

Real Politics and Metaethical Baggage

Many commentators on modern political philosophy have claimed that, in recent years, a ‘counter-movement’, challenging the ‘mainstream’ approach to political philosophy, has arisen. In an influential survey article, William Galston announces that

‘During the decades-long reign of what some have called ‘high liberalism’ (exemplified by John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, among others), a counter-movement has slowly been taking shape.’ (Galston 2010, p.385)

The best label for this counter-movement, Galston suggests, is ‘realism’. Well-known advocates of varieties of realism include Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, Amartya Sen, and John Gray.¹ As several commentators have noted, if this is a movement then it is not a very united one.² Realists endorse a range of diverse and sometimes conflicting claims. However, such unity as there is among realists can be summed up by two ideas. First, realists suggest that ‘mainstream’ approaches to political philosophy fail to engage with real politics and, second, that approaches *should* engage with the real politics.³ Even here the extent to which different realists agree could be questioned. How we should understand ‘real politics’, and what a failure to engage with it amounts to, is disputed among realists. Some complain about the lack of focus, by mainstream ‘non-realist’ political philosophers on the workings of actual political institutions.⁴ Others focus on the failure to attend to conflicts, or distributions of power, or the distinctive histories which characterise real political situations.⁵ Political philosophers should, it is argued, incorporate an understanding of history, sociology, psychology, political science, and so on, into their attempts to justify basic values and principles, rather than engaging with these disciplines only at the point of applying pre-established principles and values to actual situations.⁶ Usually, these objections to what mainstream political philosophers do not do are coupled with criticisms of what they do. It is sometimes argued, for instance, that they are too concerned with ideal theory and utopianism.⁷ Despite the diversity within the realist camp, it has seemed to many that there is enough resemblance between these positions to make it worth discussing them collectively.⁸ I too will make this assumption.⁹

It may seem obvious that the debate between realists and non-realists has a metaethical dimension.¹⁰ After all, it is natural to think that a methodological debate concerning a discipline, which (as realists and non-realists agree) is at root a normative and evaluative discipline, would overlap considerably with debates in metaethics. However, despite this, the debate between realists and their critics has been surprisingly quiet on questions of metaethics. Granted, it has not been completely silent. As I claim below, some contributors have made arguments that seem to rest on metaethical premises. However, the work that has been done is limited in three respects. First, arguments that rest on metaethical claims are few in number and rarely explored in much depth. Second, such arguments tend to focus on a fairly narrow range of metaethical issues. Most turn on whether there is an important distinction to be drawn between facts and values.¹¹ This is not an unimportant issue; I will explore it in some detail in §I and §II. However, there are many other important metaethical issues that have not been brought to bear on the debate between realists and non-realists. One is the relevance of questions in moral epistemology to the debate between realists and their critics.¹² Third, metaethical arguments

¹ See, for instance: Williams 2005; Geuss 2005; Geuss 2008; Geuss 2010; Sen 2009; Gray 2007.

² See, for instance: Bell 2009; Scheurman 2009; Baderin 2014.

³ See, for instance: Bavister-Gould 2011; Galston 2010; North 2010; Rossi 2010; Sleat 2010.

⁴ For discussions of this type of realist critique, see: Galston 2010; Sleat 2010.

⁵ For a very useful overview of some of these differing strands of realism, see Sangiovanni 2009.

⁶ This assumes what some realists question; that political philosophers should attempt to justify values and principles in the first place (see, for instance, Geuss 2008, pp15-16). However, for simplicity, I shall take the realist claim to be that if (rightly or wrongly) justifying values and principles is taken to be an important task for political philosophers, then philosophers should engage with real politics when undertaking this task.

⁷ See, for instance: Geuss 2008; Williams 2005; Mills 2005; Sen 2009.

⁸ This position is partly motivated in Galston 2010.

⁹ If the reader does not agree with this assumption, then I invite them to view the following discussion as devoted to one strand of realism – namely, the strand which argues that political philosophy should engage with real politics – rather than realism per se.

¹⁰ I take metaethical enquiry to refer to attempts to understand the semantic, metaphysical, epistemological and psychological significance and nature of our ethical thought and practice. For more discussion, see Railton, Gibbard and Darwall 1992.

¹¹ See, for instance: McDermott 2010; Swift 2008; O’Brien 1999, p77; Geuss 2008 pp16-17.

¹² In Railton, Gibbard and Darwall 1992, the authors distinguish between ‘old’ analytic metaethics and ‘new’ metaethics. The former, which dominated until the 1950s, focused mainly on the nature of moral language and the facts/value distinction (see Railton, Gibbard and

are almost always used by opponents of realism. There has been hardly any exploration of how realists might defend their position on metaethical grounds. (This might, of course, be because there are no plausible arguments for realism based on metaethical assumptions. I will return to this in §IV.)

It is worth asking: why have political philosophers involved in this debate not really explored the metaethical dimension? One possibility is that political philosophers may be keen to avoid committing themselves to controversial positions in metaethics if they can possibly avoid it. Cohen, for instance, emphasizes that the argument outlined in his article, 'Facts and Principles', is neutral between the major controversies which dominate the metaethical literature.¹³ A second possibility is that some political philosophers see metaethics as a separate discipline and hence not their concern. Daniel McDermott, for instance, responds to the worry that political philosophy is pointless since there are no moral facts by claiming:

'This is a genuine worry, but it is a kind of metaethical worry that is none of the political philosopher's business. In philosophy, as in most intellectual endeavours, progress depends on a successful division of labour.'

Perhaps something like this sentiment partly explains why the metaethical dimensions of the realism debate have not been explored in greater depth. There is a third possibility, which might explain why realists have not focused on metaethics.¹⁴ Some realists are keen to argue that political philosophy should not be viewed as merely a branch of ethics. Raymond Geuss devotes much of his *Philosophy and Real Politics* to defending this claim.¹⁵ Similarly, Bernard Williams sought to show that political philosophy is a separate discipline from ethics.¹⁶ Given this, the realist might be inclined to resist defending their position on metaethical grounds, or conceding that it could be successfully critiqued on such grounds.¹⁷

It should be noted that the denial that political philosophy is a branch of ethics does not necessarily imply that metaethics is irrelevant to the debate between realists and non-realists. Realists who deny that political philosophy is a branch of ethics still claim that the former is a normative and evaluative discipline. The normative and evaluative claims in question are simply not ethical ones.¹⁸ Moreover, it seems that many arguments in metaethics are just as applicable to political value as ethical value (assuming, with the realist, that there is an important distinction here). Scepticism about the possibility of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is', for instance, does not seem any less applicable to ethical 'oughts' – for instance, 'you ought not to lie' – as political 'oughts' – for instance, 'the state ought not to restrict individual liberty'. So it does not seem that realists who deny that political philosophy is a branch of ethics *must* resist appeals to metaethics. However, it is clear why they might want to. If they wish to dabble in metaethics, they must walk a fine line between acknowledging the significance of metaethical arguments, on the one hand, and emphasizing that there is clear water between ethics and political philosophy on the other.¹⁹

In this paper, I argue that with respect to the realism debate, advocates of either side do not have the luxury of remaining neutral on some major metaethical questions. While political realists and non-realists can, perhaps, plausibly claim neutrality on some metaethical issues, such as the debate between moral realism and anti-realism,²⁰ there are important connections between the political realism/non-realism debate and certain

Darwall 1992 p121). The latter has a much wider focus. It encompasses a number of issues relating to the philosophy of language, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology and moral psychology, together with the connections between these issues (see Railton, Gibbard and Darwall 1992 p121). It seems that much of the existing work on the metaethical dimension of the debate between realist and non-realist political philosophers has concerned the issues associated with old metaethics. Its focus, therefore, is unfortunately narrow. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

¹³ See Cohen 2003, p234. This is not to suggest that Cohen resists committing himself to controversial metaethical views elsewhere (see, for instance, Cohen 2008, especially pp274-372). However, he certainly sees the neutrality of the argument presented in this article to be a virtue of the argument.

¹⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

¹⁵ See Geuss 2008, pp1-18 and pp59-101.

¹⁶ See Williams 2005.

¹⁷ I do not wish to claim that realists who deny that political philosophy is applied ethics necessarily will make this claim. As I have already mentioned, Geuss briefly discusses some metaethical issues associated with realism (see Geuss 2008 pp16-17).

¹⁸ It might be argued that the slogan 'political philosophy is not applied ethics' is most charitably interpreted as an attempt to contrast political philosophy with particular traditions of ethical thought, or particular way of understanding 'ethics', rather than ethics per se (see Baderin 2014 pp144-145). If this is correct, then realists might be well advised to abandon this slogan as misleading. If they do, then this might remove the temptation to resist discussing metaethics in relation to political realism.

¹⁹ For a discussion of some of the issues that arise for realists who wish to distinguish political philosophy from ethics, see Frazer 2010 pp497-499.

²⁰ To avoid confusion, it is worth emphasizing that 'realism' and 'non-realism' in the methodological literature on political philosophy are entirely different positions from 'realism' and 'anti-realism' in the metaethics literature, the similar labels notwithstanding. Moral realists claim, very roughly, that there are mind-independent moral properties in virtue of which moral judgements are true or false, and moral anti-

controversies in metaethics. Both realists and non-realists are constrained in the metaethical positions that they can and cannot endorse. Rendering either position plausible, therefore, depends on defending certain metaethical claims. I shall try to explain which side needs to defend which claims. The central aim of this paper, then, is to outline the argumentative burden of realists and non-realists (at least as regards metaethics). I do not attempt to defend one side or another. That said, I do think that my analysis has three important implications for this debate. Two of these implications are favourable to realism. I suggest, first, that when it comes to responding to non-realist metaethical arguments, the realist has more options than they may initially appear to. At the very least, they have more options than the very limited literature on the metaethical dimension of the realism debate currently suggests. I argue, second, that metaethical arguments can also be made against non-realism. The non-realist also has a metaethical case to answer. Since this claim seems absent from the current limited literature on the metaethical and political realism, establishing it puts the realist in a stronger position than is currently the case. The third important implication is less obviously beneficial to realism. Since they have a metaethical argumentative burden, they cannot get away with ignoring metaethics. This means that, if they wish to maintain that political philosophy is not a branch of ethics, then they must walk the fine line I mentioned earlier between acknowledging the significance of metaethics and avoiding a collapse between ethics and political philosophy.

I. The Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments

I shall begin by examining the metaethical commitments of realism. A useful starting point is an argument that is occasionally made against realist methodologies. Critics of realism often adopt a so-called ‘division of labour’ approach to justifying normative and evaluative political claims. There is, they argue, a division of labour between political philosophy, which tries to articulate and justify political principles, without reference to real politics, and other disciplines such as history, sociology and political science, which consider facts, theories, analyses and so on, which tell us what we need to know about political reality to effectively apply these principles.²¹ Critics sometimes argue that so-called realist methodologies only *appear* to be alternatives to this division of labour approach. When considered in more detail, they are merely particular instances of it.

For instance consider genealogical criticism, a paradigmatically realist methodology.²² Genealogical criticism starts with an analysis of the history or genesis of some belief or value system, which reveals facts about how it arose or came to be endorsed by agents, or about the motives for adopting it. Accepting these facts deters agents from endorsing that belief or value system, or alternatively helps them to be sympathetic towards it. It is important to point out that the historical analysis does not generate a straightforward refutation or proof of some value, principle, ideal, and so on.²³ However, by influencing our assumptions about and attitudes towards certain values, genealogy is relevant to the justification of claims about their importance. To give one famous example, Nietzsche argues that Christianity was born out of feelings of inferiority and resentment which, given the Christian emphasis on truth, love and compassion, renders Christianity ultimately untenable.²⁴

However, it might be argued that a history of Christianity has no normative force unless there is some underlying principle (presumably that a belief system which is indicative of weakness – as Christianity is alleged to be – is a bad belief system). Given this, the genealogical method is merely a way to use history to apply principles that are either simply assumed or justified independently of the historical enquiry. That is, it is basically just an instance of the division of labour approach.²⁵ The crucial thought behind this kind of objection to realism is that history, sociological or psychological enquires, cannot by themselves yield normative or evaluative claims. Without principles, values or ideals lurking somewhere in the background, such enquiry has no normative or evaluative significance. This thought is summed up by Daniel McDermott:

realists deny this claim. So understood, it is plausible to claim that political non-realists can be moral realists and political realists can be moral anti-realists.

²¹ See: Swift and White 2010; McDermott 2010.

²² See: Geuss 2002; Geuss 2008; Williams 2002.

²³ See: Geuss 2008, pp67-70; Miller 1984, pp48-50.

²⁴ See: Nietzsche 1990; Nietzsche 2007.

²⁵ This line of argument is similar to, but also importantly different from, the much discussed argument G. A. Cohen offers in Cohen 2003. Cohen argues that fact-sensitive principles – roughly, principles that are partly grounded in facts – must presuppose more basic fact-insensitive principles. Much of the criticism of this argument has focused on the notion of ‘grounding’. (David Miller, for instance, argues that for Cohen, grounding seems to amount to logical entailment, which is too indefensibly narrow (see Miller 2013 pp21-28).) It is worth noting, however, that in making this argument Cohen’s concern is not, first and foremost, how we should justify political principles, but rather what those who affirm such fact-sensitive principles are *committed* to endorsing. That is, his argument concerns what endorsing a fact-sensitive principle presupposes. This, I take it, is why Cohen sums up his thesis by saying: ‘Most people think, as I indeed do, that facts do ground principles, and my thesis claims that they are thereby committed to acknowledging the existence of fact-insensitive principle’ (Cohen 2003 p228). Given that Cohen’s focus is on the presuppositions or commitments of those who endorse fact-sensitive principles, rather than directly on appropriate ways to justify those principles, his argument differs from the one I am currently considering.

‘Analytical political philosophy is a complement to the social sciences. Whereas social scientists aim to determine the empirical facts about human behaviour and institutions, political philosophers aim to determine what *ought* to be done in light of that information. How should states be organized? What kinds of projects should they pursue? Are there some actions that are impermissible? No set of empirical facts can determine the answer to these kinds of questions. You can pile up a mountain of data about the differences between, say, democracies and dictatorships, but without the normative element that is the political philosopher’s concern, nothing would follow about which form of government ought to be implemented.’ (McDermott 2010, p.12)²⁶

The argument from philosophers such as McDermott seems to rest on a familiar metaphysical distinction between facts on the one hand and values on the other. It is often thought that there is a metaphysically robust distinction between facts, which can be incorporated into a naturalistic world-view, and values which cannot and so must be understood in a fundamentally different way (although what this other way should be is disputed).²⁷ The ‘realm’ of facts differs from the ‘realm’ of values. It is usually held that this metaphysical picture has an epistemological implication. Our knowledge of facts, it is thought, cannot by itself yield any evaluative knowledge. We may have a vast amount of knowledge of the factual realm, but this by itself cannot give us knowledge of values and principles (assuming that knowledge of the latter is even possible). So, the position I am considering rests on a metaphysical idea – that there are distinct realms of fact and value – which is taken to have an epistemological implication – that our knowledge of the evaluative cannot be derived from knowledge of the factual.

Following Putnam, it is useful to contrast the fact/value distinction and the fact/value dichotomy.²⁸ The latter suggests a kind of ‘metaphysical dualism’; facts are fundamentally different to values. It is possible, so Putnam argues, to reject this dichotomy but nevertheless claim that, in certain contexts, it is useful to distinguish between factual claims on the one hand and evaluative claims on the other. The argument that I am currently considering rests on the claim that there is a dichotomy rather than merely an analytic distinction.

For reasons that I will discuss in §II, realists may wish to reject this metaphysical picture of a fact/value dichotomy and its epistemological implication. (Those who do so may be well advised to follow Putnam and maintain that there is still an important distinction between fact and value.²⁹) However, it is important to note that what I have said so far about the fact/value dichotomy and the epistemological implication is compatible with the realist claim that, in the course of justifying principles and values, we should engage with real politics. After all, engaging with the real politics does not imply that we should engage with nothing else. The implication from writers such as McDermott, however, is that the *basic* values, principles, concepts, and so on, which philosophers are interested in, are *solely* on the value side of the dichotomy. To be sure, those principles can then be combined with real world considerations to generate further evaluative claims. This is why McDermott thinks that analytical political philosophy is a complement to the social sciences. However, those *basic* principles and values themselves are solely the concern of political philosophers, and so are on the ‘value’ not ‘fact’ side of the dichotomy. To piece together an argument against realism we need one further claim: that the methods of historical enquiry and analyses of social practices and beliefs, and so on, are on the fact side of the dichotomy. This claim falls out of most ways in which the fact/value dichotomy has been traditionally characterised.³⁰

So, to put the pieces together, the first argument against realism goes as follows. There is a metaphysically robust dichotomy between facts and values, and knowledge of the former cannot by itself yield knowledge of the latter. Since the historical enquiry (for instance) is on the ‘fact’ side of this dichotomy, it cannot by itself justify normative and evaluative claims. So, if genealogical criticism (for instance) yields normative or evaluative claims, it *must* presuppose (at least implicitly) some other normative or evaluative claims. Moreover, at least some of the presupposed normative or evaluative claims must be basic political values and principles. So, realist approaches – such as genealogical criticism – must presuppose rather than justify basic political values and principles.

I call this the Metaphysical Argument. It is a slightly misleading label. I wish to distinguish it from a second argument, which I will call the Epistemological Argument. However, as I indicated above, the Metaphysical Argument presupposes an epistemological as well as a metaphysical claim. It presupposes that, because there is a dichotomy between facts and values, factual knowledge cannot yield evaluative knowledge. Unfortunately, I cannot think of a better label.

²⁶ See also: Swift 2008; O’Brien 1999, p77.

²⁷ For classic discussions of this position see: Mackie 1977; Ayer 1952; Blackburn 1993.

²⁸ See Putnam 2002 pp7-66. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this clarification.

²⁹ The position bears comparison with the Stephen Toulmin’s discussion of the connection between the justification of moral and empirical claims. See Toulmin 1950.

³⁰ See, for instance: Ayer 1952, pp104-126.

I move now to the second argument. This argument, like the Metaphysical Argument, hopes to show that there must be values or principles lurking in the background of supposedly realist methodologies. Historical or sociological analyses by themselves, this argument says, cannot justify normative or evaluative claims. However, unlike the first argument, the second does not start from a metaphysical picture with certain epistemological implications. Rather, it starts from a straightforwardly epistemological claim and remains silent on matters of metaphysics. The epistemological claim is simply that basic political values and principles are justified *a priori*.³¹ Some political philosophers explicitly endorse this claim.³² Given this epistemological claim, the argument continues by pointing out that the histories and sociological analyses offered by realists are justified *a posteriori*. If they are to yield any normative or evaluative claims, this argument goes, they must therefore appeal (perhaps implicitly) to principles or values that are justified *a priori*. Given – as seems undeniable – that claims which are justified *a priori* are not justified by examining political reality, it follows that apparent realists must rely on principles and values which are established without engaging with real politics. I will refer to this as the Epistemological Argument.

There is one important clarification that I should make about the Epistemological Argument. For the argument to have any bite, it is not enough to claim that our knowledge of principles or values depends *in part* on ideas or claims that are known *a priori*. Suppose for instance, that we thought that principles could be justified by a version of reflective equilibrium, which attempts to achieve coherence between moral intuitions – which are known *a priori* – and certain non-moral claims that are known *a posteriori* (such as scientific theories or claims about human nature or societies).³³ A non-realist could not use this account of moral epistemology to defend the Epistemological Argument. Realists are committed to engaging with real politics. But they are *not* committed to engaging with the real world *and nothing else* in the course of justifying values and principles. So, in order to get the Epistemological Argument off the ground, we must presuppose an epistemology whereby values and principles are justified on *a priori* grounds alone.

Of course, if it turns out that *a posteriori* considerations have only a very limited role in justifying values and principles, then this would certainly take the wind out of realism's sails. In this case, it would seem that we should engage with real politics *a bit*, but for the most part the justification of political principles is an *a priori* matter. If this is true, then the realist rhetoric seems overblown. However, I shall put this issue to one side. My concern is whether the Epistemological Argument shows that the realist claim – that we should engage with real politics in the course of justifying values, principles, ideas (and so on) – is implausible, rather than whether it is overblown.

II. Realism and the Fact/Value Dichotomy

In this section and the next, I will outline two strategies which a realist could adopt in order to respond to the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. The first strategy is to deny that there is a metaphysically robust fact/value dichotomy. I will argue that, if plausible, this strategy can avoid the Metaphysical Argument. However, I will also argue – more interestingly – that this strategy can also be used to respond to the Epistemological Argument. Denying the fact/value dichotomy undermines the motivation for endorsing the epistemic assumptions behind the Epistemological Argument. The second strategy that a realist could adopt, which I will discuss in §III, denies that values and principles can be known *a priori*. This strategy can be used to respond to the Epistemological Argument. However, again more interestingly, it can also be used to avoid the Metaphysical Argument. The latter strategy, I will suggest, shows that realists can agree that there *is* a metaphysically robust distinction between facts and values, if they wish. If *either* of these strategies is successful, therefore, then a realist can use that strategy to avoid *both* the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. The significance of this is that it gives the realist more options to respond to the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments than is immediately obvious. Insofar as realists have considered the Metaphysical Argument at all, they have tended to respond to it merely by denying the fact/value dichotomy.³⁴ Although I know of no explicit discussion by a realist of the Epistemological Argument, simply denying that knowledge of values and principles is *a priori* is a pretty obvious response. By claiming that either strategy is sufficient, I hope to move beyond both the existing (albeit limited) responses to the Metaphysical Argument, and also those responses that will be immediately obvious to the reader.

The first strategy is to deny that there is a metaphysically robust dichotomy between facts and values. It is not my intention to establish whether this is the case, and hence whether this strategy is successful. However, it will be helpful to have in mind some of the important objections to the fact/value dichotomy which

³¹ This view has an obvious connection to the idea that moral claims are justified *a priori*. Historical advocates of this view include W. D. Ross, G. E. Moore and Henry Sidgwick. See: Ross 1930; Moore 1903; Sidgwick 1981. For a more recent account, see Audi 2004.

³² See, for instance: Wolff 1976, p6.

³³ For further elaboration on the method of reflective equilibrium, see: Daniels 1996.

³⁴ See, for instance, Geuss 2008 pp15-16.

philosophers have put forward, so I will briefly gesture at a few. Some critics argue that there is no satisfactory account of the ‘fact’ side of the dichotomy, which is necessary to vindicate the fact/value dichotomy.³⁵ Some argue that evaluative and normative thought permeates both our experience and scientific enquiry, so attempting to distinguish between the purely factual and purely evaluative is futile.³⁶ Others say that the licence to make (and even understand) particular kinds of factual claims depends upon evaluative ones. Donald Davidson famously argues, for instance, that to interpret the mental states of other agents we must attribute ‘correct’ values to them and, relatedly, that values are constitutive of the mental.³⁷ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is often argued that thick ethical concepts – such as ‘cruel’, ‘brave’ and ‘elegant’ – provide a counter-example to the claim that there are two separable domains of facts and values.³⁸ As Hilary Putnam elegantly puts it:

“‘Cruel’ simply ignores the supposed fact/value dichotomy and cheerfully allows itself to be used sometimes for a normative purpose and sometimes as a descriptive term.’ (Putnam 2002, p.35)

So, assuming for the sake of argument that we should deny that the fact/value dichotomy is metaphysically robust, how does that help the realist respond to the Metaphysical Argument? Well, quite simply, the Metaphysical Argument is premised on a false view of the metaphysics of value. The strategy that I am considering claims that, since there is no dichotomy between fact and value, there is no clear sense in which the kinds of historical or sociological analyses deployed by realists are strictly on the ‘fact’ side of the false dichotomy. We also have reason to doubt that values, principles and ideals fall strictly on the ‘value’ side of the false dichotomy. After all, an ideal – such as the ideal of autonomy – or a value – such as freedom – might function like a piece of thick ethical vocabulary. Following Putnam, we might think that they cheerfully allow themselves to be used both descriptively and normatively. Since the Metaphysical Argument rests on the idea that we cannot justify values and principles from facts alone, which in turn depends on the fact/value dichotomy, if it turns out that we should reject this dichotomy then the Metaphysical Argument is undermined.³⁹

An example might help to illustrate the point. In his much discussed paper, ‘“Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, Charles Mills argues that feminist analyses of patriarchy give us an example of realist theorizing (or, to use Mill’s preferred terminology, non-ideal theory). It was, he claims, an important political ‘innovation’ by feminists to use ‘patriarchy to force people to recognize, and condemn as political and oppressive, rather than natural, apolitical and unproblematic, male domination of women.’⁴⁰ Crucially, Mills argues, this conceptual innovation sought to ‘map accurately... crucial realities that differentiate the statuses of the human beings within the systems they describe.’⁴¹ The conceptual innovation, Mills claims, sought both to describe reality and to evaluate it. Since the value-laden analysis is rooted in a political reality – in this case, the actual power relations between the sexes – it might seem that Mill is justified in considering this a realist approach to political theorizing. A critic of realism is likely to deny that this approach is distinctively realist.⁴² They may argue, for instance, that the feminist critique should be understood in terms of a purely descriptive account of power relations between the sexes, on the one hand, and a set of implicit principles condemning such power relations on the other. Hence the evaluative component of this analysis is distinct from the descriptive part; the former is the concern of political philosophers, the latter of the social scientists, and there is no need to engage with real politics to establish the former. Against this, a realist may retort that the concept of patriarchy should not be understood in this way; it is at the same time a descriptive and evaluative concept, and carving it up into distinct components which fall under the remit of different disciplines misses the point. It is not necessary to adjudicate on this dispute here, since my purpose is merely illustrative. Since we are considering the realist’s position, let’s assume for the sake of argument that Mills’s understanding of patriarchy is correct. On this assumption, it seems that the realist can say the same thing about patriarchy that Putnam says about cruelty. The claim that a given society is patriarchal is like the claim ‘David is a cruel’. All the evidence that we could appeal to in order to justify the latter claim – David’s treatment of those around him, the pleasure he takes in causing misfortune to others, and so on – seems to be descriptive. And yet the claim that is justified – that David is cruel – is certainly evaluative. The realist, it seems, might claim that the same is true of patriarchy.

So far, I have suggested one strategy that a realist might adopt to avoid the Metaphysical Argument. However, I now want to suggest that this strategy can also help realists to respond to the Epistemological

³⁵ See, for instance, Putnam’s criticisms of Carnap and other logical positivists in Putnam 2002, pp7-270.

³⁶ See, for instance: Dewey 1938.

³⁷ See: Davidson 2004.

³⁸ Other advocates of this argument include Iris Murdoch (1970) and John McDowell (1998).

³⁹ For a related discussion see: Geuss 2008, pp16-17.

⁴⁰ Mills 2005 p175.

⁴¹ Ibid p175.

⁴² See, for instance, Swift and White 2010 p60.

Argument. The debate about the robustness of the fact/value dichotomy concerns, among other things, what evaluative and descriptive knowledge is *about*. According to advocates of the fact/value dichotomy, knowledge of matters of value – if there is such a thing at all – is knowledge of a particular non-factual category of things. The object of such knowledge is not part of the ‘domain’ of the factual. Certain types of non-evaluative knowledge, such as scientific knowledge, by contrast, are generally held to belong to the factual domain. However, as I outlined above, deniers of the dichotomy claim that these domains are not separate. Scientific enquiry, it is claimed, is value-laden, and moral terms – such as ‘bravery’ and ‘cruelty’ – have a descriptive meaning that is inseparable from the evaluative meaning.⁴³ Advocates of the dichotomy, in other words, argue that the objects of evaluative and non-evaluative knowledge are distinct, whereas deniers argue that they are not.

This is important because it suggests two ways in which a realist might respond to the Epistemological Argument. The first way tries to put an epistemological burden of proof on the defender of the Epistemological Argument. The Epistemological Argument states that the justification of political principles and values is *a priori*. If claims about values and principles have a completely different object to claims that are – paradigmatically – known *a posteriori*, such as scientific claims, then this position seems like it might be defensible. However, the arguments against the fact/value dichotomy, which I sketched earlier, deny that the objects of evaluative and descriptive knowledge are entirely distinct. So, it is much less obvious why the appropriate epistemology for evaluative and scientific claims, for instance, is completely different. To be sure, there might be distinct epistemologies despite overlapping subject-matter. However – so this response goes – since it is unobvious why this should be the case the burden is on the defender of the Epistemological Argument to show that this is the case. That is the first way in which a realist might use arguments about the fact/value dichotomy to respond to the Epistemological Argument. The second builds on the first. A realist might argue that defenders of the argument do not merely face a burden of proof; they face a burden of proof that cannot be met. There is, as a matter of fact, no way to show persuasively that the evaluative and the non-evaluative have overlapping subject-matter and yet distinct epistemologies.

The best way to defend the Epistemological Argument against both lines of response, of course, is to argue that the burden of proof can be met. Doing so is no easy task. But neither is it obviously impossible. The most promising way that I can think of to defend it is to argue that evaluative truths are necessary truths, and that our knowledge of necessary truths is *a priori*. If this is the case, then a non-realist might be able to argue that although there is no dichotomy between the evaluative and the factual, there is a clear distinction between necessary and contingent truths. Many scientific claims, for instance, belong in the latter category; claims about moral and political values and principles belong in the former. Of course, defending the necessity of such claims is no easy task. This position has certainly received criticism.⁴⁴ So, of course, has the claim that knowledge of necessary truths is *a priori*.⁴⁵ However, I only wish to highlight a way in which non-realists might defend the Epistemological Argument. As I mentioned at the outset, my aim is only to establish who has to defend which metaethical positions, not to support or criticise any such position.

III. Realism and A Priori Justification

I will now move on to a second possible realist response. According to this strategy, realists should deny that political values and principles are justified *a priori*. One way to do this, of course, is to cast doubt on the idea that anything can be justified *a priori*.⁴⁶ Another way is to suggest that political principles and values are moral principles and values, and then argue that moral claims cannot be justified *a priori*.⁴⁷ (Some realists, of course, deny that political philosophy is a branch of moral philosophy, and so will resist this strategy.⁴⁸) However, there is a third way of denying that political values and principles can be justified *a priori*, which will probably be more attractive to many realists. An extremely common theme in realist thought is that our understanding of normative and evaluative political concepts must be context-sensitive. It is argued, in various different ways, that it is either impossible or pointless to attempt acontextual political theorising. Raymond Geuss devotes much of his *Philosophy and Real Politics* to defending a variant of contextualism.⁴⁹ In particular, he defends two

⁴³ The descriptive and evaluative meanings are held to be inseparable in the sense that it is impossible to offer a reductive analysis of thick moral concepts that can fully separate the descriptive and evaluative components. For a discussion of this claim, see: Elstein and Hurka 2009.

⁴⁴ See, for instance: Blackburn 1984, p184.

⁴⁵ See, for instance: Kripke 1980.

⁴⁶ Quine’s claim that all justified beliefs could be defeated by further experience is sometimes used to argue that there could be no genuine *a priori* knowledge. See: Quine 1980; Cassam 2007, pp207-209.

⁴⁷ For defences of this view of moral epistemology, see: Boyd 1998; Brink 1989; Sturgeon 1985.

⁴⁸ See, for instance: Williams 2005; Geuss 2008, pp1-18.

⁴⁹ See: Geuss 2008, especially pp1-18, pp37-55 and pp95-101. See also Geuss 2009.

related claims: first, that we cannot understand politics and important political concepts unless we understand them as embedded within a given political context;⁵⁰ second, that appropriate political action – which, for Geuss, includes political theorising – cannot be codified, and instead relies on exercising a political skill which is sensitive to context.⁵¹ Bernard Williams puts historical context at the heart of his account of political justification. For Williams, finding an ‘acceptable’ solution to the ‘first political question’ – namely, how we can secure order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions of cooperation – is always dependent upon the circumstances and values embedded in particular society.⁵² Williams argues that while, here and now, only liberal states can offer an acceptable solution to the first political question, in different historical contexts, where those over whom power is exercised endorse different values and ideas, non-liberal solutions are perfectly acceptable.⁵³ Now, if we accept this central plank of realist thought, it seems to follow that the justification of political values and principles cannot be *a priori*. Such justification is impossible or pointless without incorporating information about the historical, social and political context. To do so is to go beyond *a priori* justification.

I have now outlined some ways of defending the second realist strategy, which turns on a denial of the idea that political values and principles can be justified *a priori*. This strategy can be used to respond to the Epistemological Argument. The latter argument, after all, relies on the claim that the justification of political claims is *a priori*. If this claim is rejected, the argument collapses. However, more interestingly, it can also be used to respond to the Metaphysical Argument. The latter argument, recall, claims that factual knowledge cannot, by itself, yield evaluative knowledge. Since realist approaches rest on factual claims – such as historical or sociological ones – further evaluative claims must be presupposed. The possibility of offering the kinds of arguments that realists offer, therefore, relies on presupposing basic political principles or values.

If the realist arguments in this section are right, and political principles and values must be justified in part *a posteriori*, then the realist has grounds to respond to the Metaphysical Argument. A realist could agree that deploying a realist methodology does indeed presuppose evaluative claims, but deny the further thought that those claims will be basic political principles and values. To be sure, such a realist might say, realist arguments presuppose value-laden claims. However, realists are not committed to denying this. They are only committed to denying that for the specific project of justifying basic political principles and values, we should avoid engaging with real politics.⁵⁴ So, a realist might think, it is both true that we cannot derive evaluative knowledge merely from factual knowledge, and that justifying basic political claims requires engagement with real politics. The fact/value dichotomy and political realism, according to this view, both stand. If this position is defensible, it seems that the realist can respond to the Metaphysical Argument.

However, how could a realist who held this view argue for it against the non-realist? The arguments that I have considered in this section give them the resources to do so. Basic principles and values must be justified at least in part *a posteriori*, according to the arguments that I have considered. This is significant because advocates of the fact/value dichotomy typically think that only factual claims can be known *a posteriori*. Recall that, according to advocates of this dichotomy, the crucial dividing line between factual and evaluative claims is that the former can be incorporated into a naturalistic world-view whereas the latter cannot. If political values and principles are known in part *a posteriori*, therefore, our knowledge of them cannot draw on purely evaluative knowledge, it must draw on factual knowledge too. So, given the assumption that the fact/value dichotomy is metaphysically robust and that knowledge of basic political principles and values is known at least in part *a posteriori*, the realist approach sketched in the last paragraph seems plausible.

Some realists, of course, might want to resist the reductive analysis of principles and arguments for them into factual and evaluative components. Given his explicit opposition to the fact/value dichotomy, Geuss would probably want to resist this.⁵⁵ Given his discussion of patriarchy mentioned above, I suspect so would Mills. However, other realists might not wish to resist this analysis, or at least might want to keep their options open. Recall that what unites realists (if anything) is the thought that mainstream political philosophers fail to

⁵⁰ Geuss claims, for instance, that ‘understanding politics means seeing that such statements [e.g. it is correct that people in general try to keep themselves alive and that all humans have to eat to survive] do not wear their meanings on their sleeves; in fact understanding politics means seeing that such statements have clear meaning at all only relative to their specific context, and this context is one of historically structured forms of action’ (Geuss 2008, p14).

⁵¹ Political action, Geuss argues, ‘requires the deployment of skills and forms of judgement that cannot easily be imparted by simple speech, that cannot reliably be codified or routinised, and that do not automatically come with the mastery of certain theories. A skill is an ability to act in a flexible way that is responsive to features of the given environment’ (Geuss 2008, p15).

⁵² See: Williams 2005, p3.

⁵³ See: *ibid* pp4-8.

⁵⁴ It might be argued that if there are evaluative presuppositions in the justification of ‘basic’ political values and principles, then those values and principles are not really basic after all. In one sense, this is correct. However, I have been using ‘basic’ in a different sense; to say that a political principle is basic implies that other political claims are applications of it. In this sense, there is no tension between the claim that a political principle is basic and that further evaluative claims are presupposed in its justification.

⁵⁵ See Geuss 2008 pp16-17.

engage with real politics and we should do so. There is nothing in this thought that seems to obviously imply that the kind of analysis sketched above is unacceptable. Moreover, I see nothing in the work of realists such as Amartya Sen and David Miller that is incompatible with this kind of analysis.⁵⁶ The real significance of the arguments in this section, however, is that the fact/value dichotomy is not a threat to realism per se, even if some realists nevertheless want to reject it.

IV. Going on the Offensive

So far, I have outlined two arguments against realism and two strategies for responding to those arguments. The arguments turned on claims about the metaphysics and epistemology of value. The responses defended rival claims – that there is no fact/value dichotomy and that political values and principles are not *a priori*. In this section, I will suggest that realists can make further use of these metaethical claims. Rather than appealing to them merely to defend realism, they can use them to criticise non-realism. Realists, in other words, can go on the offensive.

In §II, I considered one strategy for opposing the Metaphysical Argument and undermining the motivation for the Epistemological Argument: denying that the fact/value dichotomy is metaphysically robust. This strategy gives the realist most of the materials they need to make the following argument. If we should abandon the fact/value dichotomy, then there is no clear sense in which values and principles are entirely non-factual. As I mentioned in §II, the arguments put forward for abandoning the dichotomy suggest that supposedly descriptive ideas are value-laden and that supposedly evaluative ideas are fact-laden. A realist may, therefore, pose the following question to the non-realist: how can you hope to justify claims that are fact-laden – namely, claims about political values and principles – without engaging with political reality? This seems to be quite a powerful challenge. I shall refer to it as the Alternative Metaphysical Argument.

In §III, I outlined a second strategy that a realist could use to avoid the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. This strategy denies that our values and principles are known and justified *a priori*. This thought could also be used, by a realist, to argue against non-realism. According to this argument, since principles and values cannot be justified *a priori*, it is difficult to see how we can justify principles and values without engaging with real politics. Surely, this argument goes, establishing political principles and values through an epistemology that is – at the very least – not merely *a priori* should lead us to engage with real politics. If the latter claim is correct, then it is difficult to see how we could defend a non-realist methodology. I will refer to this as the Alternative Epistemological Argument.

So, we have two arguments against non-realism. How could a non-realist respond? One obvious way is to defend both the fact/value dichotomy *and* the claim that values and principles are justified *a priori*. Beyond this, there are two types of strategies worth considering. The first strategy a non-realist could use to respond to the Alternative Metaphysical Argument is as follows. A non-realist could agree that the justification of values and principles depends upon *certain kinds* of factual claims, but not ones that realists are concerned with. Typically, realists do not merely say that we should be concerned with empirical or contingent facts in the course of justifying political claims. Rather, they argue that we should be concerned with specific kinds of real world considerations; it is considerations of power,⁵⁷ conflict,⁵⁸ the mechanism of political institutions,⁵⁹ and so on, which realists argue are important. Given this, a non-realist could argue that political philosophy is, indeed, permeated by descriptive notions, just not *those* ones.⁶⁰

Suppose we thought, for instance, that some principle has genuine normative or evaluative significance if everyone under certain idealised conditions (such as being informed and having undergone a process of rational deliberation) would agree that it did indeed have normative or evaluative significance.⁶¹ In this case, the normative and evaluative considerations are dependent on facts about humans – since under idealised conditions it must be the case all humans would accept them – and so we could, if we liked, consistently deny that we can disentangle the evaluative and the descriptive. However, the kind of descriptive considerations that are being appealed to – the consensus of opinions of all persons under idealised conditions – differ from the historically

⁵⁶ Miller, for instance, defends the claim that basic political principles of justice are ‘fact-dependent’; that is ‘their validity depends on the truth of some general empirical propositions about human beings and human societies, such that if these propositions were shown to be false, the concepts and principles in question would have to be modified or abandoned’ (Miller 2013 p18). This realist claim seems perfectly compatible with a reductive analysis of arguments into evaluative and factual components.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Geuss 2008, pp23-30.

⁵⁸ See, for instance: Gray 2007; Mouffe 2005.

⁵⁹ See, for instance: Elkin 2006.

⁶⁰ See Miller’s discussion of more and less radical versions of the claim that political principles should be fact-insensitive in Miller p20 and p28.

⁶¹ This model, of course, is not too far from ideas developed by the earlier and later work of Rawls and that of Habermas. See: Rawls 1971, pp102-170; Rawls 1993, pp11-46; Habermas 1996.

and geographically specific considerations of power, conflict, institutional set-up, and so on, that tend to be the concern of realists. According to this position, therefore, the values and principles are still bound up with factual claims, but not about real politics. This approach is certainly not without its difficulties. It relies on at least two extremely controversial claims: that people would concur even under idealised conditions and that it would prove anything if they did.⁶² However, it is certainly one strategy that a non-realist could use.

So, that is one way a non-realist could respond to the Alternative Metaphysical Argument. There is an analogous way that a non-realist could respond to the Alternative Epistemological Argument. A non-realist could concede that the justification of values and principles is, indeed, at least in part *a posteriori*. However, they could argue, we do not need to appeal to *a posteriori* claims concerning matters that realists are interested in (relations of power, conflict, institutions and so on). It is enough to appeal to other kinds of facts that are justified *a posteriori*. For instance, if there are basic facts about human nature that hold across all societies now and in the past, and if these claims are known *a posteriori*, then it could be argued that these facts are relevant to the justification of values and principles. As with the first response to the Alternative Metaphysical Argument, an important concern with this response is how it could be motivated. The response relies on establishing that some *but only some a posteriori* claims are relevant to the justification of political values and principles. (Moreover, as a realist may point out, the excluded *a posteriori* claims are ones which, on the face of it, seem extremely relevant to normative political enquiry.) The obvious response to this strategy, therefore, is: why exclude these particular *a posteriori* claims?

The second type of strategy for responding to the Alternative Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments is as follows. A non-realist could simply deny that we should appeal to values and principles in order to justify normative and evaluative political claims. Non-realists could, in other words, endorse a version of particularism.⁶³ Particularist non-realists avoid engaging with real politics in the course of justifying principles, which are (according to the Alternative Metaphysical Argument) fact-laden and (according to the Alternative Epistemological Argument) justified *a posteriori*, simply by not trying to justify principles in the first place.

There are two reasons why a non-realist might wish to resist resorting to particularism, however. First, very few modern political philosophers have been sympathetic to particularism, so this is not a move to be made lightly. Given that so much work in political philosophy has focused on which values and principles should guide political action, this move would require quite a shake-up of non-realist methodologies. Second, non-realists argue that at least some parts of normative political enquiry should be independent of considerations about political reality. It is very hard to see how this could be squared with the idea (central to particularism) that normative enquiry must attend to the features of some specific case, rather than generalising from other cases or applying general principles. Accepting this approach, therefore, leads to a problematic tension. Where does the independence from political reality feature if normative enquiry proceeds from particular cases? It is very hard to see, therefore, how we could motivate a non-realist particularist approach to political philosophy.

To sum up, I have considered two arguments against non-realism. These arguments are parallel to the arguments against realism which I have devoted the majority of this paper to exploring. The arguments against non-realism turn on the claims about the metaphysics and epistemology of value, which were used by realists to avoid the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. One turns on the denial of the fact/value dichotomy, and the other turns on the claim that the justification of principles and values is not *a priori*. I have tried to outline some of the main strategies that non-realists could use to avoid these arguments. None of these strategies, of course, are uncontroversial. So the non-realist, like the realist, has an argumentative burden.

V. Summary

It is worth briefly summing up the claims that I have made about who has to argue what in order to make their position defensible. I have suggested that realists must defend at least one of two positions about the metaphysics and epistemology of value. First, they could argue that the fact/value dichotomy is not metaphysically robust. Second, they could argue that political values and principles are not justified *a priori*. Defending *either* of these positions, I have suggested, provides a way of responding to *both* the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. I have also argued that non-realists face the Alternative Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. One way to respond to these arguments is to defend the robustness of the fact/value dichotomy and the claim that the justification of political values and principles is *a priori*. A second way is to agree that facts are relevant, just not the kind of facts that realists are concerned with. A third way – although not a very appealing one for the non-realist – is to advocate particularism.

So, what is the significance of this? Firstly, it highlights that both realists and non-realists cannot remain neutral on metaethical matters. The plausibility of both kinds of approach to political philosophy rests on

⁶² See, for instance: Waldron 1999, pp147-208.

⁶³ See: Dancy 2004.

the plausibility of certain metaethical claims. Secondly, I hope my arguments have contributed to the ongoing debate between realists and non-realists by clarifying which positions each side has to defend. However, there seems, to me at least, to be two further reasons why the foregoing discussion is significant. Thirdly, compared to the currently very limited discussion of the metaethical dimension of the realism debate, and also compared to initial impressions a reader might have when considering the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments, my analysis in some ways strengthens the realist's position. For one thing, they have more options than might seem initially obvious to the reader when encountering the Metaphysical and Epistemological Arguments. Denying either the fact/value dichotomy or the claim that values and principles are justified *a priori* is sufficient to avoid both arguments. For another thing, non-realists also have a metaethical case to answer, despite the fact that such a case has not been explored in the current literature on realism. However, fourthly, there is at least some cost to the realist, or at least to realists who argue that political philosophy is not a branch of ethics. They must articulate this view in a sufficiently nuanced way to allow for the relevance of metaethics to debate between realists and non-realists.⁶⁴

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