GÜLŞEN SEVEN REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE Bilkent University 2017

# REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE: ASSESSING REALIST CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL-NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

**A Ph.D. Dissertation**

**by**

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**Ankara**
**January 2017**

**To my boys**

# REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE: ASSESSING REALIST CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL-NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

**The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences**
**of**
**İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University**

**by**

**GÜLŞEN SEVEN**

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**THE DEPARTMENT OF**
**POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**
**İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY**
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**January 2017**

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ABSTRACT

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL PRACTICE: ASSESSING REALIST CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL-NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

Seven, Gülşen

Ph.D, Department of Political Science and Public Administration

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January 2017

This thesis is a study of value of theorizing for the practical world of politics. It addresses the question of how it is advisable to conceive the relationship between political theory and political practice. It does so by focusing on contemporary discussions about realism and moralism in political theory. Realism is a contemporary theoretical approach that poses a challenge to the dominant liberal paradigm, which allegedly bases its understanding of politics on the primacy of the moral over the political. The meaning and implications of such moralized understanding are explored, in this dissertation, in relation to John Rawls. After presenting a reading of Rawls's major works in relation to the relationship between political theory and political practice, I specify general principles guiding the recent realist revival in political theory. This account suggests that realism encompasses a wide variety of non-moralizing positions whose critical purchase on dominant political theory varies. More critically, it illustrates how some varieties of realism

invite moralism through the back door, primarily due to their insistence on some form of foundationalism for a political theory to be action-guiding. I single out John Dunn's sceptical activist realism and Raymond Geuss's critical activist realism as two alternative candidates that exhibit the possibility of political theory, centred on the notion of political judgment, to be action-guiding without having foundational commitments of the kind typically presupposed. This account essentially presents an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice to that of mainstream liberal political theory.

Keywords: John Dunn, Moralism, Raymond Geuss, Realism, Theory and Practice.

# ÖZET

## SİYASET TEORİSİ İLE SİYASİ PRATİK ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİ ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME: LİBERAL-NORMATİF SİYASET TEORİSİNE YÖNELTİLEN REALİST ELEŞTİRİNİN DEĞERLENDİRMESİ

Seven, Gülşen

Doktora, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

Tez Danşmanı: Doç. Dr. Nedim Karakayalı

Ocak 2017

Bu tez siyaset kuramlarının pratik siyaset için değerine ilişkin bir sorgulamadır. Özellikle, siyaset kuramları ile siyasal pratikler arasındaki ilişkiyi nasıl anlamamız gerektiği sorusu üzerine yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bunu realizm (gerçekçilik) ve moralizm (ahlakçılık) olarak adlandırılan akımlar arasındaki tartışmaya odaklanarak yapmaktadır. Son yıllarda popülerliği artan realizm akımı, siyaset teorisinde egemen olan liberal, normatif ana akımın siyaset teorisi ve siyasal pratik arasındaki ilişkiyi ahlak alanının siyasala olan üstünlüğü üzerinde temellendiren anlayışına karşı çıkmaktadır. Bu tez kapsamında, siyasalın ahlaki kategoriler ile anlaşılmasının etkileri bu anlayışın temsilcilerinden John Rawls üzerinden irdelenmektedir. Rawls'un yapıtlarının detaylı okuması üzerinden, buna yöneltilen eleştiriler yoluyla, realizm akımının yol gösterici genel ilkeleri ortaya konulmaktadır. Bu sayede ortaya çıkan resim realist akımın aslında çok çeşitli 'ahlak dışı' pozisyonları barındıran heterojen bir yapısı olduğunu göstermektedir. Tümü realizm adıyla anılan bu

pozisyonların liberal, normatif siyaset teorisine getirdikleri eleştiriler birbirinden farklıdır. Pozisyonların kimisi realizm adı ile bağdaştırılmalarına rağmen, siyasal analizlerinde ahlaki kategorilere başvurmaktadır. Bu da realist akımın eleştirel gücünün ehlileştirilmesine neden olmaktadır. Bunun nedeni, bu pozisyonların siyaset teorisinin siyasi pratik için yol gösterici olabilmesi için normatif olması gerekliliğindeki ısrarlarından kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu ısrarın yersiz olduğunu göstermek ve realizmin dönüştürücü eleştirel potansiyelini teslim etmek amacıyla tez kapsamında realist akımın en önemli temsilcilerinden John Dunn ve Raymond Geuss'un realist literatüre katkıları ayrıntılı bir şekilde tartışılmaktadır. John Dunn'ın şüpheci ve Raymond Geuss'un eleştirel aktivist realizmi siyaset teorisinin normatif taahhütler altına girmeden siyaset pratiğine yol gösterici olabileceğini kanıtlamaktadır. Bu da, esasen, liberal, normatif siyaset teorisinin siyaset teorisi ile siyaset pratiği arasındaki ilişki kavramsallaştırmasına güçlü bir alternatif teori ve pratik ilişkilendirmesi oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: John Dunn, Moralizm, Raymond Geuss, Realizm, Teori ve Pratik.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT……iii

ÖZET……....v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……vii

TABLE OF CONTENTS…….....ix

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION…….1

1.1.Research Context and Relevance…….....3

1.2. Envisaged Contributions……7

1.3. Chapter Outline……..9

1.4. Limitations……...13

1.5. A Word of Caution……17

CHAPTER 2: JOHN RAWLS AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF MAINSTREAM LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY……20

2.1. Introduction……..20

2.2. *A Theory of Justice*……...22

2.3. *Political Liberalism*……..33

2.4. Realist Criticisms, (Political) Liberal Responses……..…41

2.5. Conclusion…….…...46

CHAPTER 3: REALIST CHALLENGE TO MAINSTREAM LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY……48

3.1. Introduction……..48

3.2. Contemporary Political Realism(s): A Survey…….…….51

3.3. Contemporary Political Realism(s): A Classification……..…….54

3.4. Conclusion…….…...62

CHAPTER 4: SCEPTICAL ACTIVIST REALISM OF JOHN DUNN…….....…67

4.1. Introduction……..67

4.2. Understanding Politics: Impediments……..……....69

4.2.1. The Nature of Politics……..……..……..……70

4.2.2. Political Understanding Today……..…….....……72

4.3. Understanding Politics: Remedies……..……..…..……88

4.3.1. Prudent Political Agent……....…..……...……91

4.3.2. Prudential Political Theory……94

4.4. Conclusion……...……...……...…...……..105

CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL ACTIVIST REALISM OF RAYMOND GEUSS……..108

5.1. Introduction……108

5.2. Moralism in Political Philosophy……111

5.3. Realism in Political Philosophy……..123

5.3.1. Negative Understanding of Realism……123

5.3.2. Towards a Positive Understanding of Realism: Realism, *Ideologiekritik* and Genealogy……128

5.3.3. Positive Understanding of Realism……..139

5.4. Conclusion…….….153

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION…….……155

REFERENCES…….163

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a contribution to a general inquiry into the value of political theorizing for the practical world of politics. In particular, it addresses the question of how it is advisable to conceive the relationship between political theory and political practice. It does so by focusing on the current discussions about realism and moralism in political theory and concludes that certain variants of realism, represented in this dissertation by John Dunn and Raymond Geuss, offer an alternative and better account of how it is best to perceive the relationship between theory and practice than contemporary mainstream liberal political theory as well as some of the prevalent forms of realism.

This thesis grew out of a dual concern. The first one is the increasing talk of impact of political theory in the face of decreasing reflection of political theory's, especially in its dominant form, relationship to its practical political context.[1] In this

[1] For a recent discussion on impact of political theory see Political Studies Review, Symposium on Political Theory and Impact Agenda. November 2015, Volume 13, Issue 4.

dissertation, such lack and its possible consequences for political theory and political practice are discussed in relation to John Rawls's theoretical insights, as expounded mainly in *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. The suggested conclusion is that contemporary predominant liberal political philosophy is rather ill-equipped to generate critical purchase on political reality primarily due to its insistence on maintaining some form of foundationalism to be able to do so. My second concern is with many variants of realist criticisms of mainstream liberal political philosophy, which, I argue, fail to challenge the dominant paradigm of doing political philosophy and understanding politics, because they tend to retain a thinned down version of foundationalism. This, I suggest, explains why many of its forms do not pose a real alternative to the dominant paradigm of political theory today (Finlayson, 2015a, 2015b: 91, 111, 121, 130; Prinz 2015, 2016).

In response to these frustrations, what I attempt to do, in this dissertation, is to establish and emphasize the superiority of certain understandings of realism in challenging the hegemony of the mainstream liberal political philosophy's understanding of politics. A crucial part of that work involves restoring and vindicating non-metaphysical and non-foundational understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice and giving up the ambition for foundational political theorizing. This, I suggest, can be achieved by utilizing two of realists' - John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's – theoretical insights.

### 1.1. Research Context and Relevance

The "divide between objectivism and relativism" has been described as "the central cultural opposition of our time" and refers to a belief that in the final analysis the only viable option available to us is either some form of objectivism (also expressed as foundationalism, metaphysical grounding of knowledge, philosophy, science and so on) or relativism (also dubbed as radical scepticism, historicism and nihilism) (Bernstein, 1983: 7). It is a choice between an attempt to find some universal, transcendental, metaphysical, non-empirical, ahistorical basis to which we can authoritatively turn to in understanding the nature of knowledge, rationality, reality, truth and so on and a radical assertion of the futility of such search for an Archimedean point, a *sub specie aeternitatis* or God's eye view as well as affirmation of purposeless, chaotic nature of the human world and potential contingency of our existence within it. This divide is as old as the Western philosophy itself. Its origins go back to Plato's criticisms of the Sophists and Protagoras's oft-mentioned relativism (Bernstein, 1983: 8; Sluga, 2014: 5-6). The ebb and flow between these two poles characterize much of the history of the western philosophy, except for a short interlude during the reign of Christian theological thought.

In that short interlude dominated by Christian theocentric framework Providence ruled. Omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God and his commands considered to be accessible through revelation provided humans with knowledge and value necessary to direct their practical activities on earth. Belief in God did not only provide a direct link between theory (God's commands) and practice (earthly affairs

of men), but it also did so authoritatively. Religious-ethical realm enjoyed a privileged position with regards to access to true knowledge, that is, the knowledge of God's commands. All other types of knowledge were considered to issue from that source and hence derivative. Thus, religious ethical realm contained the rest of the knowledge and provided a comprehensive worldview (Collingwood, 1924: 15-57; Geuss, 2005: 40-66).

With the gradual decline of belief in Providence and eventual abandonment of the Christian theocentric framework the realm of human practical affairs, once again (just like Plato makes Protagoras say), ceases to be determinate. Human beings become sovereign over their practical affairs and their fleeting and contingent judgements in relation to themselves, other selves and the material world they encounter become both the source and content of knowledge and value. If belief in God served to reconcile the real with the rational within the Christian theocentric framework, social theory (in its undifferentiated form) assumed this role with its demise. However, with the demise of the privileged position of religious-ethical realm, it ceased to enjoy the hierarchical unity that it once enjoyed. Several different systems of knowledge presented themselves as autonomous alternatives to religious worldview each claiming their own superiority over others in being the firmest of the foundations, in providing access to true knowledge and in lending some determinacy to the human practical affairs. Philosophy, science, art and history were among those that advanced the claim of being the most comprehensive types of knowledge to which other forms of knowledge should be subject to. Yet, each also challenged the claims of others for being the most comprehensive by challenging their premises.

Hence, none could be contained within a unified hierarchical framework (Collingwood, 1924: 15-57; Podoksik, 2003: 22-25).

Social and political theory, to date, is characterized by these two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, there are attempts to restore the unity knowledge once enjoyed and provide comprehensive worldviews. On the other hand, there are continuous challenges to any such proclaimed unity and comprehensiveness. The attitude that accompanies the movement of political thought in relation to possibility of discovering foundations is, thus, usually from one of confidence to scepticism. 20th and 21st century of political thought is no exception to this pattern. While the normative tradition in political philosophy from Plato to Rawls kept looking for a transcendental foundation from which to evaluate (and better) our societies, in particular our political situation, the relativist tradition from Protagoras to Rorty insisted on arguing for the impossibility of the task. In-between these two extremes are some theoretical positions that attempt to situate themselves beyond this dichotomy in that, while they deny the possibility of establishing a hierarchical, comprehensive worldview which can hold together everything else within a system, they resist falling into relativism or radical scepticism. The main question for these in-between theories is how the foundations of political theory ought to be conceived.

The revival of discussions on how to do political theory, which recently took the form of a discussion between moralistic and realistic approaches to political theory, should be seen in this context. Realism is the name adopted for the new contender to the mainstream liberal political philosophy, following the communitarian,

multicultural and agonistic challenges of 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Variety of (sometimes not necessarily compatible) positions and approaches that are grouped under the heading of political realism, after Bernard Williams's re-utilization of the term, raise complaints about the dominant political philosophy's failure to engage with the real world of politics and political practice in a satisfactory manner. The dominant paradigm in political theory, political realists claim, rests on a specific understanding of political theory, which is based upon the prospect of articulating a foundational, comprehensive moral and a political system on the basis of certain universal principles. The task of political theory is to elaborate such principles, which would constitute an Archimedean point from which to evaluate our moral and political existence. This understanding of the vocation of political theory is not only problematic but also dangerous from realists' point of view, because philosopher's hope of understanding the world *sub specie aeternitatis* is not only illusory, but also extremely dangerous (Bernstein, 1983: 4). It is illusory simply because there is no such vantage point accessible to anyone, including the philosopher or the political theorist, located outside the vagaries of our social and political existence. And it is dangerous if one acts on the false conviction that such point does exist. Political theorists, realists claim, should, thus, give up the search for comprehensive rational foundations outside politics, such as the attempt to ground politics in a universal morality, either in the form of grounding beginnings or foundational ends. Instead of moralistic approaches that attempt to understand politics on the basis of the priority of the moral to the political and treats politics "something like an applied morality", realists insist on approaches to political theory that give "greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams, 2005: 1, 3). This entails, above all, making political theory more attentive to the realities of politics and reconsidering political

theory's relationship to political practice and context. This general realist call for reorientation of political theory and reconceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice has been interpreted in myriad of different ways by variety of theoretical positions compatible with realism in varying degrees. Not all (in fact not even majority) of these, I argue in this dissertation, succeed in emphasizing the centrality of the need to get radically away from a particular conception of political theory and theorizing and practice orthogonally different form of theorizing to that of mainstream liberal political paradigm. The two that do, that of John Dunn and Raymond Geuss, provide us with a starting point to think more critically and fruitfully about the relationship between political theory and political practice in a non-illusory way.

### 1.2. Envisaged Contributions

The present thesis can be read on two distinct levels. There are systematic, concise expositions of arguments that characterize mainstream liberal political philosophy as exemplified by Rawls, arguments that surround the recent debates on moralism and realism in political theory and in-depth analysis of John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's political thought. These can be read independently as individual studies. However, there is also a deeper argument that runs through the whole text, focusing on the theme of the relationship between political theory and political practice in relation to the debates on moralism and realism in political theory. This theme is closely linked to my contention that the subject is not merely or primarily of great methodological and intellectual concern, but is politically significant. At issue are, in other words, not just a set of methodological concerns regarding the proper way of

doing political philosophy or political theory, but of asking questions and searching for answers regarding us, human beings: what we are, what we can know and not know, what norms ought to bind us, what are the grounds of hope for living better together in the future, what to hope and not hope from politics and so on.

The major intended contribution of the thesis, thus, is to provide an assessment of at least the two major ways in which the relationship between political theory and political practice is being conceived today: philosophical and historical. These two ways of doing philosophy and their respective understandings of the relationship between political theory and political practice, I aim to show, stand orthogonal to one another. Thus, the deeper argument aims to challenge dominant ways in which we practice and think about political theory today and to suggest, at least some directives, for re-thinking it.

The second envisaged contribution is to the recent debates on moralism and realism in politics. While the general aim of the dissertation, in this regard, is to enhance our understanding of moralism and realism in political theory, the more specific intention is to uncover realism's potential as a critical challenge to the dominant forms of doing political philosophy, particularly to mainstream liberal, political philosophy.

The third goal of the dissertation is to present a detailed study of two realist thinkers, John Dunn and Raymond Geuss. John Dunn is usually mentioned among realist thinkers, yet there is hardly any engagement with his works; none in fact. In this

dissertation, I present the first systematic treatment of John Dunn's political theory as a realist endeavour. The same is also true for Raymond Geuss. Although he has attracted more attention than John Dunn as a realist thinker, partly because he is a self-declared realist, there is not yet a complete treatment of his works as works of realism.[2]

Finally, this thesis contributes to debates on political judgement. The topic, despite its immense importance, is hardly properly explored except for a few works. Emergence and development of realism as a serious contender to mainstream liberal, political philosophy recently highlighted the importance of judgement in politics. In this dissertation, I attempt to clarify the meaning of the notion, while also offering a tentative account of how it could be best conceived. This is done by exploring, reinterpreting and broadening John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's reflections on the subject. This is, nonetheless, just a preliminary step towards developing a theory of political judgement.

### 1.3. Chapter Outline

The thesis is composed of two main parts. The aim of the first part of the thesis is to set the stage for the development of a theory of political judgement by developing John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's theoretical insights in the second part. This preparatory section consists of two parts – reading John Rawls's major works as representative of mainstream liberal political philosophy and assessing how the

[2] For the only exceptions see Prinz, 2015 and 2016.

dominant paradigm  conceptualizes the relationship between political theory and political practice, followed by analysis of realism in political theory in all its variety, in order to assess its critical grip on mainstream liberal political theory's conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice.

In chapter 2, I analyse John Rawls's understanding of politics, political philosophy and the relationship between political theory and political practice that informs his theoretical account by focusing on his major works. The purpose of this chapter is first, to offer a basis on which to comprehend the relationship between political theory and political practice within mainstream liberal theoretical framework and second, to establish a background to assess the realist criticisms and claims.

I develop a classificatory scheme of different types of realisms on offer in contemporary political theory in relation to their conceptualizations of the relationship between political theory and political practice in Chapter 3, after briefly presenting the major realist themes and concerns. Three types of realisms are identified as paralyzing, neutral and activist in relation to the answer they provide to the question of 'What is to be done?' This chapter shows how most of the realisms on offer in contemporary political theory, particularly of paralyzing and neutral types, possess none or only a very limited capacity to challenge and pose an alternative to the dominant political paradigm's conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice. Instead of standing orthogonally to the mainstream liberal theory's understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice, they either retrieve from the task of reconceiving the

relationship altogether or replicate many of the assumptions and conclusions of the dominant liberal paradigm. It is only, what I call here, activist realism, which have not yet received proper attention within the realist literature, which is capable of advancing a fundamental critique of the mainstream liberal, paradigm of understanding politics and hence provide a better understanding of our political situation as well as better orientation for our political practice.

The second part of the thesis develops an alternative understanding the relationship between political theory and political practice by detailing two examples of activist realism: that of John Dunn and Raymond Guess. A theory of political judgement, which is at the centre of these activist realisms' understanding of politics and political theory, I argue, advances a conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice that provides guidance, while, it is also committed to fundamental criticism of foundational, normative assumptions of much of contemporary political theory.

In Chapter 4, I develop a sceptical activist understanding of realism based on interpretation of John Dunn's work. First, I explore, his insistence on the importance of political understanding for political judgement explored in relation to his understanding of politics and political theory. Political theory, Dunn suggests, despite its shortcomings, is still one of the best means humans have to understand the world of politics and act in accordance with such an understanding. This claim gives rise to several different questions: What kind of political theory is capable of providing proper understanding and proper guidance for humans today? How such

theory is capable of providing guidance? And what kind of guidance is to be expected from such a theory? I present an answer to the first of these questions by focusing on Dunn's critique of contemporary political theory. The other two questions, I answer, by interpreting the virtue of prudence as the minimum requirement for a proper political theory to aspire to. A theory of political judgement that places the virtue of prudence at its heart, I claim in this chapter, is capable of guiding collective action without falling into moralism or relativism.

Chapter 5 focuses on another realist thinker, Raymond Geuss, as another representative of realism with an activist orientation. I present a contextualized interpretation of Geuss's works with an aim to show that germ of a more critical understanding of realism is to be found in his works. In order to bring out those more critical aspects of his thought, I first focus on his criticisms of contemporary political theory. These more negative analyses are then combined with his more positive accounts of what his variant of realism entails. In this second part, I emphasize Geuss's distinctive understanding of political theory as partisan, activist action. Properly partisan, in other words, activist realist theory is reflectively critical, questions itself and other political theories by utilizing three means of critical self-reflection: *Ideologiekritik*, genealogy and realist methodology. It is only such self-reflexively critical theory that is capable of guiding collective political action, because only such theory is not frozen in time. Action-guiding theory, in this understanding, is a historical theory of political judgement inspired by political imagination.

In Chapter 6, I show the centrality of the concept of political judgement for an activist realist political theory, by drawing upon the previous discussions of the concept in relation to John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's sceptical and critical activist realisms. In this concluding section, my aim is to delineate a particular understanding of a realistic theory of political judgement inspired by Dunn's and Geuss's theoretical insights and defend it as a theory of political judgement that is capable of providing guidance to political practice.

### 1.4. Limitations

Although a fairly new word, coined only in the 19th century, realism is a complicated and, for that matter, a difficult concept. The complication arises out of convoluted linguistic history of the word realism itself, as well as those of its roots, real and reality (Williams, 1976: 257, 258). There are variety of intricate, and sometimes contradictory, meanings of the concept, even if one is to limit oneself to its usages in philosophy and politics, ignoring those in art and literature.

Raymond Williams (1976) distinguishes between four different meanings to which the term has been put since its use in the 19th century (p. 258). I will briefly dwell on the first three usages, while bypassing the fourth one as it refers to its use in art and literature (Williams, 1976: 259). First, it has been used to describe what is now referred to as doctrine of metaphysical realism as opposed to that of nominalism (Scruton, 1983: 395; Williams, 1976: 258). Metaphysical understanding of realism advocates that reality exists independent of our perceptions of it (Scruton, 1983: 395). The oldest metaphysical doctrine of realism so defined is the Platonic one,

whereby Platonic Forms or Ideas are considered to be universals that exist independently of the objects within which they are insinuated and perceived (Williams, 1976: 257). “It is very striking, and very confusing” as Raymond Williams (1976) remarks, “that this Realist doctrine is what we would now call extreme IDEALISM” and constitutes one of the major targets of political realism as understood in this dissertation (p. 258). Hence, from this earlier metaphysical understanding of realism to its modern, post-19th century use, we observe a complete reversal of its use: modern day realists are ardent opponents of the Platonic idea of independent existence of reality, while old realists are now labelled as extreme idealists.

The second use of the term Williams (1976) identifies brings the term’s meaning close to that of naturalism or materialism, since it is used to describe the material, physical world as it exists independent of the mind perceiving it (p. 258-259). In this dissertation, although there is no direct engagement with this understanding of realism, sometimes also referred to as scientific realism, its tangential influence can be detected in what is, in Chapter 3, referred to as neutral realism, which insists on understanding realism as concerned with describing events and things as they actually exist, “independent of the mind or spirit” observing and describing it (Williams, 1976: 258). This rather factual understanding of realism is predicated upon the possibility of a more or less clear-cut distinction between fact and value,

and between descriptive and normative explanations. It registers a belief in and significance of value-neutral theoretical endeavour.[3]

The third meaning of realism attempts to go beyond a factual description and refers to "a description of facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be" (Williams, 1976: 259). In this understanding, the contrasting pair of the real is not necessarily very clear, since sometimes it is used as the opposite of the "imaginary", while at others it is the contrasting pair of the "apparent" (Williams, 1976: 258). This third sense of the term, lies at the heart of activist political realism elaborated in this dissertation in relation to philosophical and political writings of John Dunn and Raymond Geuss. Both Dunn and Geuss suggest, as we shall, in the following chapters, see, that being realistic involves, most of the time, looking at 'unearthed' (i.e. beyond appearances) and 'unappealing' (i.e. stripped of forms of wishful thinking) reality in the face. At times, Williams (1976) remarks, this understanding of realism is applied to mean being "practical" and accepting "hard facts" that impose limits on the situation one finds oneself in or attempts to explain (p. 259). These two understandings implied in the third sense of realism pull in different directions. While the former one conceptualizes existing reality as, at least potentially, changeable, the latter one conceives it as more or less fixed (Williams, 1976: 259). This, as we shall see later on, poses a great difficulty for activist realism that, rather precariously, attempts to generate 'practical' political

[3] This understanding of realism on factual basis also informs what is referred to as "legal realism" or the view that "tries to discuss the basic *fact* of law, without reference to its prescriptive nature" (Scruton, 1983: 259).

understanding that takes ‘hard facts’ seriously, while, at the same time, trying to go beyond the ‘appearances’ and forms of ‘wishful thinking’.

Although, to a certain extent, informed by these different senses of realism distinguished by Williams (1976), realism that is detailed in this dissertation belongs to a general category identified as political realism by Scruton (1983) (p. 258-259; p. 395). As part of a general category of political realism, it refers to “disposition to see things as they are, rather than as they ought to be” (Scruton, 1983: 395). The most known instantiation of this understanding of political realism is its use in International Relations Theory as *Realpolitik*, in which emphasis is placed on agents’ desire, in international arena, to increase their power and further their interests. Political realism invoked in this dissertation is distinct from its use in International Relations Theory, in that, it considers the terms power and interest to be rather difficult to specify. Not only, it holds, is it extremely difficult to specify what somebody’s interests are and how one can further one’s power, it is also difficult to sustain a systematic exclusion of moral considerations of the agents from entering into the picture, as is the case with most versions of *Realpolitik*, especially if those moral considerations are instrumental in increasing agents’ power and furthering their interests.

The basic limitation of this dissertation, thus, is its focus on a rather particular understanding of political realism popularized, at least as a term, by Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss in the beginning of the 2000s, and further expanded

by primarily British contributions.[4] Another important limitation of this study is a result of one of its central assumptions: that most political philosophy, or, at the very least, most realist political philosophy aims to be action-guiding. This limits treatment of political realism to those theoretical accounts that do actually aim to provide practical guidance to political agents, while excluding those that deny existence of any sort of relationship between political theory and political practice, such as that of Michael Oakeshott, who, nevertheless, is considered a political realist.[5]

### 1.5. A Word of Caution

Before I proceed with discussing Rawlsian theory of justice as an archetypical example of mainstream political philosophy, I would like to say a few words on Janosch Prinz's treatment of realism in his Ph.D. thesis titled "Radicalizing Realism in Political Theory" submitted to University of Sheffield in 2015, since, what I attempt to achieve here and the way I attempt to achieve it, might suggest existence of some similarities between his and this dissertation. I would like to refute this suggestion, by claiming that while, at the very outset, there seems to be some structural similarities between the two, there are hardly any substantial overlaps. The structural similarity is, moreover, confined to our common focus on John Rawls as a representative of dominant form of political philosophy today and our attempt to develop a classificatory scheme of realisms on offer in political theory. These two

[4] Excluding occasional, yet rather famous exceptions such as Galston, 2010, and Honig 1993, to some extent.

[5] For "the distinctively Oakeshottian gulf between theory and practice" see Franco, 1990: 161 and Oakeshott, 1975.

structural similarities, however, do not translate into any substantial similarity, because while I focus on Rawls's theory of justice as developed through *A Theory of Justice* to *Political Liberalism*, Prinz focuses only on the latter. We both do, though, use Rawls to set up the stage for discussing the potential of realism to challenge mainstream liberal political philosophy, which Prinz calls liberal-normativist political theory, in relation to its action-guiding potential. Against the background provided by analysis of Rawls, we both turn to analysis of realism and offer classificatory schemes of our own of different varieties of realisms. This is, once again, just a structural similarity and does not entail any substantial resemblance. Prinz (2015) argues that subdivisions of realisms in contemporary political theory are "methodologically oriented non-ideal theory realism, political judgment and political conduct realism as well as empirical social science realism and vision of politics realism" (pp. 177-178). None of these varieties, he suggests, in the end, are capable of positing a fundamental challenge to liberal-normativist political theory, because they share many of its features. Vision of politics realism, which Prinz (2015) associates with Bernard Williams poses a stronger, but still not radical enough challenge (p. 178). They all remain committed to revising or reforming liberal-normativist theory. One that has a potential to reject the liberal-normativist paradigm in its entirety and radicalize the realist challenge to liberal-normativist theory, he suggests, is to be found in a side-lined realist figure, Raymond Geuss, who should not be even properly called a realist, but a critical theorist instead. Prinz's (2015) final aim in the dissertation is to present a (re) "interpretation of Geussian realism as a sympathetic modification of early Critical Theory through the addition of Foucauldian elements" (p. 179). The substantial differences between his classification of realisms on offer as well as his judgement regarding Geussian

realism and mine are obvious. The classificatory scheme I develop is based on threefold distinction between paralysing, neutral and activist realism in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?' This classificatory scheme attempts to show that a truly realist political theory can neither remain neutral nor paralyze, but should necessarily be activist (i.e. concerned with guiding political action). Unlike Prinz, I interpret John Dunn and Raymond Geuss as two activist realists, who advocate the centrality of political judgement for political theory as well as politics. My final aim is to contribute to the development of a theory of political judgement. While Prinz considers what he calls political judgement realism not capable of posing a radical challenge to the liberal-normativist political paradigm in relation to guiding political action, I suggest, it is the only true realist approach there is. Behind this disagreement lies our differing views on the requirements of an action-guiding theory, in particular his insistence that to be action-guiding a theory needs some form of normativity and my contention that a theory can be action-guiding without being normative.

# CHAPTER 2

# JOHN RAWLS AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF MAINSTREAM LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

## 2.1. Introduction

Political realism, broadly conceived, challenges contemporary mainstream liberal, political philosophy's understanding of politics in moral terms and its concomitant conceptualization of theory's relationship to political practice on the basis of the primacy of the moral to the political. John Rawls's theory of justice elaborated first in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), fine-tuned in his later works starting with *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical* (1985) and culminating in voluminous *Political Liberalism* (1993) is taken by realist critics as a paradigmatic case of a moralistic political theory that renders "the moral prior to the political" in understanding politics and considers politics as "something like an applied morality", despite Rawls's and later Rawlsians' declarations that his theory has increasingly come to be informed by the political reality (Sleat, 2014a: 316; Williams, 2005: 1).

In this chapter, I examine the force of this realist criticism by presenting a critical analysis of Rawls's elaboration of principles of justice. The chapter is structured around two main concerns: the first is to provide a brief account of Rawls's development of his theory of justice, while the second is to work out its relationship to political context and practice in order to assess the cogency of realist criticisms. I set out the discussion by presenting expository account of Rawls's theory of justice first as elaborated in *A Theory of Justice* and second, by focusing on its restatement in *Political Liberalism*. I, then, move on to consider some realist criticisms advanced by John Dunn and Raymond Geuss against the theory of justice in order to both assess their force and re-evaluate the pragmatic and political distance Rawls has travelled from his original to later formulation of the theory of justice in terms of bridging the gap between political theory and political practice.

Based on the account provided, I advance two main hypotheses. One, that Rawls's theory of justice, despite Rawls's practical turn in the second half of the 1980s, remains committed to some form of foundationalism, which, I call, following Vincent (2004) an immanent one (pp. 4-5, 162-169). Second, this immanent foundationalism, I suggest, is responsible for rendering the account of the political presented in *Political Liberalism* so narrow that it does not possess even a slight possibility of exerting any kind of critical purchase on political practice. The only kind of purchase it has, as its realist critics claim, is of partisan and ideological sort.

## 2.2. *A Theory of Justice*

In 1956, introducing the first volume of *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Peter Laslett (1956) famously declared the death of political philosophy.[6] He commented:

> It is one of the assumptions of intellectual life…that there should be amongst us men whom we think of as political philosophers. Philosophers themselves are sensitive to philosophic change, they are to concern themselves with political and social relationships at the widest possible level of generality…For three hundred years…there have been such men writing in English, from the early 17th century to the 20th century, from Hobbes to Bosanquet. Today, it would seem we have them no longer. The tradition has been broken and our assumption is misplaced…For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead (p. vii).

This sense of degradation of political theory, closely connected to an observation of political philosophy's withdrawal from grand theorizing, throughout much of the twentieth century, usually decisively up to 1971, was quite widespread. A similar sentiment was expressed by Leo Strauss in relation to impact of modernism on political philosophy, by Brian Barry in his *Political Argument*, and by many of the contributors to *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* published in 1993. Publication of John Rawls's seminal work, *A Theory of Justice,* in 1971, represented for these and many other scholars (at least at the time) political philosophy's eventual

[6] On the death of political philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon world during the 1950s, see Barry, 1990; Goodin and Pettit, 1993; Laslett, 1956; and Parekh, 1998. The claim of decline or death of political theory in the 1950s and 1960s is highly controversial. Some scholars simply do not agree with the claim of a death of political theory since the period under question greeted the works of important figures like Louis Althusser, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, R. C. Collingwood; John Dewey; Dante Germino; Friedrich Hayek, Hans Kelsen, Georg Lukacs; Michael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss Eric Voegelin. For a critical account on the discourse on the death of political theory see Gray, 1995 and Vincent, 2004. Both Gray and Vincent suggest that the spoken about death was the death of a particular, parochial type of political theory (unhistorical and culturally parochial species of liberal theory) and not political theory *tout court*.

return to its true vocation, grand theorizing, which has been, it was claimed, interrupted by the rise and dominance of what has come to be loosely labelled as analytic philosophy from the 1930-40s to 1970-80s. Broadly shared sentiment of appreciation accompanying the work has been vividly captured in the claim of it having resuscitated political philosophy at the time of its death.

What *A Theory of Justice* really recovered, if it can, in fact, be argued to have recovered anything, was the importance of normative argumentation, which has been an important part of classical normative tradition in political philosophy. While prior to publication of *A Theory of Justice*, the function of political theory was largely confined to a second-order activity of ahistorical conceptual clarification, following its publication, normative-based justice theory became one of the main preoccupations of the 20th century political philosophy. The break the book represents from the conceptual concerns of analytical philosophy, however, should not be exaggerated, since both Rawls's theory of justice and other theories of justice that followed it continued to demonstrate an interest in rigorous conceptual analysis, particularly in the concept of justice, albeit, now, with a normative purpose.[7] This is why the book is still considered a contemporary epitome of normative political theory. Let us examine its normative foundations and ambitions in more detail.

[7] Justice, was, at the time, singled out as the subject matter of normative political theory, primarily because it was considered to be the most basic or central concept of politics. In addition, it was seen to connect the Greek political thought to the modern political thought. In this sense it replaced the concept of the state and was, in turn, replaced by (deliberative) democracy (Vincent, 2004: 109-110).

*A Theory of Justice* is composed of three parts: the theory, the institutions and the ends. The first part is concerned with explication of the theoretical basis of the theory of justice and introduction as well as justification of the two principles of justice via the original position. The second part applies the principles of justice to social institutions and individual duties and obligations. The last part is devoted to demonstrating that Rawlsian conception of justice is attuned to human moral psychology and their conception of the good and, thus, provides a stable conception of justice.

*A Theory of Justice* starts from the intuitive conviction that justice is the first virtue of human activity (Rawls, 1971: 3). Since society is a realm of human activity, by derivation, justice is, first and foremost, applicable to it, with the purpose of regulating social conflict and cooperation, and advancing people's good. As a scheme for securing mutual advantage of people, the society is characterized both by identity of interests and conflicts of interests. It is characterized by identity of interests, because people collectively benefit from social cooperation, which makes it possible for them to pursue wide variety of interests not possible to be pursued outside society. However, it is also characterized by conflict of interests, because people in order to pursue their interests demand more of goods and benefits produced as a result of a collective activity. In other words, conflict of interests arises due to conflicts about distributive shares. This explains the need for a theory of justice that would specify the principles of justice. The primary function of the principles of justice is to assign the "basic rights and duties" and determine "the proper distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation" (Rawls, 1971: 5). A conception of justice that is publicly known and accepted, while narrowing the

conflict of interests is assumed to be able to widen their identity and establish bonds of civic friendship among people with disparate aims and purposes (Rawls, 1971: 5). The result is a well-ordered society that affirms justice as the primary virtue of social institutions.

> ...A society is well-ordered when it is not only designed to advance the good of its members but when it is also effectively regulated by a public conception of justice. That is, it is a society in which (1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles (Rawls, 1971: 4-5).

*A Theory of Justice* is focused on developing "a theory that enables us to understand and to assess these feelings about the primacy of justice" and, in this capacity, is part of moral philosophy (Rawls, 1971: 586). The provisional aim of moral philosophy, Rawls states, is to describe our capacity as moral persons. The theory of justice, in this regard, should be considered to be explaining our very own sense of justice. Although a sense of justice is shared by all and is invoked by all within the routines of everyday life intuitively, the effective use of this capacity requires formulation of these intuitions in the form of a set of principles that would lead people to arrive at better or considered judgements. With the aid of a set of principles, our refined moral capacities and sense of justice are more likely not to contain any distortions (Rawls, 1971: 47).

In an attempt to formulate a theory of justice, Rawls invokes the social contract tradition. In accordance with the contract view, the principles of justice that are to regulate "the basic structure of society", that is, "the way in which the major social

institutions" (political constitution and the principle economic and social arrangements) "distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation", are agreed upon by free and equal rational persons in an original position (Rawls, 1971: 7, 11). Due to the fact that these principles are agreed upon in a fair, initial situation, the theory elaborating these principles is called "justice as fairness" (Rawls, 1971: 11).

Justice as fairness stipulates that people's considered judgements guide their choice of principles of justice in the original position. In other words, it suggests a correspondence between people's considered beliefs and the content of the principles of justice. In fact, the two principles of justice are nothing but people's considered judgements organized as a set of principles (Rawls, 1971: 454).

It is for this reason that a theory of justice should not be considered a foundationalist theory, since the principles of justice the theory stipulates are not external impositions on the conduct of people. Rather, they are products of continuous self-examination and reflection in a reflective equilibrium (Rawls, 1971: 48, 579). Reflective equilibrium refers to the state in which a person either revises his judgements or sticks to his firmly held convictions after one is presented with all possible conceptions and the philosophical arguments in favour of them (Rawls, 1971: 48-49). It is designed to ensure that our considered judgements move us closer to the philosophical ideal, that is to say, to a state where there is a total convergence between our considered judgements and the principles of justice arrived at (Rawls, 1971: 50).

Justice as fairness, it was mentioned before, is based on the principles of justice that would be agreed upon in an initial situation of fairness (Rawls, 1971: 11). This hypothetical, initial situation of fairness is called "the original position" (Rawls, 1971: 12, 17-22). The purpose of the original position is to supply justice as fairness with a position that is unencumbered by historical contingencies, in the choice of a society that a rational man would want to live in and in the choice of principles that are to regulate such a society. To do that rational persons are to engage in a thought experiment and think of themselves placed in an initial situation of fairness. People in the original position are aware that there are some objective and subjective conditions that make social cooperation both necessary and possible, which are called "circumstances of justice", by Rawls (1971: 118, 126-130). The objective circumstances include the familiar moderate scarcity of resources, the limited physical and mental capacities of people, inevitable coexistence of individuals on a limited geographical territory and so on (Rawls, 1971: 126-127). The subjective circumstances, on the other hand, refer to individuals' differing notions of good, interests and life plans (Rawls, 1971: 127). The circumstances of justice, in short, point to the necessity of social cooperation, if one is to advance his interest and rational life-plan. Being rational selves, people in the original position are willing to engage in social cooperation and choose the principles that are to regulate such cooperation provided they are fair. The original position incorporates the idea of "pure procedural justice", according to which the agreement reached on the principles of justice is fair only if they are arrived at through a fair procedure and based on a fair description of the initial situation (Rawls, 1971: 85, 83-90). Fairness in this context means that people in the original position should be represented

equally, as abstracted from the factual characteristics and circumstances that individuate them and set them at odds. In order to achieve this, the original position incorporates certain conditions the most important of which is “veil of ignorance” (Rawls, 1971: 12, 136-142). The veil of ignorance ensures that the initial agreement is fair and impartial, since it incorporates features to make up for the randomness of the real, historical world.

Behind the veil of ignorance, people do not have knowledge of certain factual information regarding themselves and their society such as their social status within the society, their class position and their talents and abilities. They have a general idea that everyone pursues a certain conception of the good, yet, they are not aware of the content of any of these conceptions. The knowledge they have about their society is limited as well. They have no knowledge about its economy, politics, culture and civilization. In addition, they do not possess any information on the generation to which they belong (Rawls, 1971: 136-137).

One important question with regards to the people in the original position and behind the veil of ignorance is to inquire what actually would lead them to choose principles of justice to regulate their social interactions. The primary reason is that they would like to pursue certain interests and ends, which form their rational plan of life, as well as, their conceptions of the good. The principles of justice that are agreed upon are considered to encourage cooperation and reduce conflict in people’s attempt to pursue their conceptions of the good and further their interests. Since people are not aware of the content of their conceptions of the good behind a veil of ignorance in an

original position, they would agree upon a general principle of justice regarding liberties that would potentially satisfy a plethora of conceptions of the good and further variety of different interests. This is Rawls's first principle of justice. It states that "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all" (Rawls, 1971: 302). **"**The basic liberties of citizens are" "political liberty",

> freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought; freedom of the person along with the right to hold (personal) property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law (Rawls, 1971: 61).

For the same reason, people would choose all-purpose means that are compatible with a selection of differing conceptions of the good. These all-purpose means are called the "primary social goods" and they include "rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth" and "a sense of one's own worth" (Rawls, 1971: 92).

People in the original position are determined to attain, at least, enough primary goods to satisfy their desires and interests, although they would obviously prefer to have more than less. They, in the end, however, settle for their equal distribution. Rawls describes this by invoking the "maximin rule" (Rawls, 1971: 154). Maximin rule suggests that times of uncertainty are marked by high risk of loss, as well as possibility of great profit. At such times of uncertainty, the rule suggests, despite the prospect of achieving high profit, people would be more inclined to reduce the possibility of loss, rather than maximize their chances of profit. Given that people in the original position have the knowledge that the primary goods are scarce, they

would not want to risk getting an at least adequate share of the goods by favouring a scheme of distribution that is greatly unequal. Thus, in an original position, each one of the people, in order to make sure that they get at least their adequate share of the goods, would chose to distribute primary goods by thinking of themselves as the most disadvantaged member of the society. This explains why they would choose Rawls's second principle of justice which states that:

> social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principles, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 1971: 302).

Once these two principles of justice, stating in a systematic form what people are already committed to by their considered judgements, are agreed upon and publicly acknowledged, they are used to assess the existing institutions, governments and laws. This is done by applying the principles of justice to the basic structure of the society. This application takes place in four stages. In the first stage, people agree on a principle of justice in an original position. In the second stage, the constitutional stage, they decide on constitutional matters including what the powers of government and the basic rights of citizens will be. The principles of justice that are agreed upon by the people in the previous stage are already binding on the discussion of constituently matters. The constitutional stage is followed by a legislative stage, which organizes the social and economic policies, while the last stage is concerned with application of general rules to particular cases. This is mostly left to judges and administrators.

In the last part of the book, Rawls aims to show what would motivate people to act on the principles of justice agreed upon in the original position, when they are no longer in that position (and hence its restrictions no longer apply). What would, in other words, make sure that a society regulated by the two principles of justice is a stable one? Rawls suggests that without the support of proper moral sentiments, it is not possible to ensure long term stability of a just scheme of cooperation. If only the principles are adopted by the people for the right reasons that they can be trusted to be abided by. This entails, Rawls argues, demonstrating that acting on the principle of justice is not only just, but also good. In other words, it entails demonstrating the congruence between the right and the good. Kantian interpretation of justice as fairness supplies such congruence (Rawls, 1971: 251-257). According to such interpretation, when people comply with the principles of justice chosen in the original position, they do not only express their nature (i.e. free and rational beings), but they also express autonomy (Rawls, 1971: 256). Expressing our nature as free and rational beings, which is enabled by the two principles of justice, constitutes our good. Reasonable conception of the good, is, thus, one that is in congruence with justice.

Such defence of the stability of a just society by an appeal to Kantian interpretation of the principles of justice constitutes a comprehensive view, because it implies a definite conception of the good, which is expressing our free and equal nature, that can only be secured by complying with the two principles of justice specified by Rawls. This is the oft-mentioned problem of stability that led Rawls to revise his theory of justice in his later works, primarily, in *Political Liberalism*.

What explains eventual convergence of people's differential intuitive senses of justice in a set of regulative principles and their acceptance of them as morally binding, in other words, according to Rawls, is human beings' universal capacity to reason. The assumption of a universal reason, rational capacity and, later on, the derivative idea of reasonableness, thus, provide the deep normative justification for the theory of justice. Such normative justification, it should be noted, is qualitatively different than that of classical normative theory in that Rawls appeals to people's practical reason rather than a metaphysical, theoretical reason to derive his principles of justice. He, thus, draws out normativity from the principles embodied in the ordinary process of reasoning, which is assumed to be a universally shared capacity among human beings, rather than from an external source. By relying on humans' existing practical reason, Rawls, thus, succeeds in developing an immanent foundationalism and avoid comprehensive, transcendental and metaphysical foundationalism of classical normative theory (Rawls, 1971: 578; Vincent, 2004: 135).

Rawls's formulation of his principles immanently from the already existing intuitions of people disciplined by the faculty of rationality and reasoning might seem to undermine the allegations of his realist critics that his theory is too remote from the real world and that it represents an approach to politics under a moral register. Yet, the function of notions of rationality and reasonableness in his doctrine lends some cogency to the realist criticisms, since these are *moral* capacities that serve to impose severe constraints on the political (Vincent 2004: 132, 135; Williams, 2005: 2).

Universal reason or instrumental rationality, in Rawlsian theory, takes on the role of comprehensive metaphysics and acts as constitutive limits on the political, because the assumption of a universal capacity of reason and rationality ignores that the notion of reason itself is highly contested. Communitarian critique of Rawls in the 1980s to that effect, Rawls's growing conviction that political philosophy should serve the purposes of the society that it addresses, as well as his increasing realization of the fact of plurality in constitutional democracies were among the primary reasons of Rawls's gradual restatement of his theory of justice.

### 2.3. *Political Liberalism*

Starting from the middle of the 1980s, Rawls became increasingly convinced that political philosophy should serve a practical task guided by the necessities of the society which it addresses. In constitutional democratic society this need is the need to attain and maintain a stable social unity. Rawls's (1985) restatement of his argument in *Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical* in 1985 is usually taken to designate this practical or the political turn of his theorizing, which has reached its most elaborate expression in *Political Liberalism* (p. 226). The book addresses the question of stability in modern constitutional democracies, which Rawls did not think was satisfactorily addressed in his 1971 *magnum opus*.

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls suggests that the book should be seen as providing a correction to the version of justice presented in *A Theory of Justice*. The three seemingly different, yet interrelated reasons for this endeavour are stated as presentation of the theory of justice in the previous book as part of a comprehensive

philosophical doctrine, incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism characterizing modern, democratic societies, the unrealistic idea of a well-ordered society and problems emanating from the argument for the stability of justice. The three elements put together reveals the problem in the *Theory of Justice* as the unrealistic assumption that a society, in which everybody embraces the same understanding of justice on the basis of its philosophical or comprehensive justification, is possible and can endure in modern democratic societies. Written as a remedy to the above-stated problem, *Political Liberalism* is assigned two main tasks: exploration and presentation of an account of justice that would identify fair terms of cooperation in modern, democratic societies (read as the most appropriate notion of justice, which is not comprehensive or part of a comprehensive doctrine) and specification of the grounds of toleration in societies marked by reasonable pluralism (read as grounds of social and political stability in societies that are marked by reasonable divergences in opinion). The combined inquiry of *Political Liberalism* is, then, "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines" (Rawls, 1993: xviii). The basic answer given to this question is a liberal political conception of justice as exemplified in Rawls's two principles of justice. *Political Liberalism* is mainly an expository and justificatory account of how and why a liberal political conception of justice is the answer (Rawls, 1993: xlvi).

The exposition in *Political Liberalism* is based on the methodology of "political constructivism", which suggests that the content of political liberalism (i.e. the two principles of justice) is derived from the practical reason (Rawls, 1993: 89). Through

the process of political construction, already existing ideas within the public, political culture of modern, democratic societies are formulated into one or more principles and, hence, rendered coherent. The principles reached at the end of the process of construction are products of practical reason, since the process of construction besides itself being based on practical reason, sets out from firmly held intuitions and convictions in the society that are parts of practical reason. Political constructivism, in this manner, is intended to supply political liberalism with a correct notion of objectivity: the reasonable (not truth), which now, unlike in *A Theory of Justice*, is applied to conceptions, persons and principles.

It should be remembered that in *A theory of Justice* the principles and ideals of the theory of justice were already based on the practical reason. Yet, Rawls continued to function on the basis of an abstract and idealized notion of persons. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls comes to adopt a different conception of society and persons: one that envisages them, themselves as products of practical reason (Rawls, 1993: xx). Rawls, in other words, assures his readers that the notion of the rational person and citizen and the assumptions we make about moral powers of that person are political and are already deeply embedded in the public reason and public liberal democratic societies.

In accordance with the method of political constructivism, Rawls begins his account by examining public, political culture of modern constitutional democracies, which are characterized by four general facts. One of the most important features of modern democracies, is the fact of reasonable pluralism, which is also instrumental for the

provision of corrections to the earlier account of *A Theory of Justice.* It refers to the possibility of experiencing reasonable disagreements especially on questions on morality, philosophy and religion even among reasonable and rational people. This disagreement far from reflecting failure of rationality or reason is a product of it. Plurality and diversity of comprehensive doctrines in such societies is a consequences of reason operating freely and thus, is a permanent feature of the contemporary societies. A reasonable or a rational theory should be such that it does not conflict with diversity of comprehensive doctrines, which themselves are products of reason. Reasonable, then, is a necessary condition that any modern theory should meet, if it is to be rational. Taking this into account, it becomes clear that social unity on the basis of a single, comprehensive doctrine can only be secured and maintained by coercive state power. In modern constitutional democracies, however, the endurance and stability of a democratic regime is dependent on the willing and free and political support of the majority of its citizens. In other words, in constitutional democracies, political power, in the last instance, is the power of the public. It is exercised by the whole citizenry. Thus, in constitutional democracy, political power is legitimate only when it is applied in line with the constitutional essentials agreed upon by all citizens (Rawls, 1993: 137). A conception of justice that can obtain free political support of the majority of the citizens and can be focus of agreement can be based on the certain, existing essential intuitive beliefs that are embedded in the public, political culture of stable democratic regimes.

Taking into account these characteristics of public, political culture of modern, societies, Rawls argues that the most fitting notion of justice in contemporary conditions is a liberal, political conception of justice. A conception of justice for the

modern democratic society should be a political conception, due to the fact of reasonable pluralism. In other words, it should be a conception that is not "derived from" or is not "part of, any comprehensive doctrine" (Rawls, 1993: xlii). The distinction between a moral and a political conception of justice is only a matter of scope, according to Rawls. A political conception of justice, unlike that of a moral one, which generally applies to wide range of subjects universally, limitedly applies to the basic structure of the society. The subject matter of a political conception of justice is, thus, the "basic structure" of "modern constitutional democracy" (Rawls, 1993: 11). This includes its chief "political, social and economic institutions" (Rawls, 1993: 11). Furthermore, unlike a moral conception that is comprehensive in its covering of values that applies to the whole of human life, a political conception is concerned only with political values, which are "expressed in terms of certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society" and which are presented as "freestanding", that is to say, as autonomous of any comprehensive principle (Rawls, 1993: 13, 12). Let us examine these features that distinguish a moral from a political conception of justice in more detail.

The first characteristic of a political conception of justice is its being restricted to ordering the basic structure of the society and not the whole. This suggests that people are restricted by the requirements of this notion of justice only when discussing constitutional essentials and establishing background institutions, and in their dealings with one another in their daily lives and with non-political associations. The assumption here is that it is possible to clearly distinguish the political from the non-political sphere of life or the political basic structure of the society from the "social", "not political" "background culture" of the people with

regards to conceptions of justice (Rawls, 1993: 14). There are, however, two main problems with this assumption. The first is that the distinction already presupposes some definition of the political, although it is used to set up the distinction itself (Gaus, 2003). If the distinction is historical or political, it has to be argued for and justified, not simply assumed as Rawls does (Wallach, 1987). Secondly, the category of the political institutions is very narrowly and legalistically conceived only to cover constitutional institutions.

The second characteristic of a political conception of justice is its freestanding status both with regards to morally comprehensive doctrines and philosophically comprehensive or metaphysical doctrines (Rawls, 1993: 10-15, 154-158). The intelligibility and soundness of this proposition depends on the meaning of comprehensive doctrines or metaphysics, which Rawls (1993) does not really elaborate except for suggesting that comprehensive doctrines are informed by "nonpolitical values and virtues" (p. 13). The political values are loosely defined as values pertaining to the domain of the political understood along liberal lines (Rawls, 1993: 135-140). The major problem with this conceptualization of the political is again the fact that Rawls assumes the division between the political and the non-political values rather than arguing for it and then uses it to ground the division between the metaphysical, comprehensive and the political such that the whole argument becomes self-referential and circular (Gaus, 2003: 187). The circularity of the argument invites the conclusion that what is political for Rawls is liberal and what is liberal is political (Wolin, 1996).

In addition, the two principles of justice in *Political Liberalism* originate from the intuitive ideas prevalent in the modern, democratic societies via the method of political constructivism. Political constructivism validates the political conception of justice by stipulating the notion of reasonableness as the objective criteria by which to assess the theory. The category of reasonableness, however, serves to protect and reinforce the philosophical and political status quo, because within modern, societies described by reasonable pluralism, toleration emerges as the only normative position for specifying how people should behave towards others with whom they disagree. Tolerance becomes the sole objective truth, with others being relative and it is argued that we should be tolerant unless our intolerance can be justified. Therefore, in *Political Liberalism*, the points of view that do not match with the principles of justice are not simply discarded as unreasonable. Comprehensive religious, moral and philosophical doctrines are tolerated as long as they are part of an overlapping consensus. This means that intolerance can only be justified with regards to "constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice" (Rawls, 1993: xlviii). Consequently, although in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls admits the existence of plurality of reasonable comprehensive philosophical, moral and religious doctrines, he limits the quest of the citizens in the political realm for an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice to the private realm by limiting the scope of the "public reason" with "constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice" (Rawls, 1993: xlviii). In this manner, tension and conflict is placed outside the realm of deliberation. The political realm, in other words, is stripped of one of the most important element of politics: political disagreement.

Furthermore, people are now conceptualized as citizens of modern, democratic societies and not as noumenal selves. Accordingly, rather than endorsing principles of justice on the grounds of moral autonomy, now they are tied to political autonomy. In other words, by complying with the principles of justice, the citizens express their freedom and equality, the two bases of the ideal of democratic citizenship. The notion of "persons as free and equal", Rawls (1993) argues, is the only moral element found in *Political Liberalism* (p. 370). This moral element drawn from the philosophical doctrine of liberalism "takes the capacity for social cooperation as fundamental and attributes to persons the two moral powers that make such cooperation possible" (Rawls, 1993: 370). Therefore, while the political conception of justice is politically neutral in relation to differing conceptions of the good, life-styles and comprehensive religious, moral or philosophical doctrines, it is morally partisan with respect to its conception of persons. This suggests a greater problem for *Political Liberalism*, due to the assumption that there is an agreement among people in liberal, democratic societies on the value of ideals of person and society (Alejandro, 1996). Liberal political morality may not be conducive to reasonable pluralism, since it postulates a certain notion of a good and necessitates lexical ordering of values giving priority either to negative liberty or individual autonomy. The principles of justice cannot be insulated from the conflict within and between values. Rawlsian "conception of the person as free and equal" is the liberal, "democratic ideal" that he uses as a yardstick in arbitration within and between values, but that ideal may not be shared by all reasonable persons (Rawls, 1993: 167). Rawls's argument seems to be that he is simply presenting an empirical account of what is the case. Yet, these are rather metaphysical assumptions about

human beings (Vincent, 2004: 166). Therefore, *Political Liberalism* turns out to be a theory based on moral presumptions dressed in a political language.

### 2.4. Realist Criticisms, (Political) Liberal Responses

One of the major criticisms advanced against unsympathetic critics of Rawls, including political realists like Raymond Geuss, has been to point out how they restrict their consideration of his theoretical endeavour to *A Theory of Justice* and ignore the large body of Rawls's subsequent work. The aim of Rawls's subsequent work, these critics claim, has been to embed his original theory in a richer, more adequate, clearer and more realistic philosophy of justice; i.e. a theory more attuned to the specific historical and social context of modern liberal, democratic society, its specific institutions, ideals, political life, real problems and real possibilities. So for a Rawlsian concerned to take the realist challenge that Rawls's theory of justice is far removed from considerations of real politics seriously, it needs to be applied to Rawls's fully developed political thought, not just to *A Theory of Justice* taken in abstraction from what it has later on become.

The claim of these critics is that in *A theory of Justice* Rawls (1971) is explicit that the theory of justice extrapolated is part of moral theory (pp. 46-53). In *Political Liberalism*, however, as the title suggests, he claims that the liberalism he advocates is political and not moral. This entails, as we have already seen, that agreement concerning rules of justice, which are to regulate the social cooperation among citizens is based on a political conception of justice. The grounds of a political conception of justice are still to be located in our intuitions, but this time the

intuitions are society, that is, context specific (Alejandro, 1996). They are to be found in the public, political culture of democratic societies, and not just any society. This explicit limitation of scope of a political notion of justice to a modern, democratic society is instrumental in revealing the time-specific and culture-specific nature of the theory advocated by Rawls and should be considered as an advance over *A Theory of Justice*.

In this section, I sketch an overview of some of the main realist criticisms advanced by John Dunn and Raymond Geuss towards Rawls's theory of justice. Since their criticisms restrict themselves mostly to his earlier formulation of his theory of justice, the discussion sets out from criticisms directed to that work, though it extends, at least in terms of its implications, to its later (re)formulations. My overall aim is to assess the cogency of their realist criticisms regarding especially Rawls's conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice.

John Dunn suggests that Rawls's theory of justice is not a good candidate for offering proper political understanding of the conditions within which people find themselves obliged to act. Based on a hypothetical contract, the only thing a theory of justice can achieve is to state what is intrinsically desirable, which is but only one of the components of political theory. To offer it as a sufficient basis for political understanding is to be pejoratively utopian (Dunn, 1990b: 145). Rawlsian utopianism manifests itself also in its concern with a marginal issue like distributive justice, in a political condition in which the preservation of the species itself should become the primary political value (Dunn, 1985: 186). In addition, Rawlsian theory of justice

fails to achieve a critical distance that is crucial rom its own circumstances of existence and, hence, from the consciousness of the historical period that it is a product of. This failure results in its elevation of "a historically given political interest" to a universal, intrinsically desirable status (Dunn, 1990b: 50). The authority of the theorist's conclusions does not carry any greater weight than the authority of culture and tradition from which they were derived (Dunn, 1990b: 16).

In *Philosophy and Real Politics*, in a very similar spirit to that of Dunn, Geuss (2008) claims that Rawls's theory of justice is "One fashionable way of failing to be realistic", because it "ignore[s] or blank[s] out history, sociology, and the particularities that constitute the substance of any recognisable form of human life" [and] "has an unreflective and uncritical relation to 'our' concepts or 'our (moral) intuitions', and this turns out to result in serious cognitive deficiencies" (pp. 59-60). His criticism culminates in the provoking image that:

> the often noted absence in Rawls of any theory about how his ideal demands are to be implemented is not a tiny mole that serves as a beauty spot to set off the radiance of the rest of the face, but the epidermal sign of a lethal tumour (Geuss, 2008: 94).[8]

In terms of the political consequences of Rawlsianism, Geuss (2005) claims that, if one takes Rawls's intentions literally, i.e. justice as fairness as a theory with egalitarian concerns, then "the real political effect of the theory has been close to zero" (p. 33). Whilst Rawls's theory places an emphasis on equality, "as Rawls's

[8] To offer another example from *Outside Ethics*: "Despite the conscientious angst of Rawls the man, and his openness to well-focused criticism of individual sections of his work, the structure and ethos of this theory [*A Theory of Justice*, but Geuss can be taken to refer to justice as fairness in general, J.P.] as a whole is deeply complacent, if not to say smug." (Geuss, 2005: 38)

purportedly egalitarian theory became more entrenched and more highly elaborated, social inequalities in fact increased drastically in virtually all industrialized countries" (Geuss, 2005: 34). This ineffectuality is a potentially dangerous form of ideological mystification (Geuss, 2005: 19-29). This leads Geuss (2008) to conclude that "[i]n real politics, theories like that of Rawls are nonstarters, except, of course, as potential ideological interventions" (p. 94).[9]

Central to both Dunn's and Geuss's criticism of Rawls are claims that Rawls's theory is an instance of a theory under a moral register or applied ethics and ideologically work towards affirming the status quo because of lack of critical distance from the circumstances of its own production (Dunn, 1985: 2, 1996: 30; Geuss, 2005: 19-29, 2008: 59-60).[10] On the surface level these charges can easily be brushed aside. In response to the first charge, Rawlsians can reply that the principles, criteria and values which Rawls's theories hope to apply are politically developed and not simply taken over from moral theory. It can also be retorted that Rawls does not just apply ethics, that is, from Geuss's (2008) point of view, do the work of ethics first and then apply these purely ethical ideals to politics, because politics is already present as a distinct area, different from moral principles, in the process of setting up the theory itself (pp. 6-9). This means that politics is not only understood as a constraint on the application of purely ethical ideals but rather certain structural characteristics of

[9] This view is in direct contradiction to the view of recent reviewers of the debates about realism in political theory that Rawls' theory can hardly at the same time be ineffectual and dangerous. See Baderin, 2014.

[10] Not so much John Dunn's, but Raymond Geuss's way of presenting his rejection of Rawls's political theory has led many commentators, both those sympathetic to realism and those defending a broadly Rawlsian point of view, to view his criticism as philosophically invalid and to charge him with misrepresenting Rawls's political theory. From many critics' point of view Geuss engages in "punditry", and "ideological pamphleteering" (Scheuerman 2013: 811; Feltham 2013: 20).

politics are taken in account for constructing the theory. In response to the second charge, on the other hand, Rawlsians could reply that it is precisely as a response to the problem of the status-quo affirming tendencies of people that Rawls introduces his distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory and makes the former prior to the latter. Seen from this perspective, it is Dunn's and Geuss's rejection of ideal theory which disables critical distance and makes their views prone to conservatism (Floyd, 2009, 2010; Kelly in Floyd and Stears, 2011; Honig and Stears in Floyd and Stears, 2011; Thaler, 2012).

These defences of Rawls, without doubt, demonstrate that Rawls can, in fact, be considered to have taken the vicissitudes of politics, considerations of power and the problem of status-quo affirming theory seriously. They, however, I argue, do not invalidate Dunn's and Geuss's general criticism that Rawls's theory fails to achieve critical theoretical distance from already existing power configurations, ossified interests and some distorted ways of seeing the world. As a result, despite Rawls's intention to present a political theory as a powerful tool to criticize current injustice,

> complex theoretical apparatus of *Theory of Justice*, operating through over 500 pages of densely argued text, eventuates in a constitutional structure that is a virtual replica (with some extremely minor deviations) of the arrangements that exist in the United States (Geuss, 2005: 21).

Although Rawls's (1993) theory of justice as it has been developed since the second half of the 1980s, *prima facie*, is more sensitive to the political context which it addresses, *Political Liberalism* does not fare any better in this regard (pp. lxiii-lx). While Rawls's concessions to pragmatism means that his theory of justice is no longer metaphysical, it still remains historically and politically problematic.

Although justice in *Political Liberalism* is rooted in our tradition and culture, it is still beyond politics, because tradition and culture are placed beyond politics (Wallach, 1987). In it, the concepts and values selected as common to liberal democracies are not questioned in terms of their appropriateness (Rawls, 1993: x). Rawls's concentration on the already existing sentiments, values and beliefs without any regard to their appropriateness prevents him from developing a context-transcending perspective and precludes the theory from achieving any kind of critical distance. The conclusion these considerations invite is that *Political Liberalism*, due to its narrowly conceived understanding of the political, manages to shy away from the real political issues of the political context to which it applies, while also staying ideologically very close indeed to the politics of the context it describes. It, thus, ends up vindicating the political order from which it originally sets out. It is only in this ideological and partisan sense that the theory is political.

### 2.5. Conclusion

Analysis of Rawls's development of theory of justice reveals the following pattern: to the extent the theory moved away from strong metaphysical assumptions instructing *A Theory of Justice* towards more pragmatic considerations informing *Political Liberalism*, the theory has become the ideological embodiment of the political circumstances it set out to illuminate. Both of the versions of the theory of justice, for that matter, exemplify rather problematic understandings of the relationship between political theory and political practice. While the earlier version seeks an objective, true foundation outside the political realm to ground and direct political practice, the latter lacks any directive force, except an ideological one, over political practice, because it lacks any critical distance from the existing political

context and practice. The result, however, is the same in both cases: a vindicatory account of the theorist's own political and value preferences, instead of genuine philosophical and political analysis and a political theory that is only feebly (depending on the strength of its ideological charm or lack thereof) directive of political practice. In the first version this is the case because there simply is no external point of view that is available to human beings, not even to political philosophers that can ground and direct political practice. In the second, it is because of the theory's uncritical relationship to its context.

The account presented in this chapter suggests that the force of realist criticism of mainstream liberal theory is precisely that it oscillates between these two poles of unrealistic metaphysical foundationalism and ineffectual immanent foundationalism that leave political practice without guidance, as it is. Rawlsian theory of justice before and after his political turn exemplify both understandings. In the next section, I turn to consider realism in political theory, as a broad political movement, in all its heterogeneity as a serious contender to both of these understandings.

# CHAPTER 3

# REALIST CHALLENGE TO MAINSTREAM LIBERAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

## 3.1. Introduction

It would not be far from the truth to suggest that we owe the recently renewed interest in political realism (at least as an actively utilized label) pretty much to the works of two contemporary political philosophers: late Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss.[11] It is to their increasingly determined efforts to distinguish between two models of political philosophy especially with respect to the relation of

[11] I should mention, at this point, that recent revival of realism in contemporary political theory took place without any acknowledgment of or engagement with debates on realism in International Relations theory. This is, to a large extent, because political realists wish to distance their understanding of realism from its prevalent understanding of realism as *Realpolitik* in International Relations theory. One possible explanation for this desire is the latter's almost exclusive focus on interests and power at the expense of morality, ethics and values. Most political realists do not find it realistic to assume that moral considerations of agents can be systematically excluded from theoretical articulations.

Recently, there has been an increased interest in situating political realism in relation to classical International Relations realists such as E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Their realism is considered to be more philosophically sophisticated and motivated by very similar concerns to those of contemporary political realists. For useful discussions of political realism in relation to these International Relations realists see especially Bell, 2009; Geuss, 2015; Scheuerman, 2013; Sleat, 2013: 12-14, 2014a.

morality (or ethics as Geuss prefers to call it) to political understanding and practice as realistic and moralistic approaches, their vehement criticisms of the dominant paradigm in political philosophy for being moralistic and their endorsement of realism as a label to describe their own preferred way of doing political philosophy, we owe the contemporary popularity of the terms.[12] Since, at least the second half of the 2000s, increasing number of otherwise disparate thinkers, following their path, came to be united in their attack on much of contemporary liberal political theory for being moralistic. Political realists, as these scholars came to be known (some self-labelled, some not), raised challenging complaints about dominant political philosophy's failure to engage with the real world of politics and political practice in a satisfactory manner.[13] The critical momentum generated by the initial wholesale criticisms of the predominant conception of political philosophy renewed hopes of those worried about the devastating impact of hegemonic liberal paradigm in understanding politics and political practice. The initial grounds of optimism, however, are slowly fading away as the loose association of political realists is proving to be more homogenous and timid than perhaps originally expected (Finlayson, 2015b: 111). Resonating Adorno's prophesy about modern societies' vast ability to co-opt even the most challenging of criticisms, realism is increasingly coming to be understood as a corrective to the dominant liberal political philosophy,

[12] In this dissertation, I will not attempt to draw a distinction between political philosophy and political theory, though, clearly, there are some attempts at drawing a distinction between the two. It should suffice to say that while Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, who are philosophers by profession tend to describe their engagement as doing political philosophy, John Dunn, a historian by profession, prefers using history of political thought or a more general term of political theory to describe his own endeavour. For the argument of this dissertation, however, it makes no sense to try and distinguish the terms, so I will be using them interchangeably.

[13] Among those are Richard Bellamy, William Connolly, John Dunn, Raymond Geuss, John Gray, Stuart Hampshire, Geoffrey Hawthorne, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, Glen Newey, Michael Oakeshott, Mark Philp, Judith Shklar, James Tully, Jeremy Waldron, Bernard Williams (Galston, 2010: 386; Stears, 2007: 534).

rather than a radical alternative to it, despite the still growing number of contributors, friends and critics alike, to the emergent literature (Geuss, 2014: 68; Finlayson, 2015a: 3, 14).

Variety of positions and approaches that are often grouped together under the heading of political realism have been subject of several scholarly analyses (Galston, 2010; Rossi and Sleat, 2014; Runciman, 2012; Stears, 2007). Research undertaken thus far studied realism from a sufficient distance, concerned, as it were, more with specifying the general contours of the movement than with detailing diverse non-moralizing positions compatible with it.[14] As a result, one can say, the general principles guiding the recent realist revival in political theory are well understood and the realist landscape more or less satisfactorily mapped out. Usefulness of this method notwithstanding, it has inevitably resulted in treatments lumping together otherwise disparate and sometimes even incompatible strands of thought under the same label and emphasizing commonalities between them more than differences. There are, as a result, hardly any attempts, at ordering varieties of realisms on offer in contemporary political theory according to some specifiable criteria.[15] In this chapter, I will first present a general account of realisms on offer in contemporary political theory and, second impose on them an ordering perspective based on their understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice. My

[14] This obviously does not mean that there is no mention of differences between different strands of realism in any of the studies on realism. It just means that the main tendency has been to focus on characteristics that bring these different strands together under the banner of realism.

[15] Exceptions are: Prinz 2015; Rossi and Sleat, 2014; Stears 2007.

aim, here, is to set the stage for detailed discussions of John Dunn's and Raymond Geuss's realist positions in forthcoming chapters.

### 3.2. Contemporary Political Realism(s): A Survey

I would like, in this section, to briefly introduce political realism in all its heterogeneity, as one of the most recent, yet highly fashionable contributors to the debates in contemporary political theory. Methodologically, I rely for analysis in this part, on existing surveys of contemporary realist literature, supplementing and qualifying them when and if necessary.

Let me start by quoting the oft-repeated allusions to realism and its opposite, moralism, in political theory. Models of political theory that "make the moral prior to the political" are "versions of political moralism" (Williams, 2005: 2). They represent political theory as "applied morality" (Williams, 2005: 2). Political moralism refers to "ethics-first" reading of the slogan "Politics is applied ethics" (Geuss, 2008: 1, 9). Political realism, in contrast, "gives a greater autonomy to the distinctively political thought" (Williams, 2005: 3). Crudely, then, realists maintain that political theory should begin developing an understanding of politics not with external specification of moral ideals that are to regulate the political realm, but from within the political practice itself (Geuss, 2008; Newey, 2010; Rossi, 2012; Sangiovanni, 2008; Stears, 2007: 553; Williams, 2005). It should, in other words, bridge the increasingly widening gap between political philosophy and the "real world" (Finlayson, 2015b: 111). It should be political, instead of attempting to "displace" (Honig, 1993) or "abolish" (Gray, 1995: 76) politics (Finlayson, 2015b:

1). This summarizes, more or less, the substance of the minimum agreement among realists.

There are different varieties on offer in contemporary literature on the subject in which this general description of the divide between realism and moralism is further substantiated. What follows below is a concise, yet not exhaustive, overview of some of the most prevalent themes within this literature.

Substantially, there are ongoing debates on the degree of autonomy the political sphere does and can enjoy (the two extreme positions being that politics is completely autonomous from any other field, especially ethics on the one hand (Erman and Moller, 2013; Hurka, 2009) and that, despite some distinctiveness, politics is still related to other fields, especially ethics, on the other (Philp, 2007; 2012; Sleat, 2013, 2014a); on the meaning of the autonomy of the political (Galston, 2010: 390-393); on possible pairs and opposites of realism including discussions on ideal and non-ideal theory as well as utopianism and anti-utopianism (Freeden, 2012; Galston, 2010: 394-395; Hamlin and Stemplovska, 2012; Jubb, 2012; Rossi and Sleat, forthcoming; Sleat, 2012, 2013, 2014b; Stemplowska, 2008; Swift, 2008; Valentini, 2012; Zuolo, 2012) on sentiments, especially on optimism and pessimism, that accompany each form of political theorizing (Dienstag, 2009; Finlayson, 2015a, 2015b; Geuss 2005: 219-233; Honig and Stears in Floyd and Stears, 2011: 177-205); on the need to emphasize allegedly fundamental, ineradicable features of politics that any realist theory should take into account including political disagreement, conflict, and centrality of power and concomitant need to reorient political theory away from

justice to concerns with legitimacy and away from entertaining the prospects of finding a well-ordered society to accepting modus vivendi arrangements as the only attainable practical possibility (Bavister-Gould, 2013; Ceva and Rossi, 2012; Erman and Moller, 2013; Hall, 2013; Horton, 2010; Larmore, 2013; MacCabe, 2010; Newey, 2010; Rossi, 2012; Sigwart, 2013; Sleat, 2011, 2010; Williams, 2005) on how to conceive the real (Factual? Empirical? Normative? Affective?) and how it bears on political theorizing (desirability concerns and feasibility constraints); on the centrality of political understanding and judgement to realistic political theory (Bourke and Geuss, 2009; Dunn, 1990b, 2000); on the action-guiding aspects and prospects of political theory; on critical purchase of realism in politics (Geuss, 2008); on realisms' politics (liberal, socialist, radical, conservative) and so on. Methodologically, the main issue of debate is whether realism constitutes a coherent affirmative alternative, is a substantive political position or whether it is just a critical outlook, a set of critical methodological tools (Galston 2010; Finlayson, 2015a, 2015b; Rossi, 2016b; Swift and White, 2008)

Among these, I suggest, the most general one, the question of the relationship of ethics or morality to politics is the most fundamental one. Yet, I wish to distance my understanding of this relationship in dualistic and mutually exclusive terms, in terms of two independent fields set against one another. I rather argue that forms of political realism that present radical challenges to the dominant paradigm of political thinking are driven by an interest in radical reinterpretation of the nature of ethics and the place of ethical thinking in our lives (Hall and Sleat, forthcoming; Nye, 2015; Sagar, 2016). This interest, in turn, is shaped by an ardent desire to make political theory more relevant to how we live our collective lives. Great bulk of

politics, at most times, is what appears to be more or less ossified causal features, a stream of processes that are deeply inelastic and insusceptible to human agency. Yet, politics is also a realm of human judgement and action transformative of the external causal field within which it takes place and human valuation constitutes one of the most consequential determinants of human judgement and action. Hence, realist's major concern with the nature and place of human valuation on politics.

### 3.3. Contemporary Political Realism(s): A Classification

Most political theorists agree that the key task of political theory is providing guidance to collective human action.[16] The main question they quarrel over is 'In what capacity and to what extent can political theory be politically informative and guide human actions within the political domain so that our individual and collective actions generate better outcomes?' The revival of the divide between moralistic and realistic approaches to political theory in the last decade, I argued above, can most meaningfully be characterized on the basis of their disparate answers to the above question.

Moralism, in this reading, very broadly speaking, encompasses theoretical positions premised on the assumption that it is, in principle, possible to fashion ourselves, as human agents, and the world we live in, through a model of what ideally 'ought' to

[16] For a variety of opinions by contemporary thinkers on the importance of the issue see Nielsen, 2005. Note also that this premise leaves out positions that categorically reject that the key task of political theory is providing orientation and guidance to human agents and deny that it either can or should aspire to do anything of the kind such as that of Michael Oakeshott, who is, nevertheless, also included among those advocating realism in political theory.

be the case.[17] What 'ought' to be the case can be discovered by appeal to the supposedly autonomous field of ethics containing pure ethical precepts allegedly unsullied by the vagaries of historical reality. Observance of these pre-historical and pre-political ethical injunctions in conducting ourselves and in fashioning the institutions through which we must act in real, historical circumstances would ensure better outcomes in our collective political life.

Realism, in contrast, starts with the recognition that any attempt to provide guidance to human beings must take them as historically located agents in their historically contingent circumstances. In other words, it must start with what 'is' the case as opposed to what 'ought to be' the case both in relation to human agency and to the causal properties of the environment within which they must act. This entails recognizing that the desires, beliefs, values, motivations and interests they hold as well as the institutional structures through which they must act to realize these vary historically. Any realist theoretical construct aiming to guide human actions must reflect and respond to this dynamism and historical variation. The first step towards this is acknowledging the stark truth that there are no grand recipes for guiding human actions within the political domain. All there is, is historical individuals creating historical realit(ies) through their actions at all times. Realism, thus understood, is all about importance of history as well as centrality of human agency for politics (Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 2-3).

[17] Having a model of what ideally ought to be the case does not require one be able to fashion oneself in accordance with the model. The model might function as an ideal to approximate or give orientation, even if it cannot be fully realized right now. But this does not change my main point.

Such a broad canvas of realism makes it compatible with various non-moralizing positions (Geuss, 2015: 12). In this section, I offer a classificatory scheme based on their conceptualizations of the relationship between political theory and political practice. For my analysis of how different strands of realisms conceive of this relationship, I study what they consider as politics, political practice or real in general terms and how they understand the real to bear on political theory or the practice of political theorizing.

The combined question I use to classify various realisms on offer in contemporary political theory, then, is: 'How the real bears on different understandings of realist political theory, particularly in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?'' Three, I suggest, can be distinguished, analytically. These are paralyzing, neutral and activist realisms.[18] Theorists belonging to all three types of realisms desire political theory to have some kind of impact on political practice. They disagree, however, in their assessments of its nature and extent. Briefly put; for paralyzing realists the real is a constant reminder that political theory, rather unfortunately, cannot do much to influence political practice despite all good intentions and attempts, hence their desperation in the face of reality; for neutral realists the real is a limiting factor on what can be achieved theoretically and politically and finally, for activist realists the real is the only hope we have for improving our political theory and concomitantly of

[18] The term 'activist' realism has recently been utilized by Lea Ypi (2015) to describe an approach to political theory, which is, I think, rather close to political moralists' concern with justice, while acknowledging the force of some of the realist critiques. My use of the term bears no relation to hers. For another rather different account of activist realism see Owen, 2013.

our political practice by taking it seriously and developing a better perspective of the relationship between political theory and political practice.

Paralyzing realism is the antithesis of activist realism and conceives the human world as largely impervious to individual agency. Paralyzing realists, usually, are pessimists and hold that people simply act the way they do for a variety of different reasons in a variety of different circumstances and nothing much can be done about it. More specifically, there is a denial that society could ever be improved in some substantial way. In some sense, then, this view is based on a denial of the possibility that people can be educated to form wiser political judgments that would enhance the outcomes of their collective actions, or, at least, a denial that political theory can be of any help to educate people to form better judgements. What inhibits paralyzing realists from entertaining this possibility is solid and impermeable nature of some fundamental constraints on human political aspirations and collective action necessary to bring them about. While different theories that fall within the bounds of this type of realism may identify and emphasize as significant different set of constraints, the most alluded ones can be grouped into two depending on whether the emphasis is on the structural properties of the causal world within which humans need to act, or on human failure itself due to some of the natural, psychological, and/or motivational aspects of human agency. The first group of theories usually appeal to the inevitable intractability of the world as one of the greatest obstacles towards educating people to form better political judgements. Put simply, these theories claim that the world is too complex to be understood by any individual no matter how impressive one's cognitive and intellectual powers are. The second group of theories place the emphasis on, what they take to be unalterable historical

universals and deficiencies of humans as expressed, for instance, in Hobbesian perception that human beings are capable of great cruelty or in the judgment that conflict is a permanent feature of the world (Dunn, 2000: 40; Finlayson, 2015a: 4). Whatever the substance, however, a persistent theme on this view is that encounter with the real is an encounter with the bleakest causal features of the political world and its primary source, human agency itself. These bleak features of the world and its inhabitants (should) act as constraints on political ambitions, hopes and aspirations and, in particular, on what people consider to be politically possible. Narrowly conceived scope of political possibility leads these people to endorse preservation of order, promotion of stability and *modus vivendi* political arrangements as highest political aspirations (Finlayson, 2015b: 5-6). The encounter with the real, in other words, leads to pessimism and paralysis. Such paralysis consists, to be sure, of a degree of apprehension about the fate of humanity, but, more (or perhaps less!) consequentially, it leaves one without sober interest in political philosophy and politics (Finlayson, 2015b: 130). It gives rise to politics of resignation (Ypi, 2015: 1, 10). The force of such theories' insights is, hence, not very directive at all. They warn us against what perhaps most of us, most of the time have good reason to fear and be weary of, but they do not provide us with "a steady intellectual instrument for the ultimate understanding of what is really going on politically at any time, or of how we would be wisest to respond to this" (Dunn, 2000: 41).

Neutral realism, recently presented as a subset of ideal and non-ideal theory debate, encompasses theoretical articulations that respond to the accusations that political theory is too detached from the real world (Estlund, 2011; Farrelly, 2007; Finlayson, 2015b: 121-135; Hamlin and Stemplowska, 2012; Jubb, 2012; Lawford-Smith, 2010;

Pasquali, 2012; Robeyns, 2008; Rossi, 2016a; Sleat, 2014a; Stemplowska 2008; Valentini, 2012, 2009). Accepting most of the major premises of mainstream liberal political paradigm, this family of approaches, aims to bring normative political theory closer to the real world by engaging in fact-sensitive normative theorising, that is, by improving ideal theory through incorporating real features of the world into the act of political theorizing itself (Sleat, 2014a). Such theories, it is argued, are more likely to be practicable and politically relevant (i.e. capable of being implemented in practice), since they built upon descriptive accounts of the real that are free of philosophical or ideological presuppositions. The very possibility of purely descriptive accounts of the real, is, of course, a highly contested issue among philosophers. For that matter, neutral realism should be understood to encompass a range of more or less realistic political theories. In general, the more fact-sensitive a theory is, the more realistic it is. Furthermore, the more relevant are the facts about the world a political theory incorporates, the more "capable it will be of effectively criticising political circumstances and guide action in the real world" (Sleat, 2014b; Valentini, 2012: 659).

According to this allegedly scientific understanding of realism, which encourages empirical study of politics, political theorists' neutrality especially with respect to any evaluative standpoints or normative positions is desirable. It, in a way, claims to present detached experts' objective reflections on politics and hence, is non-committal in respect to their implications for action, except for the kind of actions the empirical facts themselves are taken to recommend. The empirical facts, on this view, then, are taken to speak for themselves and to determine what is doable in practice. The weak version of neutral realism recommends doing only those things

that are doable, while the stronger version suggests one should aspire to do only those things that are doable and acts as a constraint on aspirations. It, thus, involves chastening of ambitions of normative political theory by feasibility constraints reality presents political theorists with. This is why this form of realism is considered to be anti-utopian, though it is hopeful about political reform (Galston, 2010: 394).

We have seen so far that for both paralyzing and neutral realisms the real world is relevant, but only as a potential source of constraint (Finlayson, 2015b: 124). To a large extent, the difference between the two, is the sentiment that accompanies an encounter with the real, which, inevitably, translates into how much influence they expect a theory to be able to exert on political practice. A thorough sense of pessimism and concomitantly high degree of political conservativism (i.e. almost automatic submission to the existing reality) characterizes paralyzing realists, while neutral realists appear to be sentimentally neutral in the face of reality. For them, the real world of facts is neither a source of despair nor of cheerfulness. Facts are facts, hard and faceless. In this understanding, unlike that of paralyzing realism, what leads to political conservatism and status-quo bias is not an attitude of resignation, but an attitude of neutrality with regards to the real (i.e. facts) (Finlayson, 2015b: 111-135; Rossi, 2016a). Hence, there is room for reform and incremental change within the existing paradigm, to the extent it is ordained by the empirical realities of the world.

Activist realism, of all three, is perhaps the only one that takes the centrality of human agency in politics (both in its ethical and political aspect) and importance of history for political understanding seriously. Historical perspective is a fundamental

prerequisite for understanding politics, because political understanding requires understanding agents, institutions and discourses all of which are located within a historical context, and hence are historically and contextually variable (Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 4). It is only at the expense of ignoring this that political theorists, such as paralyzing realists, build their theories upon what they claim to be permanent features of the world or fixed universal traits of human beings. Any historically informed political theory cannot afford to take anything as permanently fixed. While it might be difficult to argue against certain propositions regarding our social and political life, such as the inevitability of conflict, historical sensitivity requires us not to absolutize it (Finlayson, 2015b: 128). In a similar vein, it necessitates recognizing and registering that human capacities and motivations (hence actions) are extremely varied and what happens in politics depends, to a large extent, on which one of them will be employed when (Dunn, 2000: 40). Activist realism, for that matter, develops an understanding of politics from the perspective of those, who participate in it, that is, from the perspective of the political agents, rather than that of political experts as in neutral realism (Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 1-26). It recognizes that what happens in politics, in the end, depends on the political judgements of real actors.

With regards to the relationship between political theory and political practice, activist realists subscribe to the view that although there might not be grand, once and for all solutions to political problems and hence, a single, clearly specifiable guide to human action within the political domain, there are many things that can be done at any given time, place and conditions to secure better outcomes, or, at least, prevent worst ones. Whether the many things that can be done, will in fact, get done in reality and what outcomes they will bring about depend, to a great extent, on what

human agents judge to be possible, permissible and desirable in given historical circumstances and how they would choose to act on those judgments. The real, factual or empirical features of the world do not, in this understanding, speak for themselves and ordain certain courses of action. They are always interpreted by human agents as enabling or disabling on their desires, hopes, aspirations, motivations and deeds. Our judgements of what is possible, permissible and desirable are, in other words, affected by our interpretation of existing circumstances. This expresses how political judgement is closely related to political innovation and political imagination (Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 7; Geuss, 2008, 2009). A political theory capable of shedding new light on existing circumstances through re-interpretation of prevailing interpretations or through conceptual innovation, far from supporting the status quo, can, in fact, lead to radical change. The opposite of activist realism, for this reason, is not utopianism. In fact, activist realism is perfectly compatible with the 1968 slogan: "Be realistic. Demand the impossible" (Rossi and Sleat, 2014: 691; Rossi, 2015). Whilst political theory cannot designate a single principle or recipe to alleviate the burden of judgment for human agents, it can help to specify the minimal conditions that a realistically informed political judgment requires. Activist realism, within this framework, should be seen as an attempt to specify conditions for arriving at better political judgments in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?' in full cognizance of the fact that there are no solutions in politics.

### 3.4. Conclusion

I aimed to meet two primary goals in this chapter: first, to advance a classificatory schema of political realisms on offer in contemporary political theory in relation to

their conceptualizations of the relationship between political theory and political practice and second, to assess their potential in challenging the mainstream liberal political philosophy's understanding of the very same relationship.

To fulfil the first aim, I distinguished between paralyzing, neutral and activist varieties of realisms in relation to their understanding of the real, and how their respective understandings influence their conception and practice of political theorizing. The account presented in this chapter suggests that all three varieties of realisms are united in their desire for political theory to be action-guiding, hence, also in taking the real world of politics into consideration, but they differ substantially on what exactly the real entails and how it might be most usefully incorporated into the practice of political theorizing. Broadly speaking, while for paralyzing and neutral realists the real acts as a limitation on the ambitions of both political theory and political practice, for activist realists, it is, on its own, neither enabling nor disabling and cannot predetermine theoretical or practical possibilities. More extensively, for paralyzing realists, the limitation the real places on theory is absolute, meaning that there is nothing that can be done theoretically, except expressing a sentiment of despair, defeat and resignation in the face of the reality. This is hardly directive of political practice at all. The relationship between theory and practice, thus, is non-existent. Neutral realists hold that the real places relative constraints on the ambitions of theory. If these constraints are taken into account by political theorists while developing their normative recommendations or by practitioners while applying abstract normative recommendations to concrete cases, the theory and practice can be brought very close indeed. The relationship between theory and practice, for these realists, is simple. The real for activist realists, on the

other hand, is as much a source of despair as it is of hope. It is not necessarily constraining. It can, in some cases, be enabling. Which one of the two in practice it will actually be, can only be decided in practice through the political judgments and actions of political agents, including those of political theorists. Political theorists as political actors, for this reason, cannot afford to be paralyzed, but struggle to influence, as much as they can, the real, practical world of politics. The relationship between theory and practice is complicated, because bridging the gap between the two involves a lot more than simply formulating or applying a set of rules. It involves an attempt to influence the judgements of real political actors.

With respect to the second goal, I start by observing that the three types of realisms differentiated are also critical in their attitude towards mainstream liberal political philosophy, especially towards its failure to guide political practice in a satisfactory manner. Despite sharing a general critical attitude, however, their substantial criticisms of the dominant political paradigm vary greatly in scope and depth. The two extremes, in this regard, are realist theories that accept the major premises of liberal political philosophy and see its failure to guide political practice as stemming from problems of applying abstract principles to concrete cases, on the one hand, and realistic theories that engage in a wholesale criticism of liberal political philosophy, especially its foundationalism, on the other. In the middle of these two extremes are theories that emphasize the need to incorporate practical concerns (such as feasibility constraints) into the theory itself, rather than worrying about them at the stage of application. These differential diagnosis of the faults of mainstream liberal paradigm translate into diverse offers of remedies for mainstream liberal political philosophy to be more action-guiding. They range from calls for clearer specification of abstract

normative principles so they can achieve greater applicability in practice to reforming some aspects of the mainstream liberal political philosophy so as to bridge the gap between the real and the rational and, farther, to wholesale rejection of the mainstream liberal framework and concomitant call for rethinking the self-conception of political theory itself, especially its relationship to political practice. Paralyzing and activist realists agree on the need to reject the major assumptions of liberal political philosophy and to rethink the self-conception of political theory itself, but they differ in their politics. While paralyzing realists tend to be politically conservative, the activist ones are political radicals or world betterers.[19] Neutral realists locate themselves within the mainstream liberal political paradigm, accept its major premises, but believe certain aspects of it, especially its relationship to political practice can be improved.

This chapter concludes the first part of the dissertation, in which I set out to establish a critical foil for developing a theory of political judgement based on two contemporary activist realists' works, those of John Dunn and Raymond Geuss, in the second part. The critical foil consisted of two parts. In the first part, I presented a reading of John Rawls's theory of justice as a representative of mainstream liberal, political philosophy and provided an assessment of its conceptualization of the relationship between political theory and political practice. The analysis suggested that contemporary liberal political theory is rather ill-equipped to generate critical purchase on political reality primarily due to its insistence on maintaining some form

[19] I do not use conservative or radical here to denote more or less well-defined political positions or ideological creeds. Here they simply refer to opposite general outlooks with conservative tending towards affirmation of the status quo and radical towards its problematization.

of foundationalism to be able to do so. I focused on political realism in all its heterogeneity, in the second part, in order to analyse its potential to posit an alternative to mainstream liberal political philosophy. Based on the classificatory scheme developed, I argued that it is only activist realist political theories that focus on the importance of political judgement that are capable of providing adequate and appropriate guidance to political action. In the ensuing second part of the dissertation, I first turn to comprehensive examination of John Dunn's sceptical activist realism as an example of an activist realist political theory.

# CHAPTER 4

# SCEPTICAL ACTIVIST REALISM OF JOHN DUNN

## 4.1. Introduction

John Dunn may best be described as a political theorist, whose intellectual life as a whole is marked by a relentless endeavour to philosophize in relation to the present, actual, contemporary politics. He has written extensively on a broad range of subjects of current interest ranging from ism(s) such as liberalism, socialism and Marxism to some of the most prominent themes of contemporary political theory including revolution, political obligation, liberty, rights and lately democracy. His ultimate desire is to utilize political theory to aid generation of proper political understanding, educate people's political judgments and guide their actions by showing them what they have good reason to do in the circumstances within which they happen to find themselves. His is an attempt to develop a theory of practical reason, a theory of what people in practice have good reason to do in the absence of the assurances and certainties of religion, morality or philosophy as potential guides to deepest questions of life. For Dunn (1985), the central question for us now, "in a world in which the authority of practices is the final cognitive authority" is: "How does it really make

sense for human beings to live?" (p. 176, 173) The answer, for him, lies in politics and the history of philosophy or political thought provides a mandatory starting point for anyone thinking seriously about these questions.

Owing to his particular understanding of politics informed by the centrality of political agency and history, as well as his ambition to utilize political theory to provide guidance to political practice by educating political agents' moral and political sensibilities as well as their visions of the world, Dunn is also, one of the designated realists credited as belonging to an earlier generation of realists banging the realist drum without explicitly labelling it as such, even before than those, who became the campaigners of the new movement (Hall, 2015; Runciman 2016; Sleat 2015). Yet, to date, there is hardly any attempt to engage with Dunn's works or with prominent themes that these contain, despite proliferating number of writings on realism in political theory in recent years.[20]

In this chapter, I offer to fill this gap by presenting first and, to my knowledge, only detailed, systematic study of John Dunn's works and by relating these to some of the major realist concerns. By the end of the chapter, I aim to provide an explanation of why Dunn is often considered a contributor to the contemporary realist political theory literature, despite his reluctance to label himself as a political realist and demonstrate how his understanding and practice of realism, especially in relation to the relationship between political theory and political practice, is able to generate

[20] The only known exceptions to me are Craig, 2016; Rengger, 1995a, and 1995b.

better insights than many others, including realist varieties, on offer in contemporary political theory. I use political understanding, Dunn's lifetime concern, as the central organizing idea of the chapter and divide it into two major parts. In the first part, I concentrate on the impediments to political understanding including the nature of politics and the state of social theory today. This account is followed in the second part by an analysis of the virtue of prudence understood both as quality of persons and of political theories and also as a possible remedy for augmenting our political understanding. I conclude by reflecting on reasons to consider John Dunn's political theory a sceptical, activist one.

### 4.2. Understanding Politics: Impediments

*"Optimism of the will is a fine thing [];*
*but for the moment there remains ample room for pessimism of the intelligence."*

*John Dunn, West African States: Failure and Promise, A Study in Comparative Politics, p. 4, 1978.*

Writing on Locke, Dunn (1985) remarks that

> what makes Locke a powerful thinker is less the striking originality of his conceptual invention than it is the capacity to hold in an extremely stable relation a variety of different lines of thought and to work through with great care and attention the intricate structures which relate them (p. 17).

He also suggests that his intellectual career can best be seen "as the working through of a rather small number of problems at an extremely high level" (Dunn, 1985: 17). This is no less true of John Dunn, whose main preoccupation throughout his intellectual career stems from an early developed conviction that politics is both the cause of and the solution to much of the mess in the world.

In an interview with Alan Macfarlane conducted on the 5th of March, 2008 and with the author in 2011, Dunn explains that neither this conviction nor his interest in politics in general were matters of intellectual curiosity, but grew out of an immediately peculiar encounter with the real world outside his familial and familiar surroundings in Britain: a childhood encounter with the real world in Tehran, Iran and Delhi, India (www.alanmacfarlane.com). He recalls what particularly struck him was the huge discrepancy between the life chances of human populations in the world. He, then, began to question a picture of a world exhibiting some kind of a moral order and to adopt instead a vision of a world ruled by arbitrariness than rational design. Yet, he retained a hope that the world can be made into a better place, which, instructed his lifelong ambition to save the world. When he arrived at University of Cambridge for an undergraduate study in History, he was already convinced that neither history nor philosophy could be of any help to this ambition, but that the solution to all this mess must lie in politics. What is politics, though?[21]

### 4.2.1. The Nature of Politics

Politics, Dunn (1996) argues, is "an attempt by creatures of limited skill and practical wisdom to reshape the societies in which they live their lives" (p. 13). The significance of this definition is its placement of the human agency at the heart of politics. Judging from the central perspective occupied by the human agency, politics appears to have two constitutive elements: the internal properties of the human agent itself and the external aspects of the world. The internal properties of human agency

[21] The information presented in this paragraph is based on the author's personal interview with John Dunn conducted in late 2011, in Cambridge, UK. See Seven, 2011.

refer to people's knowledge, perception and feelings about the world in which they live. It encompasses their sentiments, beliefs and attitudes on the external settings of their lives, in addition to the values and purposes they wish to realize through their actions within that external setting. External aspects of the world, on the other hand, are constituted by the causal characteristics of the world, where human action takes place. This external setting, which is a cumulative product of the collective actions of past individuals, is instrumental in prescribing the external limits to the range of what is possible.

Thus, the answer to the question of 'what is politics?' depends on the perspective one adopts. To engaged agents who act through politics to realize their goals and purposes, politics appears a realm of action shaped by well or ill-considered but nevertheless purposeful actions of the actors involved. Politics, in this perspective, is what all of us bring about together through both individuated and coordinated action while trying to attain our multi-faceted aspirations. In contrast to this internal and subjective viewpoint of an engaged agent, the perspective of a detached observer provides an external and objective view of politics that conceives it as the external setting of purposeful human actions, which frames them by enabling some and limiting some others. The viewpoint adapted also determines agents' perception of the universe, their relation to it and their place within it. From the perspective of an agent the universe appears to be a stream of purposes, a highly plastic material ready to be moulded in accordance with the agent's set of purposes, desires, wishes and beliefs, while from the perspective of an external observer it appears as a stream of processes, deeply unplastic and insusceptible to human agency. Dunn suggests that although it might not readily appear so, politics is both of these at once: it is a field of

interaction between the realm of intentions and realm of consequences. It is a realm of human judgement and action transformative of the external causal field within which it takes place, as well as limited by what appears to be more ossified causal features of that same field it attempts to transform. This dual character of politics is one of the reasons for our disastrously consequential lack of understanding of the politics of our era, which, Dunn considers, to lie at the root of all our political problems.

### 4.2.2. Political Understanding Today

Over a span of more than five decades of intellectual life, John Dunn, became increasingly convinced of having identified perhaps *the* greatest obstacle to make our politics work to transform the world to a better place: the fact that *we*, people do not understand the politics of our era (Dunn, 1990b: 8, 1993: xii, 136, 1996: 1).[22]

The reasons for our extremely consequential lack of understanding are numerous and some of these are simply fundamental and permanent, given human beings and the conditions within which they have to act are *now*. For the time being, thus, unless human beings or the world change drastically, it is possible to put forward, with high degree of conviction, the rather uninviting epistemological conclusion that it is not possible for *any* human being to gain cognitive mastery over the world. This bleak conclusion, Dunn is committed, however, is neither a reason for despair nor for

[22] John Dunn himself admits the existence of such unity in his thought throughout his works published in 1980, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992 (Dunn, 1996: 2). One can without doubt add *The Cunning of Unreason*, published in 2000 to this list.

giving up any effort to try and understand the political setting of our lives with as much energy and patience as we can muster. Dunn's conviction is not only that we should try harder and harder to attain some kind of political understanding, but also that the history of political theory still offers the most valuable starting point for proper (political) understanding (Dunn, 1990b: 8, 1993: xii, 136, 1996: 1).

History of political theory is a key aid in understanding the politics of yesterday, today and tomorrow provided that it is considered in the right light and practiced in the right manner. Nobody should think history of political theory as a potential guide to the deepest questions of life. No one should possibly mistake it for a repository of well-founded judgement about what really matters. It cannot show us what to think about now, but it does provide us with still the most important question any one of us should seriously grapple with at all times: How does it really make sense for human beings to live? How human beings have good reason to live? (Dunn, 1985: 121). Apart from showing us the centrality of this question for political thinking, the practical capacity of the history of political theory to influence the politics of today and tomorrow bears directly on how it is and how it should be studied. John Dunn has been preoccupied with this question from the very beginning of his career. His very first article, 'The Identity of the History of Ideas', published in *Philosophy* in 1968, is concerned with demarcation of a proper historical method for the study of history of ideas in general and history of political theory in particular. The article is a provocative account against what Dunn then sees as the dominant method of studying the history of political theory, namely the separation of a purely historical or causal and a philosophical or rational approach to the understanding of history of political theory. Neither is it possible to fully understand a text by concentrating

purely and solely on the circumstances within which it was produced, nor is it advisable to just concentrate on the declared intentions, aims and conclusions of the author. What is needed is setting the work, together with its author, in its historical context, without fetishizing either the author or the context at the expense of the other. Thinking is an action, a form of activity, states Dunn (1985), and authors are agents; their capacity as agents should be explained in terms of their beliefs, values, preferences and commitments which lead them to take particular stances towards their work (p. 17). Nevertheless, action always takes place within a context and so does construction of self-identity. The context by its role in shaping the identities of human beings, also determines the limits of their social imagination and what they can make of themselves "in circumstances and out of materials not of their own choosing" (Dunn, 1985: 31, 39, 2000: 39). The best method to study the history of political theory, thus, is to employ the philosophical and historical approaches in conversation with each other, without delineating either philosophy or history as a privileged site of political understanding.

These two major insights, the centrality of practical reason and importance of both philosophy and history for political understanding, drawn from his study of the history of political theory illuminate John Dunn's intellectual career. His intellectual career, in fact, can be described as an attempt to develop a theory of practical reason, a theory of what men and women in practice have good reason to do in the absence

of the certainties provided by the Christian theocentric framework, from where he initially started developing his political understanding.[23]

Unlike what it used to be within the Christian framework, in the modern, secular world the knowledge of the practical reason has to be drawn from inside the realm of social existence. Whereas in the former God's purposes for human beings, or the law of nature in general terms, provides an other-worldly authority for human moral beliefs, the claim within the modern conception of practical reason is that human moral beliefs and sentiments do not depend on any external authority, but are learned through and derived from the process of socialization. The social context in which people are situated becomes the sole criterion for judging their normative claims, which, in the last instance, is reduced to their desires, sentiments and evaluative opinions. Within modern practical reason the rational grounds for human action, in this manner, become reasons internal to individuals, subordinating human practical reason to the contingencies of history. The rational agency thus constituted is disenchanted, but also without any direction in social and political action. In the modern world, it is the social theory, in its undifferentiated form that is the modern

[23] In the Preface to his first book *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* Dunn (1969) states "I simply cannot conceive of constructing an analysis of any issue in contemporary political theory around the affirmation or negation of anything which Locke says about political matters" (p. x). The reason for his reluctance is Locke's theocentric worldview that informs much of his ethical and political writings. Starting with his writings in the first half of the eighties, one can observe a shift in Dunn's attitude towards the relevance of Locke's insights for contemporary political theory. For the change of tone see especially Dunn, 1984; Dunn, 1985, Chapters 2 and 3; and Dunn, 1990, Chapter 2. One needs to be careful in commenting on Dunn's changed position on Locke, however, since the change does not really mean affirmation of a theocentric framework in his own political thought. In addition, he does not change his opinion that Locke's Christianity was extremely influential on his ethical and political theory (Dunn, 1990b: 10-11). In fact, he argues that certain number of his ideas do not survive in the modern times because they are so much predicated on his Christian theocentric framework, such as a theory of human rights prior to and independent of the claims of political authority.

claimant to the knowledge of practical reason and a candidate to guide human action in the practical realm. In its differentiated form, amateur, official and professional social theories, all try to provide an answer to the question of what human beings have good reason to do in practice. All three, however, are failing us today in their attempt to aid political understanding and provide guidance to our actions, according to Dunn. As he says:

> At present there is every reason to believe the bearers of official, amateur and professional social theory to be equally feckless in their grasp of the prospective consequences of enacting their own presumptions and equally regrettable contributors, accordingly, by their agency to the impairment and imperilling of collective human life. The essence of my complaint about contemporary academic consciousness is its systematic unsuitability for defining this predicament, let alone for contributing to its alleviation (Dunn, 1990b: 8).

Amateur social theories, which simply refers to people's self-understandings regarding the setting and significance of their lives, their self-descriptions of theirs and others' behaviours, are deficient due to our severely limited cognitive and moral capabilities in relation to the complexity of the world they are required for (Dunn, 1990b: 206; Lloyd, 1983: 3, 62-64). One of the main reasons for our lack of understanding, thus, emanates directly from our nature as human beings. Human beings, Dunn (1996) states, have limited cognitive capabilities, are partial in their judgements and limited in their skills (p. 13). This biological propensity of human beings is enough to inhibit comprehensive cognitive mastery over the world in which we all live our lives. However, although the limitations humans have by their nature are not novel and, thus, not peculiar to the modern world we live in, Dunn argues that it is particularly in the world we live in now that our capacities for political understanding are severely limited. This brings us to the second source of limitation

on our political understanding, which flows directly from the causal complexity of the world we inhabit today.

The second source of limitation on our political understanding is the modern predicament itself. What we are trying to understand, when we are trying to comprehend politics is a field of action both constituted and limited internally by our sentiments, beliefs and corresponding judgements about the world in which we live our lives and externally by causal properties of our social, economic and political systems. Each and every one of us, including political theorists, consider these two constitutive planes from our own time and place. From where he is placed, Dunn identifies three major sites that require attention for developing a proper political understanding for the world we inhabit today. These are global capitalist economy, the modern state and the very real threat of extermination of species as a whole.

One of the most important features of the politics of today is its enlarged scope and agenda. The external setting of our politics is to be found in the twin sources of this enlargement, namely, in the process of globalization or emergence of world capitalism and in the modern conception of political legitimacy, the idea that rule can be legitimate only if it is acceptable to the free and equal, culminating in the modern democratic constitutional republic. Today human interactions, including political ones, take place over the entire globe. Any understanding of politics today, thus, cannot be limited to certain classical political structures such as the workings of domestic economy and the practices of the nation-states within the domestic political space, but should aim at grasping the extended political configurations, the global

market economy and the corresponding political structures, taking into account the new opportunities they open up and the dangers they aggravate for the world and the human habitat. Today, furthermore, all human beings live at the mercy of potential destruction of the whole humanity and human habitat either by ecological disasters or by thermonuclear, chemical and biological weaponry made possible by the progress of natural science, the development of global economy and the political construction of modern state (Dunn, 1996: 12). Any adequate political understanding today cannot afford to fail to take adequate measure of these for our collective future. Yet, they are extremely difficult to take measure of based on our individual, parochial, self-righteous self-understandings or amateur social theories. Can we draw upon the strengths of the other two claimants of practical reason in this case?

Official social theory, which societies base their political authority on do not fare any better in this regard (Dunn, 1985: 8). Although it is not very clear what Dunn wants to utilize the term official theory for, it might be argued that it contains elements of both amateur and professional social theories. Amateur social theories' influence on the official social theories or the official discourses adopted by the politicians and statesman can be seen in their repetition of what people would, in essence, like to hear from their politicians. Professional social theories' influence is felt, on the other hand, in official theories' adoption of some of their concerns and vocabulary. One could clearly think of Rawls's impact on real politics in these terms: that is, ideologically, by diverting political discussion from more serious issues to considerations with justice. Substantially framed in this manner, it is obvious why official theories almost at all times would fail to produce and disseminate any

genuine political understanding. They are just far too responsive to the demands of the people and hence populistic rather than truthful.

Professional social theories, which refer to attempts by social scientists to grasp the properties of societies, on the other hand, are epistemically pretentious and ontologically defectively atomistic (Dunn, 1985: 8, 1990b: 202-203). Indeed, much of modern political theory, Dunn maintains, oscillates between indefensible epistemic pretension claiming comprehensive mastery over human practical reason and similarly untenable epistemic impotence leaving everything as it is. They, thus, purely reproduce the deficiency of understanding prevalent among humans and also lag behind the practical realities of the world they are supposed to clarify in order to augment people's political judgements. As a result of postulating either deficient or inadequate accounts of practical reason, contemporary political theory analytically is equipped only to understand the past and cannot provide a guidance with regards to future (Dunn, 1993: 132). In addition to this, the academic division of labour between a scientistic political science concerned with pure causality uninformed by values and political philosophy concerned with values, but uninformed by the practical causalities renders contemporary political theory morally far too ambitious, since it posits as central political values, values that are impossible to realize in current circumstances (Dunn, 1993: 132). Politically it lacks the challenge of an organized and realistic alternative (Dunn, 1993: 133).

The major source of this incapacity of modern political theory is to be found in its inability to properly grasp the nature of politics, in particular its dual character. The

subject matter of political understanding, politics, is a field of causality established by the inter-subjective interactions among humans, which is shaped by:

> …the beliefs and sentiments of a given population, the institutional forms through which that population can (and, for the time, largely must) act, if it is to seek to realize its less personal purposes, and the cumulative consequences of the actions (individual, group or collective) which its members choose to perform (Dunn, 2000: 323).

Politics, thus, is neither just a field of human agency nor purely and totally structurally determined. It lies, uncomfortably, at the intersection of the two. It is a real that is both constituted and limited by human agency and human actions. Understanding it requires not only knowledge of human motivations, desires and beliefs of people, but also of the causal structure of the world within and through which they must act to realize these. It requires a continuous conversation between the perspective of an external observer and the perspective of agent, which Dunn believes, if not impossible, is extremely difficult to achieve because the two perspectives, on their own, produce two incommensurable and clashing styles of understandings: fatalist and voluntarist. Fatalist vision draws a bleak picture of the human past, present and the future. It conceptualizes the world as impermeable to human will, desires and purposes. Voluntarist vision, on the other hand, conceptualizes the human past, present and the future as infinitely responsive to and shaped by human's wilful and determined assertions. Modern political theory, thus, oscillates between offering voluntaristic accounts that construe both humans and the world as infinitely perfectible and fatalistic accounts that deny humans sovereignty and control over their practical life and conceptualize the world as impervious to human desires and interests either for philosophical or historical reasons. The significance of a strange combination of philosophy and politics under the rubric of

political theory is precisely the point that it is only the cognitive mastery of both fields that can lead to proper understanding of politics (Dunn, 1985: 132, 1996: 30).

Modern academic division of labour perpetuates the division between these two fields and further aggravates the incapacity of modern political theory to provide political understanding. Such division of labour compartmentalizes aspects of human practical realm and designates particular disciplines as having total jurisdiction and authority over its specific aspects. This fragmentation of the human sciences is accompanied by a corollary fragmentation and compartmentalization of the human practical realm into a world of fact and a world of value. The primary division of labour, thus, is between philosophy as claimant to the knowledge of value and science as to that of world of fact or causality. Yet, Dunn insists that when divorced from the causal considerations philosophy relapses into moralism and becomes politically inconsequential by vindicating values that cannot be realized in the existing practical circumstances. In a similar vein, political science uninstructed by any coherent conception of value degenerates into scientism or historicism content with accepting existing beliefs and outlooks as they are without criticizing their validity, truthfulness, meaningfulness or goodness.

The academic division of labour between a scientistic conception of political science responsible for explaining social, economic and political causality or the world of fact in a mode that is independent of human will and desire and a style of moral philosophy limited to the study of human value purged from all its causal (anthropocentric) qualities (inconsistencies, indeterminacies, unreliability,

unreasonableness, irrationality and so on) results in overtly moralistic political theories or political theories framed within a moral register (Dunn, 1996: 30, 1985: 2). Such theories are concerned with internal desirability of certain values and if these values, in any way, are to be integrated within a political system, they are integrated within a system created by moral theorists and assessed on the basis of the system's internal coherence, which have neither any resemblance to nor any bearing on the actual world of politics. In addition, they forget "what the lives of human beings are really like and treating them as though they were simply artefacts of the theorist's own ethical predilections" (Dunn, 1985: 152-153). Detached from the actual, historical world of politics and real, historical human beings, these theories, argue for the necessary cultivation of certain values, rank them in order of priority and so on, without a due consideration to their applicability or achievability in practice. The result is a discrepancy between political value and political possibility, discrepancy between our expectations and purposes (the values we hold) and our causal powers within the world we live in (Dunn, 1993: ix, 121).[24]

Political philosophy written since the 1950s characterise these deficiencies. At the time of the declaration of the death of political philosophy, the ambivalent position of political theory (i.e. that it lies at the intersection of the academically rigidly demarcated disciplines of philosophy and political science) was not considered to be problematic. This period witnessed a rather stark separation between "scientistic political science" and a "narrow version of philosophy proper" confining the field of

[24] *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, originally published in 1979, is completely concerned with providing an account of the central themes prevalent in contemporary political theory that exemplify the discrepancy between political value and political possibility. Those anomalies are with regards to concepts of democracy, liberalism, nationalism and revolution (Dunn, 1993: ix).

philosophy to analysis of language (Dunn, 1985: 172). In the 1950s, the dominant attitude was that philosophy cannot postulate any values as (morally and) politically desirable, but can only engage in analysis of various moral discourses while remaining detached from the realm of human values and preferences. It was further argued that political science could not be done in a philosophical manner. Academic political philosophy, then, restricted itself to application of favoured grand theories of ethics to political categories. Since the 1970s, however, we face a reverse tendency: "an inadequate sense of the complexity of the philosophical field which stretches from ontology to political and aesthetic value" (Dunn, 1985: 173).

Contemporary political theory since then is very much dominated by two main currents: utilitarianism and the Kantian alternative, the main protagonist of which is Rawlsian (political) liberalism.[25] According to Dunn, both approaches fall short of providing systematic account of the relations between human value, human agency and material universe. Utilitarianism fails because of its natural science based epistemology of "scientific realism" and "atomistic ontology", and Kantian alternative due to lack of "any convincingly characterized defence of or surrogate for a Kantian ontology" (Dunn, 1985: 180, 1990b: 203-204, 1985: 179).

[25] Dunn (1985) admits that the whole contemporary political theory is not utilitarian or Kantian (p. 173). In fact, both the utilitarian and Kantian alternative are challenged by deconstruction of philosophy as an academic trade and reconstitution of comprehensive conception of practical reason. The former one is advocated by Richard Rorty and the second one by figures such as MacIntyre, Nagel, Wiggins, and Charles Taylor. But on the central question of "how to envisage a critique of practices in a world in which the authority of practices is the final cognitive authority", none makes a clear advance (Dunn, 1985: 176).

Particularly regrettable in the case of utilitarianism is its deficient account of the nature of human value. It takes contingent human values and interests of a given population as the only standard of evaluation, beyond which no appeal can be made (Dunn, 1985: 180, 1990b: 204). The Kantian alternative, the recent Rawlsian project, is based on the idea that although there is no independent moral order of values to appeal to, it is still possible to arrive at some objective, action-guiding principles. Dunn claims that Rawls's explicit rejection of moral realism pushes Rawls back to moral scepticism. The result is a theory or justice that is not metaphysical enough to provide objective, action-guiding principles. Accordingly, contemporary theories of social justice, lacking a conception of the place of morality in human life, cannot really have an impact on the moral consciousness of the people. Their moral consciousness is on a par with their readers and even if is better it cannot carry a greater intrinsic authority (Dunn, 1996: 97). It just expresses the judgements and choices of already existing human beings, and, hence, "a historically given political interest" perhaps, just in a more elaborate manner (Dunn, 1990b: 50). Without an external foundation, the values, rights, goods and duties expressed by the moral theorists cannot enjoy greater authority than the individuals are inclined to accord to it (Dunn, 1990b: 49). Since most of these theories are liberal in nature, it means that they will be accepted by those, who are already carrying liberal sentiments. Thus, rather than discovering a universal sense of justice, Rawls, at best, explicates a particular one limited to societies of twentieth century Western democracy, but presents it as a universal.

Dunn's criticisms of other contemporary theorists all depend on the perception that their supposed political values—their sense of the political good—are so remote

from actuality as to serve no obvious purpose other than the elevation or edification of the theorists themselves. The blindness of contemporary political theory to the causal landscape of the societies in which we live leaves it preoccupied with marginal political issues such as distributive justice, instead of dealing with more existential threats such as the threat of annihilation of human species as a whole. What is absurd in the face of this fact is the insistence of contemporary political understanding on the issues of distributive justice, when the primary political value should become the preservation of the species itself (Dunn, 1985: 186). He states that "A theory of social justice is a fine thing, a good thought in a naughty world. But it is the naughty world which has to be dealt with" (Dunn, 1990b: 24). Sometimes, thus, Dunn (1985) appears to suggest that these writers are so concerned with philosophy, that they have a defective understanding of politics (p. 171). But this fairly obvious criticism is combined with another which is that their conception of philosophy is also defective.

> It is striking how much of the recent Anglo-Saxon philosophical backlash against utilitarianism in political philosophy remains essentially Kantian in inspiration. John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* and Thomas Nagel's *The Politics? of Altruism* and *Mortal Questions* are all profoundly Kantian works. But thus far they offer a Kantian ethics without any convincingly characterised defence of or a surrogate for a Kantian ontology. It therefore seems unlikely … that they will prove markedly more robust than, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's attempt to resuscitate an Aristotelian ethics without its attendant metaphysics, or Charles Taylor's rather less clearly delineated struggle to execute the same task on the even less fissile philosophy of Hegel (Dunn, 1985: 179).

The verdict is that most modern political philosophy displays "vapidity and vacuousness"; is in effect no more than a "homily"; tends to shift between "truism and absurdity"; does not suggest how the social science which arose in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s can be related to the moralizing liberal political philosophy of the 1970s and 1980s; and serves only to express the "edificatory self-

consciousness" of "cultural functionaries"—or, in other words, amounts to nothing more than "moral narcissism" (Dunn, 1985: 186, 121, 160).

The conclusion that follows from these considerations, however, is neither a reason for despair nor for giving up any effort to try to understand politics and make the world a better place with as much energy and patience as we can possibly muster. Its lesson, in other words, is not futility of any human endeavour to better our practical lives, but futility of certain ungrounded hopes like that of turning the history into a march of reason (Dunn, 2000: xiii, 310) This is the gist of John Dunn's engaged scepticism: we need to engage in politics, we need to try to understand the politics of era and we need to attempt to produce political theories designed to aid political understanding and educate political judgement, while, at the same time, practicing chastened realism and remaining sceptical through and through as to how much of what we aim we can ever attain.

We need to remember that, no matter what has happened in the past, what happens in politics in the future is neither definitely closed nor infinitely open. In fact, at the centre of political understanding lies the very simple thought that in explaining the past it is necessary to take all past acts as given, but that in choosing and making the future, no matter how constrained the circumstances in which people must act, there are yet no human actions at all to take as given (Dunn, 1990b: 144).[26] The future is

[26] We need to remember as well that what we take as history and see as more or less rigidly structured has also been shaped by historical individual's judgements regarding political actuality and possibility. "History is not fate, but a series of judgements made, the choices taken, the wills exerted and the possibilities actualized up to that time within it" (Dunn, 1985: 77).

dependent on the interaction between a range of attainable and desirable goals and related dangers and constraints that these face. What will actually happen in politics in the future, which of the desires will be realized, will be decided by the causal weight of each constitutive element of politics, political causality and political value, upon the other (Dunn, 1985: 2). It will depend on the field created by the respective configurations of value and causality, and how we, people choose and act within this configuration.

Given that what will happen in and through politics in the end, is a practical question, whose answer can only be settled in practice, the real question for any political theorist is not 'What will happen in the future?' but 'How much room there is to induce people do what they have good reason to do and avoid what they do not have any good reason to do?' This is a question of practical judgement. To think about this question is to think politically; it is political thinking. Developing proper political understanding is to start to think politically. In the next, second part of the chapter, I turn to consider possible aids to improve our political understanding today and induce people to do much better politically, although even possession of political understanding should not be confused with any real or promised capacity to change things for the better, which, in the end, is always a matter of practice.

### 4.3. Understanding Politics: Remedies

*"Who knows? But even if no one today can cogently claim to know, perhaps it may be possible to shed a little light on the question of what it now makes sense to believe."*

*John Dunn, Political Obligation in Its Historical Context, p. 244, 1980.*

I have considered, so far, how Dunn conceptualizes politics as importantly constituted by an interaction between people's values and the causal structures of the world. I have also shown, how, for Dunn, most of the prevalent forms of political understanding today, tend to emphasize the constitutive role of one of these elements over and at the expense of the other and, hence, result in either voluntaristic or fatalistic accounts of the human past, present and future as infinitely open to perfection or highly unresponsive to any human betterment, except for sporadically, by sheer luck of fortune. Besides the nature of politics itself, I have also dwelt on other reasons that contribute to and even aggravate our lack of political understanding today: the nature of us, human beings, the complexity of the world we inhabit today and the state of contemporary political theory. I now turn to considering what resources or remedies Dunn thinks we possess that could be utilized to increase both the level and quality of our political understanding so that our political actions produce better outcomes rather than worse.

Reflection on the dual character of politics today, which is highly unlikely to change in the near future, and the listed impediments suggests that our best chance for improving our political understanding today lies in improving our social theory, that is, our amateur, official and professional social theories. How much actual room for improvement there is in each direction will, in the end, be decided by how elastic

some of the impediments prove to be and human practice itself. We can be fairly certain, for instance, that the world is bound to become more complex not less so in the foreseeable future, further limiting our ability to understand what is happening politically on a global scale. We can also be fairly sure that certain traits we possess as human beings are highly resistant to change indeed, though human beings are always receptive to learning and education. Improving our professional social theory might be one of the first steps and best means to facilitate such educational process. How can it be facilitated? John Dunn's (1990b) preferred 'formula' for improvement is revitalization of the virtue of prudence (p. 197).

John Dunn (1985, 1990b) uses the concept of prudence throughout his writings rather sporadically though pointedly to suggest that if there is any hope for improvement at all with regards to our politics, at the centre of it lies the significance of prudence. Since Dunn provides hardly any explanation as to what exactly prudence entails, I present, in the following, a rather speculative account of what it might be taken to mean and what could possibly be its significance. My boldness in presenting a rather speculative account of the notion is based on the conviction I have that the term is significant to understand not only Dunn's understanding of politics and the relationship between its theoretical and practical aspects, but also some of the major concerns that instruct the recent realist revival in political theory, such as the centrality of a certain understanding of ethics for political judgement and indispensability of an endeavour to understand politics both in its affective and causal dimension for any sound theory of political judgement.

Prudence is an ancient virtue with a not-so-well documented history.[27] Originally introduced by Aristotle as a guide to political, practical choice and action, it was later put in a Christian framework by Aquinas. It was picked up by several classical republicans, it appears in the writings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume to name but few, and in the modern political thought has mostly been invoked by political realists (Rengger, 1995: 424). Usually a distinction is drawn between ancient and modern understandings of the notion of prudence. The latter usage is taken to designate a totally pragmatic attitude towards politics and the concept itself to mean cunning, while prudence in the ancient sense, although practical, is guided by an end of good life and means foresight or looking ahead. Although Dunn (1990b) himself calls his conception of prudence a modern one, I suspect, and elaborate later on, that his understanding of it is related to some minimal, thin conception of a good life and not simply to security and maximization of interests, though these clearly are of quite significance to his understanding of politics (p. 200). Having a moral aspect to it, prudence, as invoked by Dunn is capable of transcending pure instrumental rationality and show us which ends to pursue given our intellectual, moral and causal powers. Such guidance, however, does not take the form of injunctions, despite Dunn's sometimes confusing rhetoric to that effect. Prudence, as "the key virtue of human practical reason", does not issue injunctions on what we should do or give us any formula or recipe for improvement (Dunn, 1990b: 3). In fact, it registers exactly the opposite: that there are no formulas, recipes or magic tricks to make the world a better place by improving either ourselves or our practical and theoretical undertakings, although at all times there are always some things that could be done.

[27] There is shortage of material regarding the notion of prudence, perhaps because it is almost erased from the contemporary discourse. For some analysis of prudence see: Hariman, 2003 and Ruderman, 1997.

Thus, the first educational lesson of the virtue of prudence is its registration of epistemic opacity in relation to political understanding and, yet, also a need for a determination to act prudently in the light of that knowledge. Analysis of Dunn's (1990b, 1985) sporadic use of the term reveals that he uses it both as a key virtue of practical reason that can be embodied by a person or a group of people and even by human species as a whole, and as a quality of "a political philosophy for the turbulent world of today and tomorrow" (p. 3, p. 189). Below I turn to consider each in turn.

### 4.3.1. Prudent Political Agents

The centrality and constitutive role of human agency in politics renders it very much exposed to the vicissitudes of human beliefs and ideas that articulate those beliefs. Everybody's sense of politics comes from their own experiences and the plurality of human experiences on earth suggests existence of multiplicity of political self-understandings. What is particularly important about these understandings is that they give way to diversity of purposes. In trying to realize their disparate, and most of the time conflicting, purposes formed on the basis of these differential beliefs, interpretations and experiences, people judge for themselves and make their judgements with utmost self-righteousness with very limited attention to their mutual concerns. This limited concern for and attentiveness to the values and purposes of others is the real drawback on their attempts to reshape the societies in which they live, the act of which requires collective action. This is why Dunn (2000) claims that there is politics because human judgement is partial, they have got conflicting

interests and when they act, although they need to act collectively to bring about desired outcomes, they remain individuals (pp. 19-30).

Prudence, when it is used as a virtue embodied by a specific person or group of people, designates "long-term foresight and wide and sober understanding of the interests that human beings share, without in any way occluding the vast range of interests which will always sharply divide them" (Dunn, 1993: 136). In other words, it counterbalances the tendency of humans to divide, conflict and clash due to their myopia regarding their collective, long-term interests and the necessity to collaborate to achieve the most fundamental, and sometimes even existential, of these. In this capacity, it serves to remedy the limitations of our amateur social theories.

The attempt to remedy our amateur social theories is of great importance for Dunn (1990b), since, although "modern political community is an assemblage" "constituted as a community by the interaction between amateur, professional and official social theories" and none can claim a privileged position with regards to the knowledge of what human beings have good reason to do, amateur social theories are more consequential (p. 201). In the final analysis, we are not only all (including professional social theorists) amateur social theorists, but it is also our self-understandings that determine much, if not all, of what happens in politics (Dunn, 1990b: 201-210). Due to this extremely constitutive and consequential role of people's self-understandings on politics and politics' influence on our collective lives, in turn, we people simply do not have the luxury of having a disengaged or non-passionate attitude towards it, according to Dunn, no matter how unedifying

politics in itself is. It requires our active engagement to understand not only ourselves (our desires and interests), the world in which we live and act, but also the other selves. This engaged attitude, Dunn suggests, requires active effort and participation by all adults in a process of mutual deliberation in spite of our myopic view of our shared and divisive values, concerns and purposes and engagement in collective action to secure a better realization of our most vital interests. Both of these, in turn, require reflection on how far we can and should trust and rely on one another or on where we can collectively place our trust. The genesis and reproduction of mutual trust is the basis of an acceptable and lasting form of human social cooperation (Dunn, 1985: 38, 1990b: 23). Thus, in a sense, the construction and maintenance of a viable order and the viability of a human community, depends on how prudently we judge as amateur social theorists in the face of dangers threatening both (Dunn, 1990b: 208).

The cultivation of prudence thus understood as a virtue on which the very viability of political community rests is all the more important in the world we live in, where threats posed by nuclear armament, ecological disasters, global market economy and the powers of the modern state to the survival of our own and other species are very real and imminent (Dunn, 1985: 11, 189, 1990b: 197). These are matters of interest to us all, which make it compulsory for us all to try and learn to judge and act more prudently. Yet, it is not only due to the greater risks faced in the modern world that we all need to learn the collective task of being prudent. Modern politics and modern conceptions of legitimacy today also require democratization of prudence, that is to say, "a spreading out of the burden of judging and choosing soberly about political questions across the entire adult populations of particular societies" (Dunn, 1990b:

214, 3). Prudence aims to show us that there is no grand recipe for the problems of politics, no formula for or reliable site of sound political judgement, by use of which we can be exempt from our responsibility of facing up to the challenges, and of acting collectively, thus, taking responsibility for our future. In Dunn's (1990b) words:

> To propose democratization of prudence is to insist that the only single conclusion we can reach about political, social and economic life is that it is irretrievably problematic and that its problems are ours to cope with for the rest of human time. Prudence is a precondition for a good life and politics needs to first attend to the prerequisites before busying itself with the content of such a life (p. 215).

In order for us to have any chance of displaying the necessary prudence however we must know both what our political circumstances are and how we should interpret them. It is this task that history of political thought and political theory help us perform.

#### 4.3.2. Prudential Political Theory

Besides trying to improve our amateur social theories, we might seek to improve our professional social theories in order to try and make sure that the outcome of our political actions come out better. As with amateur social theories, the possibility of improving our professional social theories also depends on development of proper political understanding. A proper political understanding, in this regard, is not only central to our individual actions but also to a theory of collective prudence.

Political theory, whose agenda is set by "what is really going on in society" at a particular time is the best aid we possess towards developing a proper political

understanding and educate our political judgement (Dunn, 1984: 1, 1985: 1). Its purpose is "to diagnose the political predicaments and to show us how best to confront them" (Dunn, 1990b: 193). Yet, it can only aid political understanding and political judgement if done properly. Since what is really going on in a society is a product of interactions among historical individuals making choices within a certain historical context to realize certain desires, values and beliefs, a good political theory should satisfy three conditions. First of all, an adequate political theory should provide an account of the conditions people are actually in by providing causal analysis of the existing political, economic, and social institutions and their interactions. Secondly, it should contain a coherent conception of human value, that is, an account of what deserves to be sustained and cherished in politics (Dunn, 1984: 1, 1990b: 193). Thirdly, political theory should tell people what is to be done in practice to realize intrinsically desirable goals as can be realized in the prevailing circumstances (Dunn, 1984: 10, 1990b: 193) It is essential for an adequate political theory or a political theory capable of providing an understanding of the present to contain all these three elements at once and relate them to one another, although they might be analytically separable.

We find these three requirements mentioned in three different places in Dunn's writings. In chronological order, it is first stated in *The Politics of Socialism*:

> There are three demands which it is reasonable to make of a political theory: the first is that it should capture what political structures, political institutions and political relations are actually like at present—what they consist in, what they prevent and what they bring about. The second is that it should capture our sense of how we might coherently and justifiably desire any human society to be. The third is that it should tell us what is to be done to realize in practice as intrinsically desirable a social and political condition as can in fact

> be realized and sustained in the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves (Dunn, 1984: 1).

We find a statement of it in an essay in *Interpreting Political Responsibility*:

> The purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them. To do this it needs to train us in three relatively distinct skills: firstly in ascertaining how the social, political and economic setting of our lives now is and in understanding why it is as it is; secondly in working through for ourselves how we could coherently and justifiably wish that world to be or become; and thirdly in judging how far, and through what actions, and at what risk, we can realistically hope to move this world as it now stands towards the way we might excusably wish it to be (Dunn, 1986: 193).

And we find a statement of it in the preface to the second edition of *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*:

> To understand politics, we still need to know what it is reasonable for us to want and care about, how the human world now is and why it is as it is, and how we could act to achieve what we want and secure what we care about (Dunn, 1993: vii)

For the sake of clarification, then, Dunn's conception of political theory is that it should fulfil three demands. The first demand is that political theory should tell us the state of our contemporary politics, that is, our causal political condition. Secondly, it should tell us what is reasonable for us to value and not to value. And finally, it should provide us with an account of how to realize our values given our political circumstances. A good political theory satisfying these three demands gives us the shape of proper political understanding, since it is constituted by combination of historical, ethical and practical understandings. Historical understanding is an explanation of the present condition of human beings and the world they live in. Ethical understanding is concerned with what we should value and how it should

lead us to act. Practical understanding is concerned with what sorts of policies and what courses of action we should favour and which ones we should avoid (Dunn, 2000: 308). The content of political understanding, on the other hand, is always purpose relative and cannot be pre-determined. No political theorist, thus, can tell us what exactly we need to understand without knowing what we need the understanding for.

It is important to recognise that Dunn (1984, 1990b) considers the third, imperative, element as "the most important aspect of any serious theory of politics" (p. vii, p. 196). Most political theories simply perpetuate an "opposition between a purely causal understanding of a world of fact and a defiantly non-causal understanding of human value seen as constituted by the consciousness of individual human agents" (Dunn, 1990b: 1-2). Yet, for Dunn (1985, 1990b), any adequate political theory, in addition to showing how the world should be understood and establishing some conception of the good, should also offer "a conception of why men or women have good reason to *act* as it enjoins" (p. 181, p. 196). It is the concept of prudence invoked as a quality of political theory that supplies this very link. These tasks of political theory, as delineated by Dunn, require a rearticulated notion of prudence.

Political theory which emphasizes the centrality of the notion of prudence is, in fact, an old understanding of the nature of political theory, which has been replaced in contemporary political theory by approaches that are either "self-righteously moralist" of the Rawlsian type or "parochially instrumentalist" of the utilitarian type (Dunn, 1985: 11-12). Dunn emphatically suggests that these prevalent forms of

political theory today are ineffectual when it comes to aiding people to develop proper political understanding and guide their political actions. At the heart of a prudential political theory, thus, is the aim to help people develop a level and quality of political understanding that matches the complexity of the world that each one of us needs to understand if the outcome of our actions are to come out better than worse, the dangers we all face and need to be aware of and the possibilities for improvement that we can collectively make use of.

Judging by its aim, it must be contended that the assumption behind Dunn's advocacy for prudential political theory is his belief that human beings can be educated to make better judgements and act on the basis of those judgements. The function of prudential political theory, thus, is educative. It aims to educate people in developing correct sensibilities and appropriate political judgement and help people to clarify their purposes as well as the means necessary for their realization (Dunn, 1990b: 199, 1996: 25). It fulfils this educational role, not by issuing injunctions or authoritatively telling people what they should do, but by showing people how to see their lives. In Dunn's (1990b) words:

> What prudence, as I mean it, tells human beings does not take the form of clear, brief and authoritative instruction on how to act (although it might on occasion muster pretty brief, clear and authoritative suggestions on what it cannot possibly make sense to continue to do). Rather, it shows human beings why they need to see the settings of their lives in certain ways – and what sorts of practical implications follow from seeing these settings thus – and not as they at present happen to do (p. 200).

Dunn's call for prudential political theory may best be understood in relation to criticisms he directs at what he labels as fatalist and voluntarist visions of the world

that are built upon subjective and objective views of human rationality and value. Fatalist vision takes human beings as they presently are with their present cognitive powers, abilities, values and beliefs. Without questioning the truth or the validity of people's present preferences and beliefs, it makes those the locus of human value in general. According to this understanding, what is rational for men is dependent on what they believe to be rational for them at the moment of acting. It construes the content of rationality as determined by historical contingency, and more importantly by the contingent values and preferences that are held by the people. In addition, by taking the values and preferences of human beings as they are, it tends to constrict the role and impact of human imagination. Within this vision, the domain of politics is construed as a self-sustaining single, closed system that is "virtually impermeable to our purposes" (Dunn, 2000: 329, 344). It posits a detached understanding of politics. Dunn (2000) argues that detached understanding of the political world has close affinities to fatalism at least in two respects: first, in the causal judgement that the vast majority of human beings almost all the time are condemned to political ineffectuality and second, in the attitude of passive resignation that such judgement fosters (p. 329). What is particularly important about this approach is the fact that it explains only why and how the world is as it is and what are the values that are presently held by the people.

The second approach, on the other hand, focuses on society not only as it is, but as it can become. The content of rationality in this approach is provided by what is rational for human agents to believe about social actuality and social possibility. Reason in epistemic rationality is not constrained by the immediate contingencies of historical visibility, because extending people's powers of vision may help to release

them from the bondage of myopic understanding of rationality. It aims at political edification. It aims at making both the people and the world a better place. The danger with this approach is the fact that it might try to foster values that are not realistic, or that are not within the reach of historical political possibility. Dunn (2000) argues that there might be good reasons for hoping that things can be caused to go better, but those reasons must be reasons for us now, reasons which are potentially within our current cognitive reach (p. 339).[28] This second view is labelled by Dunn as voluntarist vision of the world. For voluntarists the human future is always comprehensively open. It is always the product of what we wish and choose to do; and any of us, at any point, can always wish, or choose, or act, very differently from our recent habits. The important point about this vision is the fact that it concentrates not so much on what the world is now and what values and beliefs people hold presently, but on what the world can become and what people have good reasons to so (what they ought to do). In other words, it concentrates on people as they *can* become and the world as it *can* become.

Drawing upon the strengths of both these visions, while trying to ameliorate their weaknesses, Dunn arrives at a fourfold scheme in order to demarcate what a particular person at a particular time has a good reason to do. He argues that what people have good reason to do in relation to the domain of politics first, depends on what that person then values and believes true about how the human world (his or her conception) politically, socially, economically is and could be caused to become;

[28] What is striking at this point is Dunn's (2000) claim that "unless and until we can tell dependably that there are no such reasons (which it is hard to see how we ever could), we have ample grounds for continuing to look for them" (p. 339). This is just saying that there will always be hope.

second, on what that person has good reason to value and believe true about how the human world is and can be caused to become; third, on how the human world in fact then is; and finally on how the human world can be caused to become (Dunn, 1980: 264). This fourfold scheme implies that it is not only the nature of rationality, the character and epistemic status of human values, but also the causal possibilities of human existence that are instrumental in answering the question of what men in practice have good reason to do (Dunn, 1980: 257). These are intimately interrelated questions according to Dunn (1980), because what men ought to do or have good reason to do is contingent on political possibility that is to say, on what can be politically brought about, which, in turn, is dependent on what men believe (set of beliefs which men entertain on the issue of what they ought to do) (p. 260). In addition to this, what men have good reason to do should be assessed in relation to the circumstances in which men find themselves historically placed. Thus, they cannot be rendered dependent solely on an exceptionally strong theory of what men have good reason to value.

It is, hence, the three tasks of political theory that Dunn expects any adequate political theory to fulfil that gives prudential political theory the shape of its content. Prudential political theory establishes a correlation between the ideals and goals to be pursued and the contingent historical circumstances. It might be considered as a fine-tuning between political actuality and political possibility. It aims to supplant such a correlation by theorizing about politics by taking into account the relationship between all three elements - people's vision of the social and political characteristics of the world as it is now, the values and beliefs people hold and what is to be done by people in practice to realize the values and beliefs they hold in the existing historical

circumstances - that have determinate effect both on political actualities and possibilities.

What about the substantial content of a prudential political theory? Dunn refrains from suggesting any substantial consideration for a prudential political theory, except for perhaps the preservation of the human species. He comes close to suggesting such a content, when he employs prudential political theory to designate a "political philosophy for a turbulent world", that is, "a theory adequate to the historical world in which we have to live, if we are fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to continue to live at all." (Dunn, 1985: 189). This conceptualization of prudential political theory is more focused in the sense that it directly links the necessity for a theory of collective prudence to the modern predicament. According to Dunn (1985, 1990b), the characteristics of the modern predicament urges everybody to educate themselves in the collective task of prudence in order to face up to the challenges and dangers posed by the possibility of total annihilation of the human habitat and extermination of our species, global market economy and the powers of the modern state (p. 11, p. 197). It should be noted that it is only in this context that Dunn comes close to providing content to a would-be prudential political theory. By inference and generalization, it might be suggested that, if a prudential political theory is to have content at all, it would be filled with social and political matters that are of utmost importance for the continuing existence of a human community and which, for that reason, necessitate rather urgent action.

However, even when one grants that the modern predicament somewhat specifies the content of a prudential political theory, the fact that the character of the modern predicament itself is contingent seems to support the general claim that a prudential political theory, in fact, does not have a determinate content. It seems that rather than designating a set of principles or authoritative instructions on how to act or even non-authoritative substantial directions, it just designates a strategy of reflecting on what people (politically) have good reason to do. The only substantial claim that it might be argued to imply is not directly related to what people have good reason to do, but is the claim of impossibility of *knowing/knowledge* in the political realm that is characterised by contingency. The fact that we cannot *know*, but only try to understand as much as it is permitted by our cognitive powers and capabilities, implies that (political) judgement on the basis of the understanding we can muster on what to think about the world, what to value and believe in and how to act to realize those values and beliefs will always be a central feature of the political realm. Partiality of judgement on these matters, combined with conflicts of interests and the difficulty of mastering the logic of collective action, on the other hand, means that political life will, for the foreseeable future, be consistently and inevitably disappointing (Dunn, 2000: xii, xiii). Prudence as the central virtue of practical reason and central part of any valid or sober political theory aims to reduce the degree of disappointment and surprise in politics by showing us "how (and how not) to hope", while acknowledging its inevitability (Dunn, 2000: xiii).

This is supported by the fact that the theory of collective prudence offered by Dunn advocates a very thin conception of the human social good. The social good it advocates is acting collectively, especially in the face of urgent dangers and issues

facing humanity, and taking collective responsibility for our actions, without trying to determine one, single locus of knowledge and authority that can judge and act on our behalf and that we can subsequently use as a scapegoat for the regrettable outcomes. The source of value, in this framework, is the community itself and the value of prudence lies in registering this notion.

Given the fact that a theory of prudence or a theory of collective prudence is taken by Dunn as the exemplary type of political theory, it should be inquired what real or possible implications it may have for the particular conceptualization of relationship between theory and practice. What may be the value of theory of prudence devoid of content in terms of the relationship between theory and practice, or, in terms guiding the human actions? I want to suggest that a theory of prudence is too weak to offer any directive guidance with regards to what people should do in the real historical circumstances in which they find themselves, at least, in the form of provision of a recipe for acting. It aims to provide a certain vision of people's real historical circumstances with almost just a hope that this would lead them to act on the implications of that vision. It is open to question how directive is provision of a certain vision of the world. In addition, how can we ever epistemically justify that a particular vision that a particular political theory provides of our actual, historical condition is epistemically and pragmatically valid and not distortive or manipulative, unless and until we act on it?

I would like to suggest that there is one sense in which prudence can be considered as, at least implicitly, directive. Prudence by locating the locus or the source of value

as people, whose sentiments and beliefs are shaped by the experiences of their society, by how they see their world, can provide an implicit guidance. The specific constructions of the theorist implicitly point towards some direction, since they reflect what he deems to be important in politics. Thus, although by means of employing prudence he refrains from pointing out a single value or a list of values or several purposes to be pursued, in his identification of the opportunities and dangers faced by us, he implicitly directs people to certain values. This is the meaning I would like to attribute to Dunn's scepticism. Pragmatically adequate political theory for a particular group, in this regard, may identify the causal ecology within which the group is located and sustained with sufficient precision to enable its members to judge individually and collectively, sound strategies for implementing their values. But it should be noted that since it is very restricted how much we can know about the future, sound political judgement never equals predictive success. What men in practice have good reason to do depend on their political judgement, that is, on their assessment of future possibilities and probabilities (Dunn, 1980: 286). There are no *solutions* in politics and the problems of politics cannot be solved by concentrating power in "just the right hands or at the services of just the right values", but only by undertaking collective decisions based on prudent judgements (Dunn, 1990b: 214).

### 4.4. Conclusion

Dunn criticizes much of political theory for failing to take adequate measure of politics and provide guidance to human actions in a world in which such need is greatly exacerbated. Inadequacy of contemporary political theories primarily results from their lack of grasp of nature of politics, which is both agency focused but highly

structured at the same time. Most political theories today conceive the field of politics to be constituted by either of the two and consequently develop defective accounts of politics placing either moral, political values or causality at the centre of their strategy for making the world a better place. He, instead, tries to combine the two by reflecting both on what the world is at is and what does it make sense for us to value given the world as it is. He does not stop there either since, most of the time, analysis of the two reveals a discrepancy between what humans value and desire, and what the world is like. Bringing the two in harmony requires either changing the world, or changing our desires and values (and perhaps sometimes both). The practical task of political theory, according to Dunn, is precisely to show us what is to be done so there is congruity between our political values and political causality. It is the link between political theory and political practice. I want to suggest that Dunn's own theoretical endeavours, while very successfully executing the first two tasks of political theory, remain weak at providing practical political guidance.

While he is very good at diagnosing the social and political ills of our era, his prescriptive recommendations hardly go beyond a warning: "Don't be silly!" (personal communication, 19 November, 2016)[29] Even his use of the virtue of prudence seems, at times, to be only rhetorical and without much power to guide. His reluctance to elaborate on it any further and to give it any substantive content supports this conclusion. I suggest that the main reason for his reluctance to elaborate it or engage in any other potentially directive task, such as working out a

[29] On the 19th of November, 2016 in Budapest, at a conference on realism, in which I participated, Dunn suggested this phrase summarizes realism in political theory.

detailed theory of practical reason or of political judgement, is caused by his scepticism regarding the possibility of our ability to know, including that of his own. In more general terms, we can say that he thinks praxis is necessary; but is very doubtful as to the possibility of finding praxis or knowing what exactly it is and what it entails. He sees modern politics as a situation in which easy theoretical solutions are unlikely to prove satisfactory. Praxis, that is, a relation between theory and practice is necessary. We must think this way. But it is very difficult to see how it would be constituted: perhaps only the problem can be identified.

The question, then, for us, is this: Is 'Don't be silly!' directive at all or directive enough? Answering in Dunn's spirit: in a world in which there is, in fact, plenty of politically consequential silliness, some of which emanate from improper philosophical, theoretical advice, 'don't be silly!' might be the best advice one may receive.

# CHAPTER 5

# CRITICAL ACTIVIST REALISM OF RAYMOND GEUSS

*"Realism neither condemns one to silence when the practical question 'What is to be done?' is asked nor does it force one to endorse the status quo or prevent one from speaking the truth to local power."*

*Raymond Geuss, Realism and the Relativity of Judgement, p. 19, 2015.*

## 5.1. Introduction

Raymond Geuss is considered as one of the most eminent of the self-proclaimed contemporary realists, only second to Bernard Williams.[30] He lays out his case for political realism by taking as its primary target an orientation to political philosophy, which Geuss takes John Rawls, among contemporaries, to epitomize: moralistic political philosophy or political philosophy as applied ethics.[31] The thought

[30] Who is the first contemporary self-proclaimed realist among these two is hard to ascertain. Neither of them can be said to have coined the terms realism and moralism (not even in the sense that they employ them), since both concepts have a long history and since, in addition, both thinkers seem to owe their familiarity with the terms in the sense they employ them to Nietzsche. The terms make their appearance increasingly frequently in their writings in the 2000s. Yet, it might still be speculated that Geuss owes his thinking about this topic in a serious way to Williams. He acknowledges Williams's importance for thinking about this topic in *Outside Ethics*, Chapter 13. (Geuss, 2005: 219-233). It is, nevertheless, the two that popularized the terms.

[31] There is also an engagement with Robert Nozick and the contemporary rights discourse as examples of moralism in politics. See Geuss, 2001: 138-146 and Geuss, 2008: 60-70.

expressed in these phrases is that dominant political philosophy of our time, following a tradition of political philosophy that goes as far back as to Plato and reaches its peak in Kant, conceives the activity of understanding and guiding politics as that of applying a set of abstract, universal moral rules to contingent political matters. Against this moralistic understanding of political philosophy, Geuss advocates a return to realism.[32] Geuss's turn to reality is primarily a response to the problem of anti-foundationalism, to the fact that we can no longer afford to escape from the contingencies of politics via the permanence and stability of morality. Unlike some other forms of realisms I have considered in Chapter 3, the realist preoccupation for Geuss is not simply how ideal or normative political theory could be brought more in tune with the realities of the world, so it can be (more) action-guiding, but how it is correct (i.e. non-delusional) for us to make sense of our political and moral conditions in the modern world in which the traditional certainties of morality and religion are no longer available to us, so that our actions produce better than worse results. The hope (as well as the assumption) is that examined (political) practice itself, including the practice of political theorizing, rather than transcendentally conceived field of philosophy or ethics offer us enough resources to make sense of our (political) lives.

Geuss presented his most systematic treatment of the subject in his compact and, perhaps purposefully, highly polemical *Philosophy and Real Politics*. The book,

[32] Although the contemporary call for realism in political theory is a fairly recent phenomenon and there are only few attempts to situate it within the tradition of classical realism, I use "return" to realism to suggest that the movement shares some assumptions with the realisms of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber. For a similar interpretation of contemporary realism as a return to some of the old themes of classical realism see Bell, 2008.

which caught immediate attention of friends and critics of realism alike, undoubtedly, gave realist revival a new momentum, one critical in nature and led to growing appreciation and consideration of Geuss's contribution to contemporary literature on realism (Floyd, 2009; Floyd and Stears, 2011; Freeden, 2012; Galston, 2010; MacIntyre, 2006; Menke, 2010; Morgan, 2005; Rossi, 2010; Runciman, 2012; Scheuerman, 2013; Sigwart, 2013; Sleat, 2011). There are, however, still only few studies that explore his writings on the subject in a comprehensive manner (Frazer, 2010; Freeman, 2009; Honig and Stears in Floyd and Stears, 2011; Menke, 2010; Morgan, 2005, Prinz, 2015, 2016; Rossi, 2010). Of the few studies that are directly engaged with Geussian understanding of realism, moreover, most present at best an incomplete and at worst an inaccurate account of his realism. The often repeated criticism that Geussian realism is of pessimist and paralyzing sort that remains silent in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?' (i.e. that Geussian realism is not activist and hence, not action-guiding) is a reflection of such tendency (Honig and Stears in Floyd and Stears, 2011; Freeden, 2012; Finlayson 2015a, 2015b).

In this chapter, I offer a systematic treatment of Geussian realism in two main parts: I first explore his understanding of realism negatively, through his criticisms of a particular orientation to political philosophy and political understanding, whose origins he traces as far back, following Nietzsche, as to Plato's Socrates and Plato and considers contemporarily epitomized in the mainstream liberal political philosophy as expounded by the likes of Nozick and Rawls. The central criticism he advances is that this type of political theory endorses a moralistic, applied ethics, or ethics-first conception of political philosophy and relies on a philosophical

understanding of politics.[33] Against this, he advocates, realistic political philosophy that is informed by a historical understanding of politics and capable of guiding political action. Geuss's positive pronouncements regarding realism in political theory is the subject of the second part of this chapter. By the end of the chapter, I aim to show that the oft-repeated criticism that Geussian realism has no critical purchase on practical political reality and that his criticism is of pessimist and paralyzing sort that remains silent in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?' is a reflection of mistaken reading of Geussian realism and does not withstand scrutiny. To the contrary, Geuss's realism, I contend, is of critical activist type and his real politics is a good candidate for a political theory of political judgment for the modern world.

### 5.2. Moralism in Political Philosophy[34]

Geuss's (2008) real politics is usually seen minimally as the opposite of the slogan "Politics is applied ethics" (p. 1). This identification, though simple and hence maybe not very instructive, allows us to make one very important and often overlooked observation: that Geuss works out his conceptualization of realism in political philosophy in relation to (his criticisms of) a particular understanding of ethics (Hall, 2014; Hall and Sleat, forthcoming; Nye, 2015; Owen, 2011; Sagar. 2016). Realism, thus understood, is critical of both a particular way of doing political philosophy and

[33] Nietzsche and Williams prefer to call it morality, while Geuss refers to it as philosophical ethics (Geuss, 2005: 6, 64).

[34] I adopt the term 'moralism', despite Geuss's preference for 'ethics-first' to describe the same phenomenon, partly because that is, now, the acceptable term within the literature, but also because Geuss came to adopt it himself in one of his latest writings. See Geuss, 2015.

a particular understanding of ethics that underlies it. Undermining the pull of the kind of political philosophy that is informed by ethics of the type that Geuss is critical of, for that matter, requires, first and foremost, undermining the appeal of the institution of morality on which it is based (Owen, 2011). Geuss attempts to do both in his criticisms of dominant forms of political thinking today. To properly comprehend his criticisms, it is, I suggest, extremely important to develop a nuanced account of Geuss's understanding of ethics.

Within Geuss's works as a whole, I argue, one finds three different, albeit associated, usages of ethics, which, unfortunately Geuss does not refer to using systematically consistent names. Chronologically speaking, he first distinguishes between "ethics in the narrow sense" and "ethics in the wider sense" (Geuss, 2005: 6). He, at times, prefers to identify "ethics in the narrow sense" with "morality" and "ethics in the wider sense" with "modern theodicy" (Geuss, 2005: 6). "Morality" is also referred to as "traditional ethics" (Geuss, 2014: 178). Most recently he distinguishes between "value judgements", "moral judgements" and "moralism" (Geuss, 2015: 4-5). The meaning he attributes to these late distinctions suggests an overlap between "moral judgements", "ethics in the narrow sense", "morality" and "traditional ethics", while "moralism" corresponds to "ethics in the wider sense" and "modern theodicy". In this dissertation, I will refer to the three usages of ethics in Geuss's works as ethics *simpliciter*, morality, and modern theodicy. I argue that Geuss's political realism is defined by its inevitable acceptance of ethics *simpliciter* on the one hand, and critically informed and uncompromising attitude towards morality and modern theodicy on the other. An analysis of these three senses of ethics in Geuss's political and philosophical writings not only reveals the role of ethics, understood as beliefs,

ideals and aspirations in his real politics; it also provides an overall structure of what is real.

Ethics *simpliciter*, which forms an important element of Geuss's realism, rests on a modest interpretation of the slogan "Politics is applied ethics" (Geuss, 2008: 1). The basic intuition behind such interpretation is that politics has an irreducible ethical dimension to the extent that it reflects the irreducible ethical dimension of human action. Human actions are not mechanical, but purposeful; they are based on various judgements some of which are judgements of value. These broadly include "various value-judgements about the good, the permissible, the attractive, the preferable, that which is to be avoided at all costs" (Geuss, 2008: 2).

Morality (i.e. Moralism) refers to an "ethics-first reading" of the slogan "politics is applied ethics" and rests on the alleged primacy of moral concerns in describing and vindicating human action (Geuss, 2008: 1, 2015: 3).[35] Thus, it is a compound that includes both a particular conception of morality and set of suppositions about its cogency to illuminate and potency to motivate (Geuss, 2015: 6). This type of morality universalizes overall assessments done in a variety of different ways and for a variety of different purposes into abstract moral principles. We always make value judgements, but our assessments are always relative to the context and purpose at

[35] My use of the concept of morality to designate this sense of ethics is motivated by Bernard Williams's discussion of the distinction between ethics and morality, where the latter designate "a particular development of the ethical, one that has special significance in Western culture" (Williams, 1985: 6). This identification is also encouraged by Geuss's reference to 'moralism' in politics as one of the consequences of this approach. See especially Williams, 1985 and Geuss, 2010.

hand. Yet, moralizing attitude or approach tends to abstract from the context and present these judgements in the form of universal moral precepts that provide guidance to human actions. These are essentially historical value judgements (or intuitions) expressed in a normative language. The alleged switch from historically contingent value judgements to timeless norms takes place through a two-step process of abstraction. For the principles to possess universal value and application, they are abstracted from the historically contingent contexts within which they arise, so they are shaped, reshaped, deployed and formulated as timeless norms. In a second step, the historical individuals are replaced by a universal individual possessing qualities that are considered to characterize all human beings. The principles reached on the basis of these double abstractions are formulated into an ideal theory of ethics, which is then used both as a guide and a standard to evaluate the actions of real, historical individuals in real, historical life circumstances. The language of evaluation is essentially moral, characterizing observance of 'ought' with the "absolute good" and non-observance with "absolute evil" (Geuss, 2015: 8). The recognition of the absolute good and absolute evil is thought to be context-independent and easy to attain. Furthermore, once acquired, such knowledge is assumed to generate sufficient motivation for people to act on it to realize the good and avoid the evil, since the "good is naturally attractive and (potentially) self-realising" (Geuss, 2015: 9). Moralism, in this sense, is a shortcut to understanding the world and acting within it, since it takes away the burden of judging.

Whilst illuminating primary considerations that guide Geuss's understanding of the real and the possible role of ideals and aspirations within it, a focus on morality on its own is not enough to develop a full understanding of Geuss's realist project. The

larger framework to which morality is a major contributor is modern secular theodicy.[36] Its function is to reconcile us humans to the world in which we happen to find ourselves. Humans have a deep seated desire, also called a metaphysical need, to feel and think that their existence and experience in this world is not just random mistake or accidental (mis)fortune, but makes moral or human sense (Geuss, 2005: 144-145). This deep seated desire clashes rather badly with our historical experience of the world as highly unstable and insecure and our lives in it uncertain. It is painful for us to confront this fact and continue to live knowing that there is no meaning to our life. We compensate by superimposing meaning, by looking for a meaning beyond our chaotic individual and parochial experiences. The meaning is, usually, to be found in some idea of a totality of the world order, of the type, for instance, provided by a religious worldview (Weber, 1991: 281, 353). Seen in this context and alongside the gradual disenchantment of the world due to decline of belief in the religious worldview, modern secular theodicy is an attempt to fill in the vacuum of meaning in modernity (Berger, 1990). Modern (i.e. secular) theodicy, in the absence of religious certainties, attempts to provide orientation to human life as a whole in the face of the fact that humans can only rely on their *own* cognitive and moral powers to make a meaningful sense of the world as a whole. A secular theodicy, put differently, attempts to show that humanity can save itself. Its basic function, just like any other theodicy, is to inscribe meaning into the world and provide cognitive

[36] Theodicy comes from *theos* and *dike*, two Greek terms meaning God and justice. It was originally coined by Leibniz, a 17th and 18th century German philosopher, who wanted to defend the existence of God and his attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, despite the apparent imperfections of the world. His *Theodicy* (1710) is a response to the problem of evil and attempts to show that it is reasonable to believe in God despite the existence of evil in the world. It attempts to justify the justice or the goodness of God in the face of evil in the world. For a more general discussion of theodicy in relation to art see Geuss, 1999: 78-115. For a discussion of theodicy in relation to philosophy and philosophers see Finlayson, 2015b: 148-149.

and normative orientation to humans by presenting us with a single, universal scheme that would make all things related to our practical existence make sense.[37]

Modern philosophical ethics (i.e. modern secular theodicy), is guided by the following questions: "What is the central question for thinking about the human life in its practical aspect?" and "What is the most proper realm and method from which to ask and answer this question?" (Geuss, 2005: 6, 42) It replaces theology with philosophy as the domain and revelation with the philosophical method as the most appropriate method for asking and finding out an answer to the question of "What ought I to do?" (Geuss, 2005: 45). Modern philosophical ethics, thus, rests on unsustainable secularization of theodicy.

Philosophy (especially moral philosophy), based on a particular understanding of ethics, Geuss (2014) suggests, provides a theodicy by preaching a gospel: that the world is a moral cosmos (p. 206). There are three components to it (Geuss, 2015: 204-205). The first idea is that we can at least minimally become self-transparent to ourselves. In other words, we can come to know what our moral beliefs are: what we value, desire and aspire to. The second is that these beliefs will turn out to be or can be made coherent with one another. They do not contradict. Finally, the world we encounter makes sense to us and is intelligible as one in which it is possible to live in

[37] For accounts that define theodicy on the basis of re-inscription of meaning into the world and human life as a whole see Berger, 1990 and Geertz, 1973. For Berger theodicy originates from an innate need for meaning. It aims to restore meaning when the religious foundations are shaken. Berger also notes the social impact of theodicy by pointing out that they serve to explain and justify inequalities.

a way conformable to at least our minimal ethical expectations, aspirations and demands. The world and morality are compatible. This is the image of a world as a moral cosmos. If the world is a moral cosmos, at some level there must be a connection between the way the world fundamentally is and our own deepest human interests, particularly our ethical interests. The structure as a whole suggests that when we have the knowledge of the world as it is and the knowledge of our desires, interests and preferences as they are, both of which are considered to be available to us, not only will the world make moral sense to us, but that moral sense will provide an overall orientation and give guidance to our lives by showing us that the world is conducive to our desires and interests, enabling their satisfaction. Hence, the function of modern theodicy is to facilitate the view that the world is fully intelligible to us and receptive to our interests and ethical purposes. More broadly speaking, it sustains the idea that it is in our powers to create a natural and social world in which we can live free of politics, or at least of fundamental aspects of human life that make politics an inevitable human practice, such as scarcity and conflict.

Modern theodicy, thus understood, circumscribes the limits of our contemporary political imagination. It limits our ability to think of the ways in which our actions and the circumstances in which they take place could be different than they are now and, hence, "reinforce the hold of the past over the present" (Geuss, 2010: ix, 2014: 130). What is truly disturbing about modern theodicy, for Geuss, however, is not simply the dominance it exerts on the way people perceive the reality of the world and the ways in which they can think of improving it. More important, for him, is that it is not based on a true picture of the world, because it is essentially oriented towards the satisfaction of metaphysical need, that is, towards satisfying people's

need to see the world and their life in this world as a whole, as meaningful enterprises. It endeavours to achieve this essentially by attempting to find "a completely secular, immanent grounding" for much of human life that can only be achieved from a purely normative standpoint, which is simply not available to human beings (Geuss, 2005: 64). A hypothetical "standpoint in which we consider only the normatively relevant features of a possible world, abstracting strictly from the real world and the empirical accidents of concrete situations" can provide guidance to human action only by exalting "accidental existing habits of thought", historical prejudices and illusions to a status of universal principles of guidance (Geuss, 2005: 21, 2010: 84).

Hence, the good news philosophy preaches is a message of deceptive hope. The consolation and retrieval from paralysis that it provides to human beings is achieved at the expense of realistic assessment of the capacity of human cognitive and moral powers to counter the paralyzing impact of the world of fact. Modern theodicy, in this respect, is a form of wishful thinking, a fantasy, but its impact on people's imagination is real and it has eminently real consequences.

The idea of modern autonomous philosophical ethics on which modern secular theodicy is based finds its full expression in the philosophy of Kant and various contemporary forms of Kantianism, including political philosophy of Rawls, according to Geuss.[38] This is why he suggests that a strong Kantian trend, expressed

[38] "Rawls's impact on political philosophy, thus, has not only been limited to its alleged revitalization, but also to its remoralization" (Geuss, 2005: 16).

in the slogan "Politics is applied ethics", is dominating much of the contemporary political theory (Geuss, 2005: 3, 2008: 1). This "ethics-first" view of politics demonstrates the dominance of ethics over other realms of human practical life, especially over politics and designates ethics both as the starting point and the final framework in the study of politics (Geuss, 2008: 1, 6). Yet, both its claim to autonomy and jurisdiction over other realms of human action is based on a set of assumptions that are rather hard to substantiate.

First of all, modern philosophical ethics assumes that the central question while thinking about human life practically is 'What ought I to do?' It is not at all clear that this is or should be the central question. In fact, as Geuss remarks, certain 19th and 20th century philosophers including "Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno and Heidegger" alert us that this question might not be that central at all, when one is thinking about human life practically (Geuss, 2005: 46).[39] Secondly, an ethics-first view assumes that there is a separate, autonomous and an all-encompassing discipline of Ethics with a distinctive subject matter and its designated methods of approaching that subject matter (Geuss, 2005: 45, 2008: 6). The autonomy and self-sufficiency of the discipline in providing answers on how people should act towards one another or 'What I ought to do?' is achieved, according to Geuss (2008), at the cost of ignoring the importance of other disciplines like history, sociology,

[39] These philosophers differ in their endorsement of a weaker or a stringer argument against the centrality of the ethical question presupposed by modern philosophical ethics. The weaker view holds that the question is philosophically not significant enough and should have a subordinate role, while the stronger view suggests that it is an entire mistake and failure to ask the question in the first place (Geuss, 2005: 59). Nietzsche, for instance, rejects the relevance of the question on the grounds that asking it presupposes agents with free wills, who are presented with alternatives to choose from (Geuss, 2005: 54-55).

psychology and economics, which are also concerned with practical aspects of human life (p. 7). With regards to the appropriate method for formulating prescriptions on how people should act towards one another, on the other hand, although philosophers disagree on the source and content of ethical statements (reason being one of the most favoured candidates), there is a general agreement that certain philosophical methods and principles, such as reflection on speech and action, clarity, coherence, and consistency of thought and so on, are easily accessible to all human beings and, for that reason, have or would have universal application (Geuss, 2005: 44, 2010: 31). Philosophy's capacity to guide human actions, thus, is dependent on people following the threefold maxims of traditional philosophy: reflect on what they are saying and doing, do not contradict themselves (i.e. refine their thoughts and actions until they are not contradictory) and act on the results of those reflections (Geuss, 2010: 31). These assumptions that most philosophers endorse due to their special vocation and training, Geuss (2010) suggests, places them in a very disadvantageous position to understand politics, unlike their perception of themselves and their vocation (p. 31).

The quasi-Cartesian attitude to human life that this scheme presents is not tenable (Geuss, 2008: 3). First of all, it is simply wrong to assume that the self is transparent to itself and consciously knows what its beliefs, desires and attitudes or that it is able to provide an explicit account of them. Thus, although it is not wrong to argue that the actions of individuals are motivated by their beliefs, desires, attitudes or values, Geuss (2008) claims:

> People often have no determinate beliefs at all about a variety of subjects; they often don't know what they want or why they did something; even when

> they know or claim to know what they want, they can often give no coherent account of why exactly they want what they claim to want; they often have no idea which portions of their systems of beliefs and desires – to the extent to which they have determinate beliefs and desires – are 'ethical principles' and which are (mere empirical) 'interests' (p. 3).

Sometimes, however, he argues, philosophers admit that these are not determinate beliefs, but "moral intuitions", that are, "strong, relatively unreflective, individual moral reactions that individuals have to specific situations" (Geuss, 2010: 32). Yet, they claim that further reflection informed by principles consistency and non-contradiction within thought, speech and action and between thought, speech and action is designed exactly to render them as determinate and refined as possible (Geuss, 2010: 33-35). For Geuss, however, consistency and contradiction are simply not central features of human actions at all. In fact, the principles do not even apply to actions, but only interpretation of actions. If, however, consistency can only be applied to interpretations of actions, no one interpretation can claim any absolute standing. In a case in which one entertains such a claim to absolute standing, it can amount to no more than generalization of a local property of highly formalised contexts (Geuss, 2008: 3-4). Thus, instead of concentrating on the consistency of actions, one should try to explain particular interpretations and descriptions of actions in terms of a political struggle, that is, by an analysis of "how the particular description of some relevant action is produced, who produces it for what purpose and what its exact content is" (Geuss, 2010: 37).

The argument that people should act on their refined reflections, on the other hand, assumes people to have a free will and be capable of free and autonomous choices. Drawing upon Nietzsche, Geuss (2005, 2010) argues the whole dichotomy of free

and unfree will is incorrect, because people simply have wills of differing strengths (p. 54, p. 174). Although it is possible to talk about strong willed people and weak willed people, this does not mean that people can freely choose to be who they are, because their subjectivity, and the components of that subjectivity including the beliefs, desires, attitudes and preferences they hold are shaped by the social circumstances of their historical epoch. Therefore, "there is every reason to believe that I (and we) share the illusions of our epoch" and this casts doubt on how free our will can ever be (Geuss, 2010: x).

The type of traditional theory based on these untenable assumptions, which favour "purity, autonomy, formalism and abstractness" is a hindrance to developing a practical philosophy and to generating principles that might have a real bearing on our actions (Geuss, 2005: 33). Its major flaw is its subscription to a strict separation between fact and value and concomitant distinction between descriptive and normative statements (Geuss, 1999: 72). It believes in the possibility of attaining a pure normative standpoint, which simply is not possible. Thus,

> if the morality in question systematically presupposes a set of purported basic facts about the world, and its prescriptions rely on these presuppositions, then showing that the purported facts are no such thing would presumably count as criticism of the morality (Geuss, 1999: 74).

Then, criticism of morality or any moralistic political theory should take the form of criticism of the underlying assumptions of the theory regarding the alleged facts of the world. This is the negative, critical role of a realist political philosophy. More positively, realist political philosophy involves giving up the search for a normative standpoint from which to guide human actions and centre on establishing a

historically informed, reflective, action-oriented political understanding and judgement (Geuss, 2005: 28).

## 5.3. Realism in Political Philosophy

Geuss wishes to occupy a theoretical position 'outside ethics' without either falling into relativism or objectivism, from which political philosophy can fulfil its task of providing practical orientation to human actions within politics.[40] This orientation Geuss (2010) characterizes as a realist approach to political philosophy.

### 5.3.1. Negative Understanding of Realism

In the first part of this chapter, I mentioned that Geuss works out his conceptualization of realist political philosophy in relation to his criticisms and rejection of a particular understanding of ethics that informs much of traditional political philosophy, while not denying the role of ethical considerations for human political action. In particular, I distinguished between three senses of ethics found in his works and suggested that his realism accepts the centrality of ethics simpliciter for understanding and guiding politics, while it is critical of morality and modern theodicy. Now let us turn to consider Geuss's realist political philosophy and the

[40] I would like to introduce a preliminary caution here in relation to relativism. While Geuss is a relativist in some sense, which I will elaborate on further into the discussion of his realist position, he is not in some other. Embracing certain type of relativism would mean acknowledging the significance of fact and value distinction that belies the distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason. Only if you hold the distinction between two types of reasoning you can comfortably differentiate between foundationalism (objectivity) and relativism (incapable of objectivity).

principles that inform it in relation to these three senses of ethics I have previously delineated.

Geuss's realism is informed by the centrality of ethics simpliciter, which refers to value judgements, to human actions. As a key constitutive part of human action, value judgements are an important part of any realist attempt to understand politics. Such analysis, however, cannot be reduced to identifying the existing value judgements in the society and ranking them in importance according to some external or internal logic of value ranking. Nor is it reducible to abstract specification of certain values as desirable irrespective of the requirements of the context. Rather, it entails critical and contextual examination of existing beliefs, values, preferences and desires that influence action, in order to facilitate realistic value judgement formation. Realistic value judgement formation, in other words, requires realistic assessment of the context, its requirements, the permissibility of the values, desires and beliefs held in relation to that context, and continuous reflection on all these properties in constant flux. Besides specifying what is to be taken into consideration in value judgement formation, realism, at a deeper and more important level, seeks to evaluate the process of belief and judgement formation itself from a cognitive-practical point of view and to dispense with cognitively distorted forms of belief formation, that is, forms of wishful thinking. Wishful thinking, Geuss argues, refers to an erroneous process of belief formation generally through misinterpretation of the available evidence. Such misinterpretation is not a simple, random mistake but a systematic (if not purposeful) one, motivated by individuals' and collectivities' psychological propensity and desire to see themselves in a positive light. Realism in a narrow sense is concerned with the psychological and affective dimension of

politics, that is, with human agency in its psychological, motivational aspects. In particular, it is concerned with negative criticism of forms of wishful thinking and positive specification of minimal conditions of realistic belief and judgement formation. Morality (i.e. moralism) and modern theodicy, Geuss suggests, constitute two of the most influential and enduring forms of wishful thinking. They are, thus, major targets of his critical realism.

Geuss's realist view is a response to moralistic political philosophy and is informed by principles that are the opposite of those underlying the moralistic approach. It insists firstly that any serious understanding of politics must start from analysis of "action and contexts of action" and not from beliefs, values, desires and aspirations of agents (Geuss, 2008: 11). (Political) action is understood in a very broad sense as any action that has "implications for further instances and forms of collective human action" including propounding theories, or entertaining some kinds of judgements. Secondly, realism is not informed by what people ideally 'ought' to value and do, but by what actually motivates them to act. Thirdly, realism considers individuals in all their historicity and in their capacity as agents. Their agency is considered in both its affective and cognitive dimensions, both of which vary historically. Fourthly, realism objects to empirically abstemious derivation of principles of conduct within the political sphere and calls for historically and empirically informed analysis of the contexts within which all human interaction takes place. And finally, it conceptualizes politics as the exercise of a craft, a skill that necessitates continuous reflection and judgement on an array of variables that influence human actions and contexts of actions. This practical skill of political judgement cannot be captured in theoretical principles and does not entail mastery of particular theories.

Complete appreciation of Geuss's realist politics requires one to consider it as an attempt of stepping outside the triadic structure of modern theodicy that defines the contours of contemporary political imagination though. Since modern theodicy constitutes the dominant framework of our thinking and is a form of collective wishful thinking for the Western world, it would be imprudent to think that any theoretical construct can simply transcend its gripping impact. We all share the illusions of our era. Yet, the possibility of radical social criticism is predicated upon achieving some sort of cognitive and moral distance from these illusions. Realism in politics starts by registering the fact that there is no pre-existing meaning in the world, but only what we humans can construct with our own cognitive and moral powers. However, unlike modern secular theodicy, instead of exalting these powers, it urges their realistic assessment. This entails recognizing that most of the time our powers are weak, our efforts are flawed and the consequences of our actions disastrous for the world and for our collective life. If this rather bleak picture of reality that Geuss's real politics draws our attention to is correct, it would seem natural to conclude that real politics either maintains that realist political theory abandons the task of providing orientation to human action and ignores the question of 'What is to be done?' altogether or draws us into paralysis by suggesting that no matter how much we would like it to be otherwise, there is simply nothing to be done. The sole choice possible, that is, appears to be between neutral realism and paralysing realism. However, formulating the choice in this manner means operating within the structure of the modern theodicy, which need not be the only way to satisfy the need for orientation of human action. Geuss's realist politics does not give up the task to guide human actions, but it dispenses with the dominant, traditional

ways of doing so. Realism in politics as a theoretical position, in this respect, is an attempt to demonstrate that there are other types of knowledge, forms of cognition and kinds of ethics outside the modern theodicy, which are better equipped to guide human actions in the modern world.

Realism in a broader sense, thus, cannot be confined to analysis of psychological-motivational categories. It also involves analysis of empirical aspects of politics like interests and structures that juxtapose the two as self-evident unities as in modern secular theodicy. Realism, within this broader framework, aims to dispense with three major elements that distort human thought about the world and about ourselves. In its aspirational aspect, the distorting force is wishful thinking; in assessing the empirical features of the political, ideology. The third form of distortion, self-evident unities, operates in both these forms, juxtaposing aspirational aspects with empirical features and presenting these historically contingent juxtapositions as natural and universal. While realism in a narrow sense, as a methodological tool, is the intended antithesis of wishful thinking and stands to wishful thinking, as *Ideologiekritik* and genealogy do to ideology and self-evident unities, respectively; in a broader, theoretical sense, it encompasses analysis of all three forms of distortion, the respective critical methods to dispense with them and alternative conceptions of truth and cognition they clear the ground for.

### 5.3.2. Towards a Positive Understanding of Realism: Realism, I*deologiekritik*, and Genealogy

One of the most important insights of Geussian realism is that setting our actions right, requires, first and foremost acquiring a true picture of the world. Realism's final ambition is to help us people attain a true of picture of our desires, interests and ourselves in our capacity as political agents (including political philosophers), first by clearing away many of the accumulated and dominant illusions of our era. Thus, the primary and perhaps the most important role of realist political philosophy is negative and critical, yet, needless to say, informed by positive conceptions of what politics is, how it is best understood and studied and how realistic political philosophy might be of any help to anyone who is looking for a genuine understanding of it and orientation with(in) it. In this section I consider realism in its critical capacity and concentrate on realism, *Ideologiekritik*, and genealogy as three significant critical methods for any critical, activist political theory. My discussions of *Ideologiekritik* and genealogy are not meant to be exhaustive accounts of these two critical methods on both of which there is an immense literature. They are explicated very briefly here, only to the extent they are relevant to understand Geussian, critical, activist realism.

Geussian realism is the opposite of wishful thinking, understood broadly as cognitively deficient process of belief formation, as a result of which we might be grossly mistaken in the way we think about the world and act

(http://ias.umn.edu/2010/05/06/geuss-raymond-2/).[41] The cognitive deficiency is often a result of misguided interpretation of existing evidence or lack of sufficient evidence to base the belief in question, especially when our ideals, preferences, values, goals or impulses excessively or unduly affect the processes through which we come to a belief about the world and our place in it. In this respect, what makes a belief a form of wishful thinking is not the truth or falsity of its content, but the process through which it is formed. Thus, the positive outcome of an erroneously held belief does not justify the fact that the belief itself was an instance of wishful thinking. The motivation for wishful thinking, Geuss suggests, originates in a deep rooted human desire to see ourselves in a positive light and affirm ourselves in narrative stories we tell about ourselves. This means that often forms of wishful thinking are result of systematic distortion or misinterpretation of the available evidence and are not simply random mistakes. Such stories can take both individual and collective form and it is the latter, that is harder to deal with, according to Geuss, since groups and societies have at their disposal social-psychological mechanisms that enforce conformity by the use of which they impose forms of wishful thinking upon collectivities. The major problem with wishful thinking in this case, and in the case of individuals, to a lesser extent, is the fact that it interferes with individuals and collectivities thinking about themselves in a clear way. Put in simple terms, wishful thinking clouds the judgements of individuals and groups, which, in turn, affects their actions. Thus, it needs to be dispensed with and realism registers exactly this.

[41] Realism, Wishful Thinking and Utopia: A Talk by Raymond Geuss, May 6, 2010. Retrieved from http://ias.umn.edu/2010/05/06/geuss-raymond-2/

There might be two objections to the argument that wishful thinking needs to be dispensed with. First, the claim that forms of wishful thinking is a deep seated human desire might suggest that there is no pure thinking that is not non-wishful and that all thinking involves a projective component as a result of which complete realism is incoherent. Although, it might be the case that pure non-wishful thinking cannot be achieved, simple non-existence of a pure state of a thing is not an argument against the attempt of trying to attain it. Hence, from this fact alone it does not follow that we should not try to control its hold on the political imagination. Second, although some forms of wishful thinking might be detrimental to realization of our true desires and beliefs, one might suggest that some forms of wishful thinking may be valuable and, indeed, even desirable. In some cases, they can motivate agents to perform valuable actions they otherwise would not. They may have positive value for the human psyche. It may appear that Geuss's realism is vulnerable to this type of criticism, since it provides no general criteria to distinguish contexts in which it would be safe to engage in wishful thinking. Yet, there simply knowably are no such criteria. Even in the case of illusions created to promulgate one's life, for instance, the desirability of wishful thinking is dependent on the idea that survival is valuable.

Besides wishful thinking, Geuss identifies two more elements that are instrumental in clouding the judgements of the individuals and collectivities: ideology and socially self-evident identities. In terms of ideology, Geuss is particularly interested in ideological articulation of certain conceptions, which come to be accepted by people despite the fact that belief in those conceptions is not in itself connected with their benefits and interests. It is in respect of this point that the author claims that there is a structural or analytical distinction between wishful thinking and ideology. While

wishful thinking is closely connected to a person's benefit or to the benefit of somebody with whom a particular person identifies, an ideology functions essentially in support of someone else's interest. To put it in a different way, wishful thinking is related to desire, which is a psychological and motivational property, whereas ideology is related to interests, that is, to an abstract specification of what is good.

The target of *Ideologiekritik* is what is usually referred to as ideology in the pejorative sense, that is, ideological delusions or ideological false consciousness that is product of particular constellation of beliefs, attitudes and dispositions (Geuss, 1981: 12). In particular, ideological false consciousness leads human agents into delusions about their society and their true interests. The aim of ideological critique is to demonstrate that the agents are so deluded by pointing out the ideological elements of their particular form of consciousness, usually very closely tied to the empirical features of human life, especially particular political, social and economic arrangements (1981: 13, 22). Hence, it is directed at criticizing particular forms of consciousness informing agents' (political) judgements and showing them the source of their self-inflicted social repressions (Geuss, 1981: 3). This, however, does not mean that emancipation and total freedom would automatically follow. Whether it follows or not is, in the end, dependent on political action, although critical, reflexive epistemology claims to generate enlightenment by enabling human agents to determine their true interests and by its inherently emancipatory character, since it seeks to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them, through the method of *Ideologiekritik*. (Geuss, 1981: 2). Theoretical approaches that are informed by critical, reflexive and self-referential epistemology are, thus, in general, practically oriented and are taken to occupy a privileged position as guides for

human action. In fact, their very validity depends on their reflective acceptability (Geuss, 1981: 55-56).

Genealogy is the name given to a distinctive form of approach to history in particular and social sciences in general. It specifically targets socially self-evident unities, a term Geuss borrows from Foucault, which refer to theoretical constructs that appear natural and coherent, while they are products of diverse, historically contingent and often contradictory interplay of forces. This suggests that the apparent unity and consistency of the theoretical constructs in question is illusory. Such illusion is created through (more) traditional approaches to history informed by what Geuss (1999) refers to as the practice of "tracing a pedigree" (p. 1). The primary and, for a genealogist, one of the most detrimental consequences of this practice is to establish stories of legitimacy and secure positive valuation for present attitudes, feelings, (institutions) and practices by tracing them to their original, single source that is attributed a positive value itself and from which all the rest of the valuation flows through a purportedly unbroken chained of succession. The value of the present construct positively correlates not only with the value of the supposedly original source, but also with its distance from the origin, meaning that the greater is the chain of succession the more valuable and authentic becomes the present. Distinctiveness of the genealogical method lies in its critical attentiveness to and questioning of these stories of legitimacy and valuation by disentangling the elements that have come together to form the contingent unity in the present (Geuss, 1999: 14).

The greatest merit of genealogy is that, just like *Ideologiekritik*, it is a form of reflective analysis, which makes it a better candidate as a form of critique compared to traditional forms of critique exemplified especially with Kantian philosophy.[42] Kantian philosophical critique takes place within a closed and circular system of justification of reason by reason. Critique is dependent on the assumption of universally binding features of reason, which themselves cannot be criticized. Genealogy, on the other hand, in itself does not legitimize or justify its own account of the present or its new valuation. In this respect, it is not a criticism of alternative valuations. What it does is to present a new form of valuation to take over and interpret existing forms of living and acting (Geuss, 1999: 21). If this is the case, though, how can one evaluate a genealogical account? What provides it a credibility and justification? How do we know whether it is true or not? Genealogy does not endorse the traditional conceptualization of truth as an evaluative standard for a successful analysis. Genealogical analysis, which is based on value judgements about life cannot be true, but they can be better, more acceptable and more successful than the alternatives in light of a particular end, such as providing guidance to the human actions. In this respect, genealogy as a form of critique is better than the alternative forms of critique, since it questions all the givens including the (philosophical) assumptions on which traditional forms of critique are based. It equips people with means to dispense with the illusions stemming from "the apparently self-evident assumptions of a given form of life and the (supposedly) natural or inevitable and unchangeable character of given identities" (Geuss, 2005: 157).

[42] For an excellent comparative account of critical theory (i.e. ideological critique) and genealogy see Owen, 2002.

Some people might be concerned that genealogy is a relativistic position. This argument seems to be supported by the fact that genealogical analysis introduces a new meaning and value to the present, which, however, remains one among many other possibilities. Bereft of criteria for distinguishing among differing true and untrue interpretations and valuations of the present, genealogy leaves people cognitively disempowered. This criticism of genealogy is not viable, simply because although genealogy does not provide an explicit single, fixed criterion or a set of criteria to distinguish among differing stories of legitimacy, neither does it endorse the general theoretical position that everything is contingent and therefore, relative. In fact, from a genealogical perspective such general theoretical position itself denotes an attempt to specify once and for all, rigid, single evaluative standard. In contrast to this, genealogy treats each particular case in its own right. The success, credibility or legitimacy of genealogical analysis is provided by its capacity to be in a better position than the existing alternatives in bringing about a desired consequence in relation to a particular purpose. Hence, the value and validity of genealogical analysis is not dependent on a set of rules, but on a discriminatory skill and judgement (Geuss, 2010: 110).

According to Geuss, all three conceptions, wishful thinking, ideology and socially self-evident identities, hint at the fact that we might be grossly mistaken in the way we think about the world and act, since their operations cloud the way we think about the world, and in turn, the way we act. One implication of this, he states, is that, if we admit that our thinking is not pure, but affected by these three potentially distorting

elements, we would not start developing a political theory based on our moral intuitions, but from a realist theory. Realism, as Geuss understand the term, then, attempts to dispense with wishful thinking, analyse ideological formations, without getting involved in them and look behind the socially self-evident identities by not accepting them uncritically. Let us now analyse the elements that are common to these three distorting influences and the methods to dispense with in order to further explicate the basic principles that inform Geuss's realism.

First of all, all three approaches are anti-essentialist in nature and historical in orientation. Anti-essentialism informs many aspects of Geuss's realism including his conception of the human agency, his understanding of politics and the role of political philosophy in guiding the human actions within the political realm. Historicism suggests that every theoretical attempt at understanding the world and the human agents is a historically contingent attempt at understanding the historical world of the period. In other words, the concerns, methods of analysis, sensibilities, evaluation and justification of all theoretical attempts are bound to be historical, informed and, to some significant extent limited, by the currents of the era. Radical criticism of the society, however, necessitates distancing oneself to the possible extent from the illusions of the epoch that we all share. Realism, in the narrow sense, as a methodology, *Ideologiekritik*, genealogy and realism provides methods to dispense with those illusions and achieve the necessary distance from which criticism is possible. Political theories or theoretical attempts to understand the world that incorporate the three forms of distortion in an unquestioned manner are not only far from providing the necessary understanding of the political, but are also detrimental for the exercise of political judgement. Their primary impact is circumscribing the

political imagination, which refers to an all-important cognitive-practical ability of "practical imagination and inventiveness, or creativity, of coming up with new possibilities or constructiveness" (Geuss, 2010: 14). Without political imagination we can neither protect our existing political values and interests, nor create new ones. Political judgement instructed by political imagination enables human agents to judge and act prudently in ever changing circumstances so that their collective actions generate better outcomes. It is possible to say, then, that these three methods of critique clear the ground for constructive, radical criticism and informed political judgement.

The fact that we all share the illusions of our epoch brings us to the importance of reflexivity for all theoretical endeavours. The three methods of dispensing with distorted forms of reflection are all reflective, meaning that unlike traditional and many contemporary forms of theorizing, they are not justified by a principle, which itself cannot be questioned. Their justification is provided by their success in bringing about enlightenment and hence, it is dependent on peoples' judgements. Reflexivity is not a luxury feature that a theory may or may not exhibit, but is strictly required of any serious political theory that aims to guide human actions. In its absence illusions, delusions and fantasies become part of the cognitive structure that we use to understand and evaluate the world.

In addition, all these approaches reject the value of drawing a rigid distinction between 'is' and 'ought' or facts and value. The rigid distinction between the two has resulted so far in a rigid distinction between pure political science informed only by

the facts of politics and blind to theory and pure normative political theory abstracting itself from the facts of political life. Strict separation between fact and value, however, is not a useful starting point, if one wants to understand and solve social and political issues. Values, beliefs, preferences and attitudes that form peoples' consciousness are affected by social, causal circumstances, while, they, in turn, make an impact on them. Hence, any serious understanding of politics requires consideration of both its normative and empirical aspects. Geuss's realism by its embrace of ethics *simpliciter*, but rejection of moralism and moral theodicy is informed by such an attitude.

The operation of power and power relations is central to all three forms of distortion, while their analysis informs the three methods to dispense with them. Geuss (2008, 2010) refrains from providing a definition of power as he is of the opinion that it does not have a single, uniform substance that can be identified (p. 27, p. 53). He argues, instead, that there are variety of qualitatively distinctive powers such as coercive powers, persuasive powers, power through charisma and so on (Geuss, 2008: 27, 2010: 53). The whole point is power cannot be antecedently defined with certain characteristics. Thus, its meaning as well as the different forms that it would take is context-dependent (Geuss, 2008: 28). Although he does not explicitly provide any categorization pertaining to different forms of power, he seems to be suggesting, at least, a two-fold distinction, albeit it cannot be thought of to be either mutually exclusive or exhaustive. For the purposes of simplicity, the distinction can be put forward as direct-visible and indirect-invisible forms of power. Direct-visible forms of power are usually exercised in order to overcome some kind of observable resistance or opposition, whereas indirect-invisible forms of power are exercised on

desires, attitudes, beliefs and so on. This aspect of power clarifies the distinction between wishful thinking and ideology along the dimension of power. In wishful thinking power operates on the initial states, before the belief has been formed and forms or alters the belief, whereas in ideology the operation of power relations in the society produces a social picture of a certain kind, as a result of which certain local and contingent features of the society will seem to be universal and of universal interest.

All of the three distorting mechanisms distort and weaken human agents' reflection at various levels. Wishful thinking distorts agents' psychological reflection pertaining to themselves, to their desires and beliefs; ideologies are instrumental in producing defective reflection at a sociological level in relation to people's true interests in the society; and self-evident unities create illusory historical reflection. Altogether they imply that our thinking about our desires, interests and history is contaminated by fantasies, illusions, delusions and forms of wishful thinking. While it is obvious how these three forms of distortion would distort our sense of our (political) actuality, for Geuss, they also exert strong deforming influence on our perception of (political) possibility by their effect on our political imagination. Political imagination is a skill of foresight and is closely connected to political judgement. Minimal exercise of political imagination entails thinking of ways in which the environment within which human action occurs or modes of acting can be different from what they are now (Geuss, 2010: ix). It is part of the process of creation of a new reality. However, every such creation is dependent on the antecedent conditions. Political imagination, thus, inevitably takes place within a framework provided by the social context. But even within this framework there is

room for manoeuvre and there is every reason to try to dispense with them in order to better understand and evaluate our political conditions. Political imagination, thus, is necessary for all types of politics, but especially for politics informed by realist concerns. Below, I turn to considering Geussian realism in its more positive aspects, first by providing a general account of his conception of politics and political theory that underlies the characteristics, which separate his realism from an ethics-first approach to politics.

### 5.3.3. Positive Understanding of Realism

*"…all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable."*

*Friedrich Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo, p. 80, 1989.*

If one is asked to comment on what characterizes Geuss's politics and political understanding besides the cryptic notion of realism, it would have to be that his understanding of politics is informed by historicism and perspectivism. Geuss, in fact, acknowledges that his own way of doing philosophy was strongly influenced by a sentence in Marx's *The German Ideology*, "There will, in the future, be only one science, the science of history" (www.philosophybites.com)[43] His perspectivism, on the other hand, is highly influenced by Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism, which suggests that there are no facts, no truths out there waiting to be discovered, but only

[43] Interview with Geuss on Real Politics, October 19th, 2008. Retrieved from www.philosophybites.com. I should strongly remark that what Geuss understands from this sentence is very different than what Marx and later on Althusser, for instance, are said to have understood from it.

differing interpretative perspectives, some being more powerful than others in their ability to imprint themselves on people's judgements and imaginations.

Geuss's subscription to historicism and prescriptivism prevents him from offering any definitions of political phenomena, including a definition of politics or the political itself. Since the definition of politics is bound to be historical and perspectival, it cannot be defined by an antecedent specification of a distinct domain (Geuss, 2008: 23, 2014: 147). Broadly speaking, it can be construed as "a way of seeing or considering the world", which is informed by reflections on "agency, power, and interests, and the relations among these", the final aim of which is coordination of human action (Geuss, 2014: 147, 2008: 25). A narrower definition of politics includes considerations on coercion, force, violence and their legitimate use in coordination of collective human actions (Geuss, 2014: 150). Although it is not possible to circumscribe politics, we can, Geuss argues (2008), at least begin to develop political understanding by asking and trying to answer as best as we can from our own perspective, three kinds of questions associated with Lenin, Nietzsche and Weber (p. 23). These three questions do not give us the details of Geuss's more substantive views on politics, but they do specify the kinds of concerns that give expression to Geuss's understanding of politics. All three, it will be seen, revolve around the importance of understanding political agency in its fundamental aspects for developing a proper political understanding (Owen, 2011). The combination of these three questions is supposed to give us a picture of the subject matter of political philosophy (i.e. politics).

Lenin's suggestion that politics is concerned with the question "Who whom?" points to importance of thinking about agency, when thinking politically (Geuss, 2008: 23, 2010: 52). Despite the often resorted impersonal language when making political statements or describing political phenomena, these phenomena always arise as a result of actions of particular individuals or groups of people. This basically means that politics is about particular concrete people doing things to others and not about impersonal statements (Geuss, 2008: 24, 2010: 5). The Leninist formula helps us to discern and remind ourselves that behind every political action, there exists an agency exerting power over another, most of the time for a particular purpose. The purposeful nature of human action leads Geuss (2008, 2010) to extend the Leninist question to read as "Who [does] what to whom for whose benefit?" (p. 25, p. 53). He also reminds that the power exerted by one over another need not be actual. Consideration of perceptions and potential of people with regards to their and others' capacity as agents, powers and interests is as consequential in politics as their actual powers and interests (Geuss, 2008: 26, 2010: 53). In fact, being able control how others perceive your powers or what they *imagine* these powers to be could be seem as one of the most important powers an agent might have.

The Nietzsche consideration about the differential structure of human valuation, for Geuss, relates to the fact that politics always involves the relationship of agents with limited powers and resources engaged having to choose a course of action, where doing so necessarily rules out various other possible options. Importance of decisions in politics (that it produces and excludes decisive consequences) points to the importance of ordering or sequencing decision-making, and the importance of timing in politics. Adding this point to the first, the realist question becomes: Who does

what to whom for whose benefits, when and to what effect? This is related to insights on order, sequence, priority and the temporality of collective action. In politics, the specific order in which one makes decisions is extremely important or even the order in which one discusses a to-be-made decision, since discussion itself is considered to be an action having certain consequences by Geuss. Related to this is the concern with the timing of the political action, since a successful political action requires a skilful judgement about what is realistically possible at what point in time, a seizure of the moment (Geuss, 2008: 31).

The Weberian question is about legitimation of political action. Geuss extends this Weberian insight to include all human political action, not just those that take place within the framework of the state. A broad definition of politics takes politics to be about the process of influencing people (through persuasion, influence, emulation and so on) and getting things done in the realm of collective human action (Geuss, 2001b: 14). This broader definition of politics invites the application of the mechanism of legitimation not only to the acts of violence within a framework of a state, but to any kinds of collective action (Geuss, 2008: 35). An adequate political understanding requires an analysis of the way the existing systems of legitimation work (Geuss, 2008: 36). “The total set of beliefs held by agents” and “the forms of widely distributed, socially rooted moral conceptions are” instrumental in having an impact of what would count as a legitimatory mechanisms at a particular time in a particular society (Geuss, 2008: 35). Thus, in contrast to a reductive or debased realisms that simply attends to interests, Geuss’s realism acknowledges the significance of the evaluative and normative frameworks in terms of which we try to make sense of, legitimate and contest political actions.

One such framework that we use today is political theory itself. Every act of theorisation about politics involves taking a certain position in the world (Geuss, 2008: 29). In other words, theorisation about politics is a form of political action, a political intervention, as a result of which examination of any propounded political theory and its possible and actual political implications along the dimensions of agency, power and interests is an indispensable part of any substantial understanding of politics. This commits one "to accept the general claim that entertaining, developing and propounding a theory are actions and as such they represent ways of taking a position in the world" (Geuss, 2008: 29). Since every act of theorisation itself is a political act, we cannot forsake assessing every political theory on the basis of its actual political implications. This view invites reflective thinking on the acceptability and possibility of one's own theory. This aspect is extremely important for Geuss (2001b), because, most of the time, we act on our beliefs, attitudes and desires that are shaped by the social circumstances of the historical era in which we live (p. 2). As I mentioned before, this suggests that we share the delusions and illusions of our own era; and a realistic understanding of the world requires one to be able to step outside the illusions and prejudices of one's own society and historical period. This requires one's theory to be reflective and self-referential (Geuss, 2010: xi).

Geuss (2001b) provides a rather generic definition of the subject matter of political philosophy as collective human actions that are characterized both by conflict and cooperation among human beings (pp. 1-2). He delineates the purpose of political

philosophy as educative. In its educative role, political philosophy is concerned with educating people to make informed and correct political judgements so that their collective actions produce more cooperation than conflict in the society. There are several tasks that political philosophy performs in its educative capacity (Geuss, 2008). Aiding political understanding, refining value judgements and providing orientation to human actions are among the more conventional roles that Geuss attributes to political philosophy. The more distinctive features of his conceptualization of the function of political philosophy is related to its critical function, in particular, its role in transforming our existing sense of reality (Owen, 2011). Geuss explains this role with reference to two further functions that political philosophy of a critical type provides: conceptual innovation and ideology. These two crucial roles of political philosophy point to importance of political imagination on political judgement and on political actions, and serve to demonstrate how Geussian realism is of activist type, that is, not constrained by actually existing circumstances or essentialism of the real.

The three tasks of political philosophy that aim at educating people's political judgements are understanding, evaluation and orientation. Political philosophy, first and foremost, aims to generate proper political understanding with regards to collective human actions. In very general terms, such understanding entails an account of the actual workings of collective forms of action in a society, explanation of the reasons for the success or failure of some of the forms and explanation of the patterns that social and political action exhibits as well as the causes of such patterns (Geuss, 2008: 37-38). Geuss refrains from specifying one particular form of political understanding as the most appropriate one, except very generally suggesting that it

should be historical, rather than philosophical. Political understanding, like politics itself, is always purpose relative and hence, should be decided what to entail specifically depending on people's purposes and the contexts within which they must act, which vary historically. Political philosophy, similarly, if it wants to aid generation of proper political understanding, should be clearly informed by political agent's aims and the context within which they try to realize those. It should itself, in other words, be historically sensitive.

People do not only wish to understand their surroundings, but also evaluate them, which involves some kind of a value judgement. In fact, the two are closely related, since it is on the basis of our value judgements that we try to understand the world within which we must act to realize our desires. Thus, the desire to know is aimed at arriving at a "true" understanding of the world, which is possible only if we evaluate it correctly (Geuss, 2008: 40). The most important rule of thumb about evaluation in politics is the absence of an obvious single dimension along which we can evaluate political entities, despite Western philosophy's desire to exalt moral evaluation, that is, evaluation in terms of good and evil, over any other dimensions such as efficiency, utility, aesthetic appeal and so on (Geuss, 2008: 39).

The third task of political theory is to satisfy human's need for practical orientation in action, which it can fulfil to the extent that it is sensitive to the specificities of historical situation. The practical orientation, which Geuss (2008) suggests is one of the principal tasks of political philosophy, refers to "having a clear and motivationally effective set of principles and directives about how to act in life, what

to do, or perhaps what goals to pursue" (p. 40). This task of providing practical orientation should be clearly kept apart from any metaphysical sense of orientation. A need for metaphysical orientation in life emerges only under certain circumstances, especially when these circumstances no longer provide a sense of positive meaningfulness in one's life, because the practices themselves are not sufficiently satisfactory (Geuss, 2008: 42).[44] A political philosophy concerned to satisfy people's metaphysical need, which is left unsatisfied by people's real life circumstances, is deceptive rather than truthful and contributes to generation of illusions rather than to their illumination. This is clearly not what Geuss has in mind as one of the roles of political philosophy, for whom, political philosophy is always about and should contribute to the search for truth and truthfulness (Hall and Sleat, forthcoming).

To this list, Geuss adds two further tasks, which, I argue, gives his understanding of the function of political philosophy its distinctive flavour. These are conceptual innovation and ideology critique and both demonstrate the importance of transforming people's existing sense of reality for Geussian activist realism. The fourth task of political theory, conceptual invention or innovation, is not only instrumental in clarifying an already existing reality or a problem, but also in creating a reality, that is, in enabling people to see reality in a novel way (Geuss, 2008: 42-55). This suggests that conceptual innovation can either be descriptive or normatively aspirational. When it expresses an aspiration, although conceptual

[44] For Marx and Nietzsche, for instance, the metaphysical need arises only under certain circumstances. It is only when acting, interacting and participating in social, productive activities fails to provide our lives with a sense of meaning that we return to having a theory of one kind that would imbue our lives with a meaning (Geuss, 2008: 41-42).

innovation does not simply describe any existing reality, it is not fully detached from the existing circumstances it attempts to guide either, since theories cannot simply realize themselves. Hobbes's introduction of the concept of the state to describe an impersonal political authority that is distinct from both rulers and ruled is a major example of a successful conceptual innovation (Geuss, 2008: 44-47; Skinner, 1989: 90-131). Its success lies in reshaping people's political reality and conditions of their political agency by altering how they understand politics and how they decide to act based on that understanding (Owen, 2011). The success of conceptions like traditional ethics, or morality, as Nietzsche and Williams prefer to call it, lies exactly in shaping reality in such a way that it guides people to see the reality in a certain way and guide their actions accordingly (Owen, 2011).

The fifth possible function of political theory is related to ideologies, that is, to beliefs, attitudes and preferences that are distorted due to operation of specific relations of power. The relationship of a political theory to political ideologies might take two basic forms. First, political philosophy might itself play an ideological role by promulgating and promoting certain ideological illusions, by rendering them difficult to detect or by creating new ones. It can fulfil this ideological role either actively or passively, that is, either by positively promoting ideological confusion or by negatively diverting attention from certain power configurations (Geuss, 2008: 53). The cases of passive ideological contribution are not only harder to detect, but also harder to be proven or refuted empirically. One major way in which contemporary political philosophy assumes such passive ideological role is in its presentation of relatively marginal political issues such as just pricing, for instance, as central and absolutely essential for political theory and practice to deal with. It

essentially involves a miscomprehension and misdirection in relation to decisions about priorities in politics (Geuss, 2008: 54). Its significance lies in demonstrating that political philosophies themselves can serve ideological purposes.

The second major function a political philosophy fulfils in relation to ideology is critical and it involves fighting and attempting to disperse existing ideological illusions, by demonstrating, for instance, "dependence of certain beliefs or desires on the continued existence of particular configurations of power that would otherwise remain hidden" (Geuss, 2008: 53). This is philosophy as a criticism of ideology. Some scholars emphasize the critical purchase of Geussian realism as a theoretical position as its most important and distinctive aspect, hence, kind of prior to any positive role that it might play (Prinz, 2015, 2016). This interpretation seems to be supported by Geuss's own insistence on the importance of criticism and his refusal to comply with any limitation on criticism of certain political or philosophical or political ideas and practices, provided one has an alternative to offer to replace the criticized object or the subject. The requirement for criticism to be constructive if it is to count as valid criticism at all is designed to repress criticism, rather than to encourage it. Geuss (2014) states:

> In the political realm appeals to the need for 'constructive' criticism can *in principle* represent a (generally laudable) attempt to remind those involved in some evaluation of human action of the need to remain aware of a kind of internal demand under which such criticism operates, namely of the need to keep Tschernyschevsky's (and later Lenin's) central question 'What is to be *done*?' firmly in mind; *in fact*, however, the demand for 'constructive criticism' in general functions as a repressive attempt to shift the *onus probandi* and divert attention from the possibility of radical criticism (p. 90, *italics in original*).

Since political philosophies are among the primary aids to political understanding, a substantial part of negative criticism, according to Geuss (2008), involves engaging in theoretical criticism designed to purge illusions, including of one's own theoretical predilections (knowing very well that not all delusions may be eliminated) (pp. 50-55). A possibility of a successful criticism (i.e. one that clears as much as possible the prevalent illusions and encourages new ways of seeing, understanding and evaluating existing political reality) is dependent on a commitment to criticism and self-criticism aided by certain methodological devices designed for that purpose such as historical analysis, genealogy, *Ideologiekritik*, conceptual analysis, realism and so on.

Geuss's statements vindicating, or, more generously put, not underappreciating, the negative, critical role of political philosophy and his stern dedication to a spirit of critique is sometimes taken to imply that his realism as a theoretical position is committed only to negative criticism, which is further taken to imply that it cannot guide political practice. This alleged implication is based on the assumption that to be able to guide political practice, a political philosophy should issue positive injunctions. It should, for instance, not just tell people that what they think is a form of wishful thinking, or ideological, or illusory, but that it should, further, tell them what to think in its stead. Political philosophy, according to some critics of Geuss, that is, cannot simply tell people to start seeing their world differently, thinking about their political situation differently and acting differently; it should also tell them how to see their world, what to think about their political situation and how exactly they should act. Yet, political philosophy's potential to guide political action, for Geuss, is not dependent on its issuing positive, constructive utterances. It is, rather, dependent

on its ability to inform people's political judgement, which certainly can also be achieved by showing people that their existing judgements are based on false beliefs in relation to their desires, interests, actual political conditions and so on, without telling them in an authoritative way what their true beliefs are. Such practically oriented political theory is one that combines criticism of existing circumstances in its affective, empirical and historical aspects with a strong and realistic belief on the possibility of transcending them.

Geuss (2008) argues that it is possible to construct a more fruitful approach to politics that will lead to a better understanding of the realm of politics and provide, at least, some minimal future guidance to the realm of human action, by constructing a political philosophy based on the opposite assumptions of the ethics-first view (p. 9). A political philosophy based on the opposite assumptions of the ethics-first view, would not construe provision of guidance to human action in the political realm in terms of an unquestioned application of pre-determined set of rules or theories, but as an employment of a distinctive craft or skill that entails critical analysis of the particular context of action and a corresponding choice of a model of reality or a theory that would be most conducive in relation to that particular context, while acknowledging the successes and limitations of every model of reality. The successful exercise of this skill is called political judgement (Geuss, 2008: 97). There are no easy solutions in politics and no recipes for once and for all solution to all our problems (Geuss, 2010: 40). Thus, it is a mistake to consider any political theory or philosophy as being able to totally eliminate or even to alleviate the burden of judgement (Geuss, 2008: 98). Their only use is in their capacity to act as signposts to different routes or possibilities, but, in the end, it is up to the human agent himself to

decide whether to act on one or another. However, even within this limited capacity, political theories are, in the final analysis, partisan practical interventions (Geuss, 2008: 95). Geuss's (2008) practical intervention suggests that a serious understanding of politics that can be a guide to political action necessitates a "return from the present reactionary forms of neo-Kantianism to something like the 'realist' view, or, to put it slightly differently, to neo-Leninism" (p. 99)

Geuss's neo-Leninist, realist view is based on four interrelated theses, which are, as mentioned before, based on the opposite assumptions of those of the ethics-first view. First of all, a serious understanding of politics cannot start from what people ought to desire, value, prefer and how they ought to act in order to fulfil these desires and wants. Rather, it should start from an analysis of the existing empirical features of the human life and society and their impact on people's attitudes, preferences and values as a result of which people are motivated to act in a certain way rather than another (Geuss, 2008: 9). It is important to note that an emphasis of the empirical features of the human life and their impact on people's form of consciousness, does not discard the importance of constructs of human imagination on people's motivations for certain actions. Rather, it simply cautions that such products of human imagination should be taken into consideration so long as they translate into political action (Geuss, 2008: 9-11).

What follows from this injunction is the core of the second thesis of realist view, namely that politics is first and foremost about action and contexts of action and only secondarily about beliefs and propositions (Geuss, 2008: 11, 2010: 35). This should

not be taken to imply that general theories, beliefs or systems of thoughts are not important for politics, since they may exert an enormous influence on the actions of humans. However, the study of the beliefs, attitudes and propositions should not take the form of analysis of their internal content solely in terms of clarity, coherence or consistency, but should be connected to an analysis of their impact on actions and contexts of action in concrete situations (Geuss, 2008: 12-13).

The third thesis of the realist view is that politics is a historically situated activity, the study of which must necessarily reflect this fact. The study of politics should not only reflect the fact that contexts of actions are in continuous flux as a result of changes in institutional contexts, but also historicity of forms of action, as well as the change in the values and attitudes of people, which motivate their actions (Geuss, 2008: 13-14). This is not an objection to generalizations per se, which is an indispensable tool in political theory, but to the view that the key to the riddle of politics and human action in the political realm is a formulation of an once and for all, universal principle.

The final assumption that informs Geuss's (2008) alternative view is that "politics is more like the exercise of a craft or art", rather than a mastery and application of a general theory to the specific circumstances (p. 15). This skill involves acting in a flexible way in accordance with the constantly changing features of the contexts of action. In other words, it requires an ability to assess the requirements that different contexts of action place on human action and change one's mode of action in accordance with those requirements with an aim of enhancement of interaction or

transformation of the environment (Geuss, 2008: 15). This suggests that actions in the political realms which are instances of exercise of a particular skill cannot be easily and unproblematical formulated as unchanging postulates or principles. New and unexpected circumstances, which often arise in history necessitates the deployment of this skill of (political) judgement.

### 5.4. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, Geuss's real politics is informed by a search for other types of valuable knowledge, and notions of ethics than those which dominate contemporary political discourse. The search is not mere protest behaviour, or an academic exercise, but a search to find the truth and instantiate enlightenment. As Geuss (2005) states:

> The immediate importance of this argument is to illustrate the deep connection between realism and the virtues of truth, that is, the sense in which realism is a disciplining of mind by the virtues of truth. We can … try to be as truthful and truth-loving as possible in developing an alternative to the deceitful, hypermoralised views of Plato, Aristotle, Kant and the other major figures in the history of Western ethics (p. 230).

Politics is about action and realism is a cognitive-practical political theory that aims to generate true knowledge to guide human actions within the domain of politics. The knowledge that it attempts to provide, however, differs from rational, empirical scientific knowledge. It is a type of knowledge sensitive to two insights. First of all, it is sensitive to the fact that neither are our reflections on ourselves as human agents with certain desires and interests, nor are our thinking about the properties of the historical world we occupy pure. They are permeated by, some of them very resilient, forms of cognitive distortions. Secondly, it is sensitive to the Heideggerian insight that

human beings are always ahead of themselves. Reflection on ourselves as human agents is bound to lag behind our actions as they change the existing reality. There is and always will be a gap between human cognitive powers and their capture of the real and its reality. But, these are not reasons to lapse into paralysis. While our thinking will never be pure and will always lag behind our actions, some approaches to politics are better suited to, at least, bring us closer to the real. Morality and modern theodicy are non-starters in this attempt, since they propose ethics, essentially dead politics, as proper guide to human action in the political realm. Realism, affirming the centrality of political judgement for politics and designating its minimum requirements as critical and reflective examination of existing affective and material aspects of human agency, existing empirical features of the world (contexts of action) and political imagination, ability to minimally foresee how things might be likely to change in the future, is the best candidate to close the gap. Realism thus understood, Geuss claims, provides a type of knowledge capable of enlightening the human agents by "devoting persistent, focused attention to that which is genuinely important in human life" and "to drawing the 'correct' conclusions from attending to these important features – whatever they are – and embodying these conclusions concretely in one's general way of living" (Geuss, 2005: 9, 10).

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

This thesis set out from the realist conviction that one of the primary tasks of political philosophy is to guide human actions in the practical realm. It concentrated on evaluating realism's ability as a general theoretical position to stand as a major alternative to the mainstream liberal political philosophy's understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice. It concluded that while many varieties of theoretical approaches that are labelled realistic today (for numerous disparate reasons) fail to meet the task, there are, at least, two thinkers, John Dunn and Raymond Geuss, whose theoretical insights that emphasize the centrality of political judgement, provide us with fresh and stimulating pointers, to *begin*, at least, to think about the relationship between political theory and political practice in an unorthodox manner. While their unorthodox approach emphasizes historical understanding of politics and is informed by realistic paradigm of political understanding and judgement, mainstream liberal political philosophy as well as

certain varieties of realism touched upon in the third chapter of the dissertation underscore philosophical understanding of politics and are guided by what is referred to, by Bourke and Geuss (2009), as Socratic paradigm of political understanding and judgement (p. 4).

Socratic paradigm of political judgement or traditional paradigm of political judgement, as Geuss (2010) sometimes refers to it, conceives political judgement primarily on the basis of beliefs and opinions held by agents on matters pertaining to politics, arrived through deliberation modelled on rational, scientific form of deliberation (i.e. based on negation or affirmation of a political proposition) (p. 4, 6; Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 4, 33). These beliefs and opinions are further assumed to be fully transparent and accessible to the agent entertaining them and expressible verbally. Discussion of these beliefs and opinions atomistically and ahistorically, that is, as detached and detachable from the web of other opinions in which they are entrenched, and from the social circumstances of the historical agent entertaining them, is considered to lead to their refinement. These refined judgements are, then, formulated in a set of principles and rules to be applied to generate political judgement and guide human actions. They, thus, provide shortcut to political judgement, rather than genuine political judgement itself. In other words, they replace the necessity for political judgement, rather than aiding it, since the form of guidance it offers is insensitive to the variety of the circumstances within which agents find themselves in need to act. Such insensitivity to contextual and historical variation and its consequent alleviation of the burden of judging constitutes the charm of this Socratic paradigm. Yet, for Dunn and Geuss, despite its charm, this understanding of political judgement is not capable of providing proper guidance to

political actions, because it claims to speak to human agents from an Archimedean point of view, which is simply not available to anyone, not even to the most learned political philosopher.

The analysis of John Rawls's theory of justice I presented in Chapter 2 shows that his theory of justice as developed in *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, is informed by the assumptions of a Socratic paradigm of political understanding and judgement. A close analysis of his theory of justice reveals that despite his alleged practical turn after the 1980s, he continued to search for some kind of an Archimedean point of view or a foundation, which would ground and justify his two principles of justice. As a result, his theory oscillates between two poles of unrealistic metaphysical foundationalism and ineffectual immanent foundationalism. This, I suggest, leaves political practice without proper guidance, save for an ideological one. The cogency of realist criticism of mainstream liberal political philosophy lies precisely in registering this fact.

As I have demonstrated in Chapter 3, however, not all varieties of political realism are cogent in challenging the Socratic paradigm of political judgement and consequent hold of mainstream liberal political philosophy's grip on our understanding of the relationship between political theory and political practice today. I call those approaches that do challenge it and provide us with philosophical insights and tools necessary to develop an alternative point of view, activist realist approaches. Activist realist approaches are informed by centrality of a historical,

realistic understanding of political judgement for any political theory that aims to be action-guiding.

Realistic paradigm of political judgement stands orthogonal to that of Socratic paradigm. First of all, it does not locate political judgement in opinions and beliefs of the agents. Rather, it is built upon the premise that political judgements themselves are actions, which are, in turn, located within contexts of actions. Furthermore, it considers politics from the perspective of existing political agents (not as rational individuals exhibiting universal traits) themselves and within the historical circumstances in which they happen to find themselves. Realistic paradigm of political judgement, in this regard, is highly sensitive to contextual and historical variation, which means that it fails to be captured in a set of universal principles and rules. Each and every situation, as well as each and every political agent requires unique consideration and unique political judgement. There is, yet, thus, for this understanding, no available recipe to alleviate the burden of judging. People can only judge for themselves and in relation to their own purposes. No political philosopher, no political expert can reliably tell people how to act politically and what exactly to do to achieve a set of desirable values in the circumstances in which they are supposed to act. This realistic understanding of political judgement, thus, undermines the appeal of expertise and expert knowledge in the field of politics. It places political responsibility on the citizenry as a whole, since "the faculty of judging is a general aptitude that is shared by all citizens" (Beiner, 1983: 3). In this respect, this understanding of political judgement is more democratic than the Socratic paradigm that values knowledge and expertise as means towards refined political judgements.

Realistic understanding of political judgement also successfully situates itself beyond the objectivism and relativism divide that I have mentioned in the Introductory section to this dissertation. It resists objectivism by denying that it is possible to conceive political judgement and action in terms of "rule-governed behaviour, where the rules by which we are guided can be explicitly specified and made available for scrutiny according to strict canons of rational method" (Beiner, 1983: 1). Yet, it does not fall into relativism either. Realistic political judgement, although agent and context specific, does not exalt each and every subjective point of view to the same status. On the contrary, it discriminates between better and worse forms of political understandings and political actions in relation to the existing circumstances, while also being informed by a sense of desirable, yet non-existing, conditions. It is, thus, not limited to an understanding of "politics as the 'art of the possible'" (Beiner, 1983: 149). On the contrary, it is compatible with demanding the impossible. As Beiner (1983) argues, this aspect of political judgement and the double demand it makes on the political agents is successfully captured by Weber in his lecture on politics as vocation (p. 150). Realistic political judgement requires "neither abstracting from the existing realities with which political man must contend, nor failing to distance oneself from merely contingent institutional and existential givens" (Beiner, 1983: 150). Following Weber, we can argue that political judgement requires passion and distance, engagement and detachment at the same time (Beiner, 1983: 150). Bourke and Geuss (2009) similarly argue that a good political judgement requires both passion and responsibility (p. 20). Passion combined with responsibility enables one to achieve critical distance from one's passionate involvement, necessary for forming a sound political judgement. Political theory on

its own cannot cultivate such virtue, but it can help to determine the conditions of its emergence (Bourke and Geuss, 2009: 25).

What lends validity and legitimacy to realistic political judgements, then? This is a rather difficult question that cannot be answered theoretically. It is simply not possible theoretically to prove the validity of one's judgement (Beiner, 1983: 132). Realistic political judgement can only be validated and justified in action and not prior to it. This aspect of realistic political judgement leaves one in suspicion as to its ability and capacity to guide political action. How can a political theory informed by the centrality of realistic political judgement be action-guiding and what kind of guidance can it provide to existing political agents?

The type of political guidance it provides certainly does not take the form of rules and recipes to be followed in diverse circumstances and for a variety of purposes. Rather, it seeks to provide practically, historically, and contextually informed political guidance. Political theory that emphasizes the centrality of realistic political judgement, thus, takes the existing causal political circumstances and present desires and aspirations of political agents very seriously, yet, not uncritically. Activist realism informed by the centrality of realistic political judgement starts with the recognition that any attempt to provide guidance to human beings must take them as historically located agents in their historically contingent circumstances. In other words, it must start with what 'is' the case as opposed to what 'ought to be' the case both in relation to human agency and to the causal properties of the environment within which they must act. This entails recognizing that the desires, beliefs, values,

motivations and interests they hold as well as the institutional structures through which they must act to realize these vary historically. Any realist theoretical construct aiming to guide human actions must reflect and respond to this dynamism and historical variation. The first step towards this is acknowledging the stark truth that there are no grand recipes for guiding human action within the political domain. All there is, is historical individuals creating historical realit(ies) through their actions at all times. The prospect of activist realism to guide human actions so that their outcomes would come out better than worse is, thus, rather indeterminate. To what extent they will in fact come out better can simply not be known or predicted. An activist realist might be highly sceptical that they will in fact come out better in any large, satisfying extent. Being pessimistic or sceptical about its prospects, however, is compatible (not incompatible) with activist realism.

John Dunn's sceptical activist realism and Raymond Geuss's critical activist realism elaborated upon in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation, are both informed by these common features. Most importantly they both emphasize the centrality of realistic political judgement for any kind of activist political theory that cannot, but be concerned with guiding political action. Given activist realism's (informed by the centrality of realistic political judgement) reluctance to actually tell humans what they should do and its indeterminate prospect for guiding human actions, however, which always depends on the actual deeds of human beings, it might be argued that activist realism is better placed to provide negative rather than positive guidance. In other words, it is better at telling people what they should not do and what they should not value given their existing circumstances, rather than telling them what they should do and what they should value. This is not the case because activist

realism is poorly equipped to provide such political guidance, but because any political theory and any political theorist is rather poorly equipped to be able to do so.

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