, 1; Thiele 2019). Realists such as Aytac and Rossi (2023, 8) express the concern that "morality doesn't even try to be politically innocent, whereas epistemology does", making the 'epistemic critique' of political arguments less subject to ideological distortion. But this argument can be turned on its head. It is the very fact that moral language *does not pretend* to be innocent of contestable value-judgements – does not pretend that its conclusions are just mandated by how the world is – that makes it less distortionary. Acknowledging that our political conclusions involve other-regarding judgements, about the interests and status of others, should be a gain to critical self-awareness and an opening to dialogue and argument, rather than the arbitrary assertion of one moral worldview over all others.

5 Conclusion: the Vices of Moralism

My aim in the preceding sections has been to clarify what actually-existing 'political moralism' looks like, to the extent that any such 'mainstream' or 'dominant' orthodoxy in contemporary political theory exists. The exercise has obviously been critically motivated. Actual moralists, I argue, often look rather unlike the picture many recent realists have painted. This may reflect the fact that such realists often avoid engaging with substantive works of contemporary moralist political theory in any detail. In his leading text on the realist tradition, for example, Hall (2020) offers a chapter-length discussion of realist concerns with moralist political theory, yet only cites a single thinker (Rawls) as an example of an actual moralist. Bourke and Geuss (2009) issue stern warnings about the dangers and confusions involved in the "moralising programme of Platonic political philosophy" yet cite no examples of any contemporary scholar who subscribes to such a programme. This pattern recurs across numerous realist publications. Realists do sometimes critique influential figures like Rawls, Cohen, Dworkin and Nozick more extensively. But none of these figures are still alive, let alone fully representative of the state of political theory today. This has resulted in a realist narrative about what 'mainstream' political theorists believe that is in many respects a caricature disconnected from what those political theorists actually argue, and the diverse projects they pursue.

That is not to suggest that *no* political theorists fit the recent realist portrayal, nor that realism generally depends on this caricature of moralism, nor that nothing ultimately distinguishes realism from moralism. My suggestion, though, is that a clearer picture of actually-existing moralism renders the realist-moralist distinction less dichotomous. Political moralists, emphasising that moral assumptions, values and standards necessarily underpin our political judgements, call for political theory to focus on critically interrogating and systematising that moral content. Political realists, emphasising the enduring characteristics of real politics and its constitutive considerations and dynamics, demand that political theory focus on understanding and theorising this distinctive political content.

There is nothing mutually exclusive about these demands, but there are certain trade-offs between them – all methodologies have to prioritise certain goals or concerns over others – which is what creates a productive tension between those of a more moralist and realist persuasion. Indeed, understood this way, moralists and realists each have an important critical function to play vis a vis each other's projects. The danger of realism, for the moralist, is that its practical project of theorising distinctive political realities may too uncritically or excessively attach normative weight to purported political realities that may be mutable and deserving of normative critique and change. The danger of moralism for the realist is that its practical project of refining and systematising our moral thinking may blind theorists to the relevance of enduring political realities. That danger actually takes two distinct forms – two genuine moralist vices – which, not coincidentally, represent two of the most enduring themes in realist political theory.

First, political realities have a *constructive normative relevance* – i.e. political contexts involve certain features (interests, considerations, structures, empirical characteristics) that are part of the positively relevant set of factors that influence what we should do. Here, the danger is a kind of *moralist fixation* in which a concern with moral judgements crowds out other important parts of political theory. The most obvious kind of realist concern with this vice is a *substantive* interest in certain instrumental considerations that a focus on morality could obscure – situations where, in other words, "the excessive concern about perceived moral issues blocks due concern for other issues" (Driver 2005, 137). A deeper concern is with a more *methodological* fixation on the task of refining and establishing ever stronger conviction in certain moral conclusions at the expense of other important forms of intellectual inquiry – such as expanding our conceptual or normative resources, examining concrete contexts of action, interpreting actual political attitudes and practices, interrogating empirical assumptions, and so forth. This problem is self-defeating to the moralist's own project since, to employ Case's (2021, 617) phrasing, it "leads to a sort of moral tunnel vision that impairs [one's] moral thinking and behaviour."

Second, political realities have a *critical empirical relevance* – i.e. politics inevitably involves certain sociological and psychological processes that empirically shape moral thinking and norms and the practices they influence in ways relevant for critique. As discussed, this is not something moralists *deny*: their views are about the content of moral claims, not about the empirical origins of those claims. But, precisely for this reason, moralism does not contain within it all the tools required for the fullest critical engagement with such claims. The key danger here is a kind of *moralist dissimulation*: in which what are presented as moral reasons, motives, or concerns are *in truth* something more dubious: prejudices, tastes, conventions, material interests or self-serving forms of 'moral grandstanding' (Campbell 2014; Tosi and Warmke 2020; see also: Thiele 2019, 23–34; Hall and Sleat 2017, 284-7). Although not unique to politics, there are reasons to think such dissimulation especially likely and dangerous in politics. It is obviously problematic when moral arguments are overtly utilised as ideological weapons to sustain dominant political structures and practices. The manipulation of 'women's rights' in the

War on Terror, for example, with the Bush administration employing such rhetoric while simultaneously pursuing a regressive agenda towards women's rights, appeared to successfully sow moral confusion about US foreign policy (Youngs 2006; Bhattacharyya 2008, ch.1). Yet the more pervasive problem in political theory scholarship is likely more unconscious. Much 'traditional' morality now, from the perspective of 21st Century ethics, looks rooted in problematically dissimulated moralized foundations: wrongly treating tastes about social behaviour and sexual practices, for instance, as powerful moral injunctions. This, of course, is at the heart of recent debates about the role of 'intuitions' in political theory (Floyd 2017; Handby 2022), and the revival of interest in a kind of ideology critique that seeks to expose and destabilize moral arguments based on their genealogical and epistemic status (Jaeggi 2009; Haslanger 2012; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi and Argenton 2021; Aytac and Rossi 2023).

Moralist fixation and moralist dissimulation are two serious dangers in political theory and real politics. But they are not complaints about the intrinsic theoretical commitments of 'political moralism,' nor something that mainstream political theory *in general* can be fairly indicted for. They are, in essence, *vocational* (with reference to the language and arguments of Wolin 1969; Stears 2005; Frazer 2016): involving claims about the responsibilities of the political theorist to go beyond moral argument and treat the persistent challenges of real politics, the interpretation of real worldviews and political arrangements, the lived experiences of citizens and politicians, and the dangers of motivated reasoning and ideology, as *essential* topics for inquiry. It is tricky, in this respect, to specify the appropriate kind of 'division of labour' within political theory to best tackle these vices. But realists have a compelling case that the status quo does not represent a healthy division of labour, given that on many topics, the kinds of concerns listed above hardly figure anywhere in the academic conversation.

Some realists and moralists will, I assume, remain uncompromising. Some realists will deny that moral judgements are necessarily implicated in the contents, grounds, or limits of political judgements. Some moralists will deny that politics has any distinctive normative relevance. But most should find these stances unpersuasive. What divides *most* moralists and realists are different but not mutually exclusive vocational priorities. Construing the debate as some kind of paradigmatic clash between a moralist orthodoxy and a realist insurgency, as some scholars in both camps have, is therefore unhelpful. Most lines of realist critique do not identify an intrinsic fallacy committed by moralism, and the vulnerability of different 'mainstream' political theorists to realist complaints varies enormously. Yet realists do identify a range of ways in which political theory needs to be broadened and rebalanced. We should, in short, be at least moderately realist and moderately moralist. But that is only possible when the genuine commitments of the moralist approach are more clearly understood.

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Conflict of interest The author declares no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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