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POLITICAL POSSIBILITY.
A RESEARCH INTO THE METHODS OF NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This is a research about the limits and the conduct of normative political thinking. When we take a normative perspective about political matters, we essentially engage in an attempt to figure out how our political practices ought to be, compared to what they are. By being so characterised, however, it looks sensible to wonder whether this sort of theoretical endeavour ought to be somehow disciplined and constrained. Are there any limits with respect to the political worlds that we can imagine as normative? Is there some kind of relation between the world as it is and the world as it should be?

In the present study, I explore this fundamental problem. The four essays that together compose this thesis analyse the relationship between political reality and normative theory from different viewpoints. In doing so, they try to offer a better understanding of the limits of political possibility for normative political thinking. The first essay asks what is the appropriate procedure to tackle the problem of the limit of political possibility for normative political theory. The second essay investigates whether political theories ought to identify the desirable political worlds by relying on some features of the actual world, namely by following a bottom-up procedure. The third essay follows a similar lead and defines what sort of theoretical structure would result from the employment of a bottom-up procedure – that is to say, the third essay clarifies how political theories ought to manage the factual knowledge that the bottom-up procedure regards as normatively relevant. Finally, the fourth essay investigates whether the bottom-up theories defended in the second and third essays have to be subjected to some sort of feasibility requirements.

In sum, I affirm that the limit of the political possibility for normative political theory ought to be traced where the political worlds which are practically possible, and which are compatible with the instantiation of the values that concrete agents deem important, can be found. This conclusion has important consequences with respect to the conduct of normative political thinking. I maintain that the theorist ought to be primarily an attentive observer and interpreter of concrete political practices. Moreover, the arguments that I outline suggest that we ought to look at our own world primarily in a spirit of reconciliation, rather than criticism. These two ways of looking at our practices are both fundamental, but I suggest that we should first and foremost look at our world and observe whether something makes sense in it and can be valued, rather than focusing on what could be subverted.

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To Alberto, Nadia, and Nicolò

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INTRODUCTION

This is a research about the limits and the conduct of a specific form of imaginative thinking – normative political thinking. When we take a normative perspective about political matters, we essentially engage in an attempt to figure out how our political practices ought to be, compared to what they are. The ultimate purpose of normative political theory is to identify what sort of political arrangements ought to be regarded as desirable to pursue and, correspondingly, to offer us some insight about how present circumstances ought to be assessed. It is, therefore, definitely peculiar as an exercise of imagination, insofar as it plays some crucial practical functions: by providing some insights about what ought to be done, normative political thinking defines criteria to evaluate present circumstances, orients collective action, and allows to have a critical grasp of the world that surrounds us.

By being so characterised, however, it looks sensible to wonder whether this sort of imaginative endeavour ought to be somehow disciplined and constrained. Are there any limits with respect to the political worlds that we can imagine as normative? More specifically, is there some kind of relation between the world as it is and the world as it should be? If normative political theory is supposed to play a practical function in our world, it would seem sensible to believe that some form of interaction between the status quo and the envisioned normative alternatives should subsist. In fact, we might wonder how political models that are significantly distant from our political realities could offer some indications about how our political world ought to be organised.

In the present study, I explore this fundamental problem. The four essays that together compose this thesis analyse the relationship between political reality and normative theory from different viewpoints. In doing so, they try to offer a better understanding of the limits of political possibility for normative political thinking. Ultimately, this research seeks to get a better sense of the maximum distance that ought to be set between the actual world and the possible worlds we might regard as having a normative valence for us. Therefore, this inquiry is methodological in nature: the objective that I set is understanding how normative theories about politics ought to be

structured, not that of proposing a self-contained normative theory – even though these two issues are in an important sense connected.

Even though this topic resonates classical philosophical controversies, it is only in recent times, that it has gained the attention of political theorists as a self-standing problem. When the present research began to take shape, in 2012, the problem of the interdependence between theory and reality in political thinking had just started to attire a lively discussion. As the wide majority of contemporary debates in political theory, the discussions about the appropriate methods to employ in normative reflection took origin from some claims by John Rawls. By grounding his normative research on two fundamental ideas, Rawls brought to the attention of political theorists two methodological controversies. In an attempt to make explicit the fundamental methodological assumptions behind his normative inquiry, he firstly claimed that:

> the intuitive idea is to split the theory of justice into two parts. The first or ideal part assumes strict compliance and works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable circumstances […] ideal part presents a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can. Existing institutions are to be judged in the light of this conception (Rawls 1999, 216)

But he added also a second point:

> Political philosophy is realistically utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought to be the limits of practicable political possibility […]. We have to rely on conjecture and speculation, arguing as best we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist, if not now then at some future time under happier circumstances. (Rawls 2001, 11-12)

These two clauses stand at the base of Rawls's normative theory of politics, and determine the pillars around which the whole methodological debate has developed since then. For one thing, by explaining that normative political reflection needs to be split into an ideal and a non-ideal counterpart, Rawls explicitly admitted that, in order to get a proper sense of what would be a desirable political world for us, political theories ought to be construed by making use of some specific idealisations – like strict compliance. Furthermore, Rawls also specified that his theory was meant to offer a *realistic utopia*, namely that it was designed in order to satisfy certain specific feasibility

requirements. Both these requirements – the level of idealisation admitted by the theoretical framework, and the degree of feasibility expected by the theory – were meant to impose some descriptive constraints on the possible political worlds that the theory could prescribe. These requirements set, in other words, a certain conception of the maximum distance between the actual political world and the possible political worlds that the normative reflection could admit.

So, complicit Rawls' claims, the question of the relationship between reality and theory re-gained attention in the form of an interest into the factual assumption that a theory ought to start from, and the feasibility constraints that it ought to abide by. Since then, a large amount of work has been done to support, dismantle, or simply overcome, Rawls' methodological commitments. More generally, efforts have been put into the endeavour of understanding the boundaries of imagination for normative political thinking. Yet, a lot still needs to be done. Indeed, as I will show all along the present study, the current debate largely appears unsystematic. This is partly a natural consequence of the fact that, as I said, a systematic analysis of the problem of the relationship between reality and theory in normative political theory has become an object of interest only recently. But this is also due to the fact that, being a methodological – and hence *meta*theoretical – dispute, this debate engages political theorists who come from diverse theoretical traditions and who, therefore, conceive the task and the limits of political theorising in radically different ways. Notably, whether a theorist regards herself as a moralist or a realist political thinker plays a fundamental role in her conception of the method that normative political theorising ought to follow. A large part of the present study will be dedicated to the divergence between moralism and realism and its methodological impact. The essays that follow will offer a contribution to this wide and thorny debate by providing some interpretive keys to systematise the discussion, and by offering a general answer to the problem of the distance that normative political theory can set between the actual and the possible political worlds.

However, before turning to the substance of the thesis that I am going to defend in the course of my research, let me spend a few words on the reasons that motivate this kind of inquiry. Indeed, I said a few times that this sort of inquiry looks crucial for political reasoning – why? The conception of the boundaries of political possibility for normative political theory that we adopt shapes political reflection along three

fundamental dimensions: the structure of political theorising, the vocation of the political theorist, and the way in which we relate to our own practical world. Depending on the distance between the actual world and those that will be judged admissible to envision, the structure of political theories will be more or less abstract; correspondingly, the political theorist will be more or less concerned with having a clear empirical grasp of actual political practices. Moreover, we will tend to develop different sorts of judgments towards our own world: the further we will locate the ideal political arrangements from present circumstances, the harsher the dissatisfaction towards our own world will be. Hence, by delving into the relationship between reality and normative theory we will be able to inform and determine the conduct of political reasoning. As I will extensively explain in the analysis that will follow, the boundary to political possibility traced by the methodological research defines to what extent normative political theory needs to be interested in this political world. The methodological inquiry determines how we ought to look at, relate, and judge, actual political circumstances. For this reason, a study into the political possibilities that are accessible to normative political theorising must be regarded as a crucial step towards an adequate assessment of political practices.

I do not pretend to have addressed the methodological issue in its entirety. But I do not regard this as a shortcoming, rather as a necessary consequence of the complexity of the subject at stake. For this reason, also, the present study has been developed as a series of independent papers. Indeed, I regard such argumentative choice as the best way to address the problem at hand: by construing independent papers, my intention was to tackle the methodological issue from different perspectives, thereby making explicit the precise and narrow questions examined each time, but providing also a sufficient number of answers to suggest an overall interpretation of the methodological issue. I will shortly explain what I take to have left aside, and what are the further directions that the methodological research should follow to increase our understanding of the relationship between theory and reality that political reasoning ought to consider. However, let me get clear about the positive contribution I provided first.

The four essays are deeply connected and represent different steps of a single research path towards a first clarification of the appropriate boundaries of political

possibility for normative political theory. Overall, the research aims to take a stand with respect to both the Rawlsian claims above-mentioned – respectively, the degree of fact-sensitivity and feasibility expected by political theories – by defining a procedure to analyse them, and offering separate answers to each of those methodological controversies. The order of the topics addressed is not casual but follows a systematisation of the literature that I offer in the first essay.

In the first paper, I explain that the methodological debate has developed upon fragile basis, and I propose a way to reframe the research accordingly. Indeed, in the first step of my analysis, I argue that in the contemporary methodological literature two major strategies to justify the border of political possibilities can be identified: the output strategy and the input strategy. On the one hand, according to the output strategy, the border of political possibilities is defined by placing constraints on the conclusions of theories: the distance between the actual and the possible normative political theory can admit is given by the required degree of feasibility of the worlds the theory recommends. On the other hand, according to the input strategy, the border of political possibilities is defined by placing constraints on the premises of theories: the set of political possibilities admissible is given by the description of political reality we should start from, and hold fixed, when we are construing normative frameworks. Crucially, in the first paper I argue that these two methodological strategies are independent: a theory admissible according to the first strategy – because appropriately applicable – could be refuted by the second one – because inadequate premises make it invalid (and vice-versa). And yet, this diversity in methods has remained largely unrecognised, especially because political realism – which I take to be the most developed and compelling input approach – has been often misinterpreted as a thesis about output requirements, i.e. as a call for action-guidance. As I show along the paper, this serious misinterpretation of the realist approach has given rise to a flawed methodological debate, because largely incomplete and structured around disputes that talk past each other. Therefore, in the first paper I conclude that, in order to properly understand the boundary of political possibilities for normative political theory, the methodological inquiry ought to be reframed by taking into account both input and output arguments, and assessing their relative merits. Accordingly, I propose a unified framework of analysis through which intersecting both methodologies. Following a

combined understanding of the two strategies, I argue that politically possible worlds must be defined as representations of states of affairs consistent with the descriptive constraints placed both on inputs and on outputs of theories.

Accordingly, the second paper provides an argument in favour of the adoption of some specific input constraints by outlining a justification of the realist approach. Notably, indeed, political realism defends a *bottom-up*, and *contextualist*, approach to political theorising. For political realists, what ought to be done in a given practical context must be a function of (a suitable interpretation and assessment of) the beliefs of the participants: political practices ought to be structured in order to abide by what agents find valuable in a given context. But why should we endorse a similar approach to political reasoning? Despite the recent attention political realism has gained, I explain that the question of its justification has been somehow neglected or underestimated. I argue that the most compelling reason to adopt political realism is prudential, and I outline an argument in its favour. I contend that political realism should be adopted as a guide for practical political life because to propose and defend normative paradigms is not a mere theoretical exercise: to implement and follow the prescriptions of a normative paradigm bears with it concrete consequences and costs. For this reason, my contention is that the choice of the methods to employ in normative political reasoning could be the fruit of a prudential assessment. In particular, since, as I explain, the implementation of normative proposals which clash with what actual agents deem valuable is costly (because politics entails the use of force), and the gains are uncertain (because normative knowledge is subject to deep disagreement), we can motivate the choice to follow a realist methodology on the basis of a prudential calculus: we have a reason to prioritise realism as a method to define prescriptions and locate the site of normative authority on participants' beliefs, because this choice safeguards the concrete interests of actual agents.

If the second paper provides a justification for the adoption of some input constraints, the third one allows us to understand how those constraints shape the conception of the political worlds we deem desirable. Precisely, I argue that the most appropriate way to conceive the structure of realist theories is to see them as consequences of a *practice-dependent* procedure. As I explain in detail, practice-dependent methodologies construe normative proposals by making a specific use of actual agents'

beliefs: they identify the point and purpose of the practices under exam from the point of view of their participants, and define how the actual world ought to look like if it were to perfectly abide by the values those practices safeguard. Does this mean that political realism cannot revise actual circumstances? Is political realism a markedly conservative approach to political theorising? I claim that this would represent a wrong interpretation of the realist bottom-up methodology. In fact, a practice-dependent procedure might justify a severe revision of the status quo, in case actual practices failed to appropriately fulfil their alleged purposes. Moreover, the interpretive process might lead us to realise that some of the participants beliefs are inconsistent or fragile, thereby inviting a revision both of participants' beliefs and practices. Therefore, I explain that the bottom-up methodology political realism embraces ought to be interpreted as a form of *reformist conservatism*, in which the political proposals envisioned are linked to a substantive extent to the actual world – since they are built from what concrete agents value – but might also depart from it – in the measure that the interpretive process allows us to revise concrete practices and actual beliefs.

However, as anticipated by the arguments outlined in the first essay, to define how input constraints affect the structure of a theory does not imply anything, in itself, about the output constraints that ought to be applied. Accordingly, the fourth essay aims to propose an analysis of feasibility requirements that realist political theories ought to follow. Are there any additional factual constraints, besides the ones set by the bottom-up procedure, that realist political proposals ought to follow? The last step of my research claims that realist proposals ought to be designed as to consider the ultimate border of practical possibilities – hence, there is no specific additional feasibility condition that they ought to fulfil. This might sound at first bizarre: isn't political realism precisely supposed to guide us here and now? As recalled in the first paper, and as I emphasise here, this is a misinterpretation of the realist approach. Rather, as I argue, political realism is required to explore all the political possibilities that are achievable to us and that abide by the bottom-up procedure which characterises this approach. As I explain, this is due to the fact that, for realists, a proper assessment of the costs and risk that we should face in actual circumstances requires a complete knowledge of the alternatives at our disposal. This means also that political realism might admit as normatively relevant possible worlds relatively far from actual circumstances.

Accordingly, in the fourth essay I analyse how the relationship between the actual and the envisioned political worlds ought to be conceived and structured in realist paradigms.

Now that I have outlined the argumentative path I followed, let me briefly sum up what I take to be my achievements. Above, I said that I regard the present analysis as relevant along three dimensions of political reasoning: the structure of political theories, the vocation of the theorist, and the relationship that we come to entertain with our own practical context. First of all, I affirm that the limit of the political possibility for normative political theory ought to be traced where the political worlds which are practically possible (output constraint), and which are compatible with the instantiation of the values that concrete agents deem important (input constraint), can be found. Relatedly, I maintain that the theorist ought to be primarily an attentive observer and interpreter of concrete political practices. In fact, the theorist is not meant to dictate what ought to be done: such knowledge is gathered from concrete practices. The theorist importantly clarifies our beliefs and provides a correct interpretation of the practical context. However, the theorist might also exercise another fundamental role: even though she cannot dictate what ought to be done from a context-insensitive perspective, she might nonetheless provide tools to criticise, and possibly change, our own beliefs; she might, that is, exercise an auxiliary and external critical role by fostering debates and fomenting discussions. Finally, with regard to our own relation to the practical context, the arguments that I outline suggest that we ought to look at our own world primarily in a spirit of reconciliation, rather than criticism. These two ways of looking at our practices are both fundamental, but I would like to suggest that we should first and foremost look at our world and observe whether something makes sense in it and can be valued, rather than focusing on what could be subverted.

Before turning to what I take to be the further research paths that ought to be pursued in the methodological inquiry, I would clarify some of the doubts that might arise during the reading. As I said, I favoured a paper-based approach, because I regard it as the best way to tackle the methodological issue. This choice has shortcomings too, since the different steps are not immediately connected with the others, despite being part of a single project. So, let me get clear about two possible sources of confusion that the discussion that will follow might generate. A first one concerns the conclusions I

reach in the first paper. As the reader will notice, the research path I outline at the end of that paper is composed by three steps. The third step, however, remains unanswered by the present thesis. Indeed, though I regard the third step as necessary to provide a complete answer to the problem of political possibilities for normative political theory, its solution would require an attentive empirical and interpretive analysis. This is something that goes beyond the intents and the possibilities of the present research, through which I tried to offer a general framework to analyse and understand the problem of the border of political possibility for normative political theory. However, this would represent the natural continuation of the present study. A second possible source of confusion is instead conceptual. I refer to "ideal theory" both in the first and the fourth paper, but I use this concept in slightly different ways. This different usage is due to the diverse purposes that the two papers have, and it is made possible by the fact that the concept of ideal theory is versatile and that has been subjected to different interpretations. In both cases, ideal theories are meant to portray desirable and possibly unfeasible states of affairs. In the first paper, however, I talk about ideal theories adding a further specification: I refer to ideal theories as to those theories which employ severe abstraction or idealisations in their premises. This is a specification absent in the fourth paper, and this conceptual diversity allows me to introduce the notion of "realist ideal theories" in the final part of the paper.

To conclude, I would like to indicate three further directions that, I believe, the methodological inquiry ought to follow. First of all, there is ample scope to refine the notion of practical possibility. To provide a full-fledged descriptive account of the distance between the possible and the actual that normative political theory could admit, we would have to substantively specify what the notion of practical possibility does entail. Secondly, even though in the fourth essay I extensively deal with the problem of the relationship between theory and actual judgment, I do not directly address how political judgments in concrete circumstances ought to be formulated. This would require an attentive analysis of concrete cases and scenarios, which would have brought me far from the purposes of my discussion. However, if normative political theory aims to offer some insight about how we should improve present circumstances, a detailed examine of the methodology of political judgment is of primary importance. Finally, the methodological inquiry would necessitate a detailed analysis of how we can come to

make sense of our practical context and of the values we deem important for our collective life. We would need, in other words, to provide a full-fledged account of how an interpretation of the sense and purpose of our practical life could be conducted. With my essays, I attempted to provide a stable basis on which to systematize methodological researches, and on which to develop these further lines of inquiry.

I.

TWO WAYS TO JUSTIFY THE LIMIT OF POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

1. Introduction: Possible worlds for normative political theory

Political theory might endorse several functions. Among these, political theory might play a normative role. When political theory is conceived as endorsing such a normative function, its main concern consists in defining – broadly speaking – what politics should be and, accordingly, what are the goal(s) towards which our actions ought to be directed[1].

The aim of this paper is to offer a contribution to the *methodological* understanding of normative political theory (henceforward, NPT). That is to say, this paper will deal with the conduct, not the content, of normative political theorising. In particular, the present study will clarify how a fundamental problem which is at the very heart of the methodological inquiries about NPT – namely the problem of the relationship between facts and principles – ought to be systematised and analysed.

Let me exactly explain the nature of the problem I am going to deal with by making use of a jargon external to political philosophy. Let's say that the status quo is the *actual political world*, and that the totality of arrangements that NPT prescribes to achieve is an envisioned political world, alternative to ours, and (for some reason) more desirable[2]. Let's call this alternative world a *possible political world*. Indeed, in a straightforward and minimal sense, the desirable world that the theory prescribes is a "possible" political world, because it depicts an imaginary vision of how coexistence could be organised. However, we might also wonder whether this is sufficient, or satisfying, characterisation of the tasks of NPT. In fact, we could think that not every

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[1] Following the introduction to the methodology of political theory proposed by Christian List and Laura Valentini, I can say that with NPT I am referring to that part of political theory which deals with *normative principles*, where "A principle is normative if it has normative content; for instance, it includes deontic operators such as ought, may, permissible, obligatory, right, or wrong" (List and Valentini 2016, 536).

[2] The idea of possible worlds has been largely employed in contemporary modal logic as a tool define and formalise the notions of possibility and necessity. For a useful overview, see Cresswell and Hughes 1996.

conceivable world alternative to ours might constitute a normative alternative, namely something that we ought to achieve. Maybe some worlds are just too far away, or are too fanciful, to be considered desirable political alternative *for us*. So, we could try to offer a more refined definition of "possible" political world, and restrict the notion of political possibility by analysing whether the worlds NPT prescribes ought to satisfy some descriptive requirement. Hence, we might wonder whether there is a maximum distance that should be set between the actual political world and the political worlds we envision as normatively authoritative for us. Is there a specific relationship between reality and principles that NPTs ought to take into account? Is there, in other words, a limit to the possible political worlds that NPT can demand to achieve?

At first sight, a negative answer would seem the most appropriate. Given Hume's Law, it would seem improper to let factual considerations regarding our own political world to shape the conception of what ought to be done politically – and this might well be the right answer. Yet, it seems that we cannot get rid of such a methodological issue so quickly. Indeed, some insights in the opposite direction have been recently put forward. Specifically, two orders of considerations have been advanced. On the one hand, it has been stressed that if the political worlds we envision aims at being normatively relevant for us, they should be somehow consistent with what is practicably possible for us:

> Political philosophy is realistically utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought to be the limits of practicable political possibility […]. I recognize that there are questions about how the limits of the practicably possible are discerned and what the conditions of our social world in fact are. The problem here is that the limits of the possible are not given by the actual, for we can to a greater or lesser extent change political and social institutions and much else. Hence we have to rely on conjecture and speculation, *arguing as best we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist, if not now then at some future time under happier circumstances*. (Rawls 2001, 11-12, emphasis added)

On a different note, but with a similar intent to state a connection between reality and political norms, it has been claimed that political theory should be practically-informed; that is, any appraisal of what ought to be done ought to start from an understanding of practices as they are. What ought to be done is, in this sense, dependent on practices as they happen to be:

Political philosophy must be realist. That means, roughly speaking, that it must start from and be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally (or ought "rationally") to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances. (Geuss 2008, 9)

So, in the light of some recent methodological suggestions, it looks legitimate to ask whether NPT should be considered constrained by reality in some ways.

Clarifying this issue looks crucial for at least two reasons. Firstly, if we had to admit that reality has a role to play in envisioning how politics should be, depending on how we are going to conceive such relationship, the content of our normative theories is going to change substantially. We could come to reject some normative proposals because they fail to meet some requirements dictated by reality. Secondly, if facts and principles proved to be somehow related, this would also affect the "vocation" of the political theorist[3]. Depending, indeed, on the degree of relevance that we are going to attribute to the empirical knowledge in political theory, the interaction between philosophy and social science is going to be shaped differently, and the tasks that a political theorist is expected to accomplish will vary accordingly.

In this paper, my intention is to show that scholars have discussed such methodological problem in the wrong terms. My central task will be to define an appropriate research method to address the issue at stake. So, I am not going to give any substantive answer to the methodological problem raised; rather, my main attempt will be to outline an adequate procedure in order to reach a satisfactory solution.

2. Descriptive constraints on NPTs: Two criteria of methodological adequacy

As I said, this paper is motivated by a dissatisfaction towards the way in which the current methodological debate addresses the problem of the relationship between facts and principles in NPT. So, how has the issue been approached so far, and what are the main shortcoming of the current analysis?

As said, I define the problem raised as the problem of the border of the possible

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[3] Here I am borrowing a terminology introduced by Marc Stears (2005).

worlds for NPT; and, from now on, I will refer to "political possibilities" to indicate those possible worlds which NPT can legitimately refer to. I am going to show that, in the literature, there can be traced two fundamental strategies to justify the imposition of a certain distance between our real political world and the political world *as it should be*: the *output strategy* and the *input strategy*. These two justificatory strategies arise from two different ways of interpreting the methodological adequacy of theories. According to the output strategy, the border of political possibilities is defined by placing constraints on the *conclusions* of theories: the distance between the actual world and the possible worlds NPT can admit is given by the required degree of applicability of the worlds the theory recommends, i.e. by the description of those facts that the theory must not attempt to change. According to the input strategy, the border of political possibilities is defined by placing constraints on the *premises* of theories: the set of political possibilities admissible is given by the appropriate sources of normativity of political theory, i.e. the description of political reality we should start from, and hold fixed, when we are construing normative proposals. Usually, the output strategy is mostly found in the debates on ideal theory[4] and feasibility[5], whereas the input strategy mainly characterises the political realist tradition[6].

Unfortunately, these two strategies do not recognise each other and they are never brought into dialogue; this, I think, is the main shortcoming of the current methodological debate. As I am going to illustrate, such failure to acknowledge the existence of these two diverse justificatory strategies weakens the methodological debate and compromises the chances of providing a satisfactory solution to the problem highlighted. In fact, the two strategies contrast with respect to the stages of theories on which they apply their methodological criteria of adequacy. The failure to appreciate this distinction implies a failure to appreciate the different sources from which a constraint upon the set of possible worlds for NPT might arise. Hence, disregarding one of the two available justificatory strategies means providing just a partial answer to the problem of the border of political possibility for NPT. For this reason, I will argue that both strategies must be taken into account and discussed in order to reach a sound answer.

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[4] For a useful overview, see Stemplowska and Swift 2012.
[5] On this debate, Brennan and Pettit 2007 and Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012 offer useful introductions.
[6] For a general account of the realist tradition see Galston 2010.

Accordingly, in the final part of the paper, I will propose a unified framework of analysis through which intersecting both methodologies.

In the following, I am going to illustrate both strategies in detail. Once the two methodologies will be unfolded, it will become clearer how a unified framework of analysis should look like, i.e. which are the steps and the elements that we must focus on in order to provide a satisfactory answer to the question at stake.

3. The output strategy

The most common way to establish a relationship between real politics and the idea of politics that should guide our actions consists in affirming that the goals towards which we ought to move need to be practicably reachable. This is precisely the point John Rawls raises in the above-mentioned quotation, when he says that we must argue "as best we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist" (2001, 12). This claim recalls the commonly accepted, but also much disputed, *ought implies can* principle. For those who accept such relationship between facts and norms, our practical duties should be informed by ideas of politics which we could, in principle, realise. In this sense, the methodological adequacy of theories is expressed through the adoption of *feasibility* thresholds for NPT: NPTs are said to be methodologically adequate when they are consistent with a certain – still to be specified – level of applicability. Thus, as anticipated, the methodological adequacy of political theories is here discussed as a constraint which applies to the outcomes of theories. In case the prescriptions of a theory prove to be feasible in the specified sense, the theory can be judged methodologically adequate.

In the literature there are two separate ways to discuss which feasibility threshold NPTs ought to satisfy. Let us see them in turn, as they offer two much different interpretations of the set of possible worlds NPT would be allowed to refer to.

3.1. Output Realism

A first and typical way of endorsing output constraints sounds as follows:

there is some conceptual incoherence involved in saying 'This is what justice involves, but there is no way it could be implemented' (Mason, 2004, p.

255). This incoherence stems from the fact that a theory of social justice, and the principles of justice it endorses, must function as an adequate *guide* for our collective action. A theory of social justice that yields impotent or misguided practical prescriptions is a deficient theory of justice. If the collective aspiration to implement the conclusions of a theory would not result in any noticeable increase in the justness of one's society, then it fails as a *normative* theory. (Farrelly 2007, 845)

The above quotation comes from Colin Farrelly's "Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation". However, a number of similar claims can be traced in the recent literature. David Miller, for example, emphasises: "I start from the assumption that political philosophy is a branch of practical reason – it is thought whose final aim is to guide action, as opposed to having a merely speculative purpose" (Miller 2008, 44). Similarly, John Dunn affirms that "the purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show how best to confront them" (Dunn 1990, 193). Thus, according to some commentators, a political theory which is unable to offer effective action-guidance proves to be a flawed NPT, as the main task of a political theory is to address the concrete practical dilemmas that we happen to face in the actual world. Recalling the terminology I have adopted in the previous section, the authors who underline the fundamental practical role of NPT argue in favour of a specific criterion of adequacy for political theories: NPTs are methodologically adequate when the prescriptions they advance can be usefully followed by real-word agents.

However, a similar requirement still does not give us a picture of the border of possible worlds those authors judge appropriate for political theory. After all, it might well be the case that ideas of better political worlds much far from ours could fruitfully inspire our actions here and now. So, how do scholars who emphasise the practical role of political theory come to interpret the border of political possibilities?

The question is clarified once we read such methodological interest towards the feasibility of theories in light of their polemic target. Here, indeed, it is worth noticing that Farrelly explicitly refers to Andrew Mason in the quotation proposed above; his comments are meant to address the article "Just Constraints" in which Mason defends ideal theorising as a crucial element of NPT (Mason 2004). Indeed, the discussions around the required applicability of normative principles arise precisely as a response to the (so-perceived) excessively idealised character of contemporary political theory. The target view challenged is the one, famously defended by Rawls, according to which "the

reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides (…) the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems [that we are faced with in everyday life]" (Rawls 1999, 8). According to this view, which is undoubtedly widely shared in contemporary political theorising, inquiring justice in ideal theory is a first necessary step in order to appropriately grasp what ought to be done in actual circumstances. Anyway, for those who have recently emphasised the need for NPTs to be practically relevant, the ideal theorising which characterises contemporary political theory represents a substantive departure from this original goal. In fact, ideal theory, it is claimed, is neither sufficient nor necessary in order to understand what ought to be done here and now. This is the substance of – what has been efficaciously called – the "Guidance Critique" (Valentini 2009).

If the target is ideal theorising, what is an ideal theory, then? The notion will recur several times in the paper, as it is a key notion in methodological debates. The concept of ideal theory itself is widely disputed. Here, I will refer to ideal theories as to those theories which make use of idealisations[7], and which are meant to indicate how a political Paradise Island[8] would look like in order to set a critical standard of assessment of current practices. Even if it is not clear whether the two features must hold together in order to make a theory "ideal", many contemporary theories do display both features, as Laura Valentini notices – this is the crucial aspect that matters for my present purposes (Valentini 2009, 338). Indeed, this twofold characterisation opens up two orders of possible criticisms against contemporary ideal theories: the ones directed against their goal (the mythical Paradise Island which gives us a picture of a fully just society), and the ones focused against their premises (the use of an implausible image of political reality as a starting point). One of my objectives will be to show that the main shortcomings of the current methodological debate are related to a failure to recognise these two diverse possible orders of criticism against contemporary political theories – but I will get back to this point later on.

I have said that many recent contributions to the methodological debate are motivated by a critical reaction against the ideal character of much contemporary

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[7] I am here using the term "idealisation" in a non-technical sense to indicate the use of assumptions which represent a world distant enough from the actual one to be judged false representations of political reality. If I had to use the terminology Onora O'Neill (1996, 39-44) proposes, I would say that in this context idealisations mean both false assumptions and severe abstractions.

[8] I borrow the expression from Ingrid Robeyns (2008).

political theory and that such unease is grounded on a defence of the fundamental practical role of political theory. Why is that so and how do they think, in response, NPT should be pursued? Colin Farrelly and, especially, Amartya Sen offer two compelling explanations of why we should reject ideal theory in favour of non-ideal approaches.

Both Farrelly and Sen argue that ideal theories are unable to provide any kind of advice in order to orient our practical conduct. Farrelly argues in favour of his own position commenting both Rawls's (1996) and Dworkin's (2000) theories of justice. For the present purposes, offering a brief outline of his criticism against Rawls will suffice to reconstruct his argumentation. Farrelly argues that Rawls's theory proves to be practically irrelevant, because fundamentally utopian and unable to offer guidance with respect to those dilemmas which we will have to face in real circumstances. This is due to a fundamental error that Rawls makes in the construction of his theory. Rawls, Farrelly says, elaborates his normative principles starting from particular assumptions responsible of making his proposal deeply unsatisfactory: the assumptions of moderate scarcity of resources and strict compliance. Such assumptions, united with the fact that (in real circumstances) rights have costs and that Rawls chooses to order his principles of justice lexicographically, makes the Rawlsian theory completely inapt to address concrete scenarios. In Farrelly's own words:

> Perhaps the most pressing failure of Rawlsian moderate ideal theorizing is that it fails to take scarcity seriously. This is a particularly troubling problem for Rawls' theory because he serially orders his two principles of justice. Such ordering yields *impotent prescriptions for real societies* that face conditions of scarcity. (Farrelly 2007, 848)

In fact, for Farrelly, Rawls's theory proves to be completely unable to address real-world trade-offs. In particular, his framework cannot offer any indication to manage trade-offs on two levels: as regards to which basic liberties to prioritise and how to allocate resources between the protection of basic liberties and other social needs. According to Rawls's theory, indeed, two principles ought to govern societies; these are the principles of basic liberties and the difference principle. These two principles of justice are considered lexicographically ordered. This is because, according to Farrelly's reading of Rawls, the protection of basic liberties is meant to have absolute priority within a just social system – rights have all equal importance among each other and their

defence has unconstrained priority over the advancement of other goods. Such a lexical order, according to Farrelly, is adopted and defended by Rawls only because he ignores that rights have costs. The fact that rights have costs, and that we do not live in society full of saints, nor we dispose of infinite resources, make trade-offs between basic liberties inevitable: real societies do not have enough resources to guarantee the *equal* protection of every right. Moreover, if Rawls's lexicographic order had to be followed in concrete circumstances, the enterprise of guaranteeing basic liberties would prove to be endless, because resources are scarce and violations are many. This, Farrelly goes on, means that following Rawls's proposal we would have no theoretical tools to allocate resources in order to guarantee the pursuit of other goods, such as public health. However, in our actual world, we are *obliged* to make similar choices as we cannot absolutely prioritise the endless pursuit of basic liberties: in case, as it happens to be, we had to guarantee other goods, we would not have any indication as to how to make public choices. This happens precisely because Rawls orders the two principles of justice and gives absolute priority to basic liberties; however, as soon as we focus on real-world circumstances (hence noticing how implausible is to start from assumptions of moderate scarcity and strict compliance) we recognise that such a theory is completely inadequate to address justice in our world (Farrelly 2007, 855). So, Farrelly concludes, even if Rawls describes his proposal as a "realistically utopian" one, his theory of justice cannot be considered "realistic" enough. Indeed, he fails to consider some crucial real-world facts and, because of this, his prescriptions end up being "impotent" (Farrelly 2007, 845).

Along similar lines, Sen offers harsh remarks against "transcendental theories" – the name Sen adopts to define ideal political theories, and which he contrasts with the alternative model he favours, the "comparative theory". Starting from a similar unease against the Rawlsian theory of justice, Sen argues against transcendental theories claiming their practical impotence. Transcendental theories are, in Sen's definition, those theories that answer the question "What is a just society?"; in this sense, a transcendental approach to justice focuses on "identifying perfectly just societal arrangements" (Sen 2006, 216). However, according to Sen, identifying a perfectly just society cannot help answering real-world dilemmas – transcendental theories are, he says, insufficient to understand what ought to be done here and now. This happens

because, when we try to establish what to do in actual circumstances making reference to a conception of the perfect society, at least three problems emerge:

> The main difficulty lies in the fact that there are different features involved in identifying distance, related, among other distinctions, to (1) different fields of departure, (2) varying dimensionalities of transgressions within the same general field, and (3) diverse ways of weighing separate infractions. The identification of transcendence does not yield any means of addressing these problems to arrive at a relational ranking of departures from transcendence. (Sen 2006, 221)

So, the problems that Sen notices are similar to the ones raised by Farrelly. The main difficulty with transcendental theories of justice consists in their incapacity to offer guidance to address concrete trade-offs. If we merely dispose of a conception of what is the *best* we can aspire to, such acknowledgement, by itself, does not offer any tools to compare concrete cases. Indeed, in complex circumstances, we cannot establish what option would qualify as an improvement with respect to justice, especially because, Sen says, "the identification of the best does not specify a unique ranking with respect to which the best stands at the pinnacle; indeed the same best may go with a great many different rankings with the same pinnacle" (Sen 2006, 221). And so, he adds, the fact that we might regard the Mona Lisa as the best picture in the world cannot help defining a unique ranking of all the paintings of the world.

Hence, if transcendental theories of justice cannot help assessing what should be done here and now, because they cannot help assessing concrete trade-offs, should the project of NPT be abandoned? Actually, in Sen's opinion, we do not lose much in avoiding transcendental theories. For Sen, besides being insufficient, transcendental theories are unnecessary to address real-world dilemmas. To support his idea, he proposes the much-cited example of mount Everest:

> we may indeed be willing to accept, with great certainty, that Everest is the tallest mountain in the world, completely unbeatable in terms of stature by any other peak, but that understanding is neither needed, nor particularly helpful, in comparing the heights of, say, Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc. There would be something very deeply odd in a general belief that a comparison of any two alter natives cannot be sensibly made without a prior identification of a supreme alternative. (2006, 222)

In particular, what Sen emphasises is that we can usefully decide between two social states of affairs without completing the work of ideal theory first. We can

recognise what represents a case of injustice and proceed to its remedy without assessing what would constitute the best achievement for us.

Indeed, Sen's idea of theorising about justice comes close to what Farrelly has in mind as a possible solution to the ineffectiveness of contemporary political theories. Both favour a discursive approach to justice, in which contingent problems are assessed in light of the concrete alternatives that are available to us and, most importantly, in light of a process of mutual recognition of what circumstances require a remedy because are perceived as unjust (Farrelly 2007, 859-62 and Sen 2006, 224). Then, according to both Sen and Farrelly, what ought to be done should be established through a case-by-case analysis in which empirical inquiry plays a crucial role and every judgement must be considered "provisional" in character. Political judgments are seen as the result of an ongoing knowledge, rather than a once-and-for-all appraisal of what perfect justice requires (Farrelly 2007, 860).

From this picture, we can conclude that the authors who give specific emphasis to the practical role of NPT, thereby proceeding to a rejection of ideal theories, defend a particular restrictive view of the border of possible worlds appropriate for political theory. As ideal theories ought to be dismissed in favour of a non-ideal (*comparative*, in Sen's terminology) approach to justice, the worlds that NPT could legitimately consider (in order to prescribe which courses of action ought to be pursued) are those which are recognised as accessible from the point of view of the agents deliberating. For this reason, I call this methodological approach an *output realist* one: in fact, those authors appeal to a more empirically-aware political theory, and seek a restriction of the possible worlds considered, in search for practically effective prescriptions.

3.2. Output Idealism

So far, we have seen a first argument in favour of output constraints for NPT. However, in the literature, the output strategy has been defended also in a slightly different form. In fact, this second way of dealing with methodological constraints placed on the outputs of theories arises as a critical reaction against the first methodological approach just introduced, namely output realism.

The bulk of the argument against output realists, as it typically sounds, consists in saying that the criticism against ideal theory is fundamentally misplaced, because it is

grounded on a misunderstanding of the very role played by ideal theories in NPT. Moreover, the argument goes, if ideal theories are interpreted according to their proper role, their function looks as a necessary component of NPT. Hence, the detractors of output realism claim, even though ideal theories are not action-guiding theories, they are a necessary part of NPT.

Indeed, those who argue in favour of a revision of the criterion of adequacy just discussed maintain that output realists make a crucial categorical mistake. They conflate "NPT" with "action-guiding theory" and, as a consequence, they substantially misunderstand the role ideal theories are meant to play in NPT[9]. However, the critiques of output realism claim, ideal theory is not supposed to provide guidance to address concrete dilemmas. As Ingrid Robeyns affirms, "ideal theory plays a *limited role*: it looks like the Paradise Island where we ideally would like to be, but it does not tell us how to get closer to the island. That work has to be done by nonideal theory, and justice-enhancing action design and implementation" (Robeyns 2008, 361, emphasis added). That is, in order to come up with an effective understanding of our practical duties, we need to complement ideal theory with other theoretical tools. Therefore, it looks surely true that ideal theorising, by itself, cannot be sufficient to establish what ought to be done here and now – simply because ideal theory is not conceived to be directly effective in actual circumstances. As a consequence, the reasons put forward for rejecting ideal theory sensibly weakens. We should not create "false oppositions" (Swift 2008, 370): the charge of ineffectiveness is not a good argument for supporting a turn to non-ideal methodologies in political theory.

Moreover, the critiques of output realism continue, ideal theories – understood as theories which inquiry what a *full just society* would look like – constitute a fundamental part of NPT, *pace* Sen's and Farrelly's beliefs. The usual target of these observations is, indeed, Sen's defence of a *comparative approach* to justice. In fact, while the critics of output realism admit, with Sen, that there might be cases in which the comparison between two political states of affairs is unproblematic, as we can easily discern which one approximate justice the most without recurring to any "ideal" of perfect society (e.g. comparing a society that bans slavery with one that allows it), the majority of cases

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[9] David Estlund sharply points out "if a theory of social justice is offered, and it is objected, 'But you and I both know people will never do that,' I believe the right response is (as a starter), 'I never said they would.'" (2014, 114).

are not likewise straightforward (Robeyns 2012, 160-61; Stemplowska 2008, 334-38; and Swift 2008, 372-75). Many cases of injustice are too complex, and often hidden behind the veil of cultural acceptance, to be addressed as self-evident truths. Moreover, it looks reasonable to say that political theorists should precisely concentrate their efforts on the most disputable cases: on those injustices that are still far from been eradicated because largely unrecognised. As Charles Mills and Ingrid Robeyns remind us, gender and race are clear examples of issues that cannot be addressed without a serious theoretical inquiry that call into question our ideological beliefs (Mills 2005, 165-83 and Robeyns 2012, 161). How do we know when justice about gender or race has been fully realised? Thus, in order to adequately understand about what should be done in the actual political world, it looks necessary to elaborate *theories* of justice. Merely resorting to a comparison between the political arrangements that are currently implementable will not allow, most of the times, to acknowledge what justice entails[10].

On a similar note, it is also often added that an idea of what full justice requires is indispensable in order not to worsen the circumstances in which we live in, by obstructing (unwittingly) the progress towards justice. In fact, looking once again at Sen's thesis, if non-ideal theory aims at advancing justice, we cannot always know, just by comparing actual circumstances, what choice would qualify as a progress towards justice. Actions that appear appropriate now could prevent the achievement of future states of affairs which best approximate justice. Hence, we need to know the full "navigation map" in order to be sure that present choices are just choices (Robeyns 2012, 160). For this reason, non-ideal theory necessitates ideal theory because, as John Simmons points out: "we, as theorists of justice, simply should not care which policies are politically possible (etcetera) unless those policies are also on an acceptable path to a just institutional structure. To dive into nonideal theory without an ideal theory in hand is simply to dive blind, to allow irrational free rein to the mere conviction of injustice and to eagerness for change of any sort" (2010, 34).

That is why, those who reject output realism say that we should better conceive NPT as a manifold discipline in which each part has its own indispensable function. In this sense, it is observed that "there is *no real conflict* between ideal and nonideal theory.

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[10] Adam Swift, moreover, suggests that even in cases of recognition of basic and manifest injustice we are implicitly making reference to a fundamental reason that justifies our belief. According to Swift (2008, 375), ideal theories help to justify and clarify those fundamental reasons.

Indeed, we should see all normative theorizing as *part of a common project*: the use of ideal theory techniques contributes to the use of nonideal theory techniques (and vice versa)" (Stemplowska 2008, 339; emphasis added).

Then, if NPT might have different dimensions and roles, what kind of feasibility concerns should matter? That is, if ideal levels of theorising are not meant to offer effective prescriptions but are, nonetheless, a necessary part of NPT, what kind of methodological constraints should apply to those levels? In this respect, those who seek a revision of output realism claim that feasibility constraints ought to be sensibly reduced, or even completely ignored, when the goal is defining what full justice requires. In fact, two possible analysis of feasibility constraints for ideal theories can be identified in the literature. I will call them the *logical analysis* and the *normative analysis* respectively. Let us see them in turn:

Logical analysis of feasibility constraints: according to the proponents of logical arguments, justice must be conceived as a notion that is *logically independent* from the one of feasibility. Hence, following this path, a valid theory of justice needs to explicitly avoid any reference to feasibility constraints. Versions of this argument in favour of the logical independence of justice from feasibility can be found both in Pablo Gilabert and, most notably, in Gerald A. Cohen. Gilabert defends a version of the independence thesis explaining that the predicate 'just' cannot be subsumed under the predicate 'feasible'; this happens because we can perfectly make sense of states of affairs which are just, and yet not feasible (and, crucially, vice-versa too). Drawing from an example proposed by Gilabert himself, the (supposed) analytic independence between justice and feasibility can be emphasised by comparing three societies s1, s2 and s3 according to both standards. In fact, we could perfectly make sense of a situation like the following: suppose that our conception of justice is given by a single egalitarian principle which allows us to rank the three society from the more to the less just in the order s1 → s2 → s3. Suppose now that s1 is not implementable and, therefore, we should choose to pursue s2. Would this mean that s1 ceases to be preferable from the point of view of justice? For Gilabert (2009, 662), such conclusion certainly looks awkward[11]. Therefore,

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[11] On a similar note, Hamlin and Stemplowska (2012) who propose a methodological schema of analysis in which ideals are to be conceived as categorically independent from considerations of feasibility.

we should be careful to distinguish – for the sake of analytic clarity – what is a requirement of justice and what is required of us to do, also on the basis of feasibility considerations also.

Cohen, similarly, argues that justice is logically independent from issues of feasibility and human nature. In his much-cited article "Facts and Principles", Cohen (2003) argues that, in order to properly understand what justice requires, it is necessary to bracket all factual considerations. Principles of justice, Cohen famously says, need to be conceived as fundamentally *fact-insensitive* (2003, 214). The main argument that he proposes in favour of a fact-insensitive interpretation of principles of justice is a strictly logical one. Recalling his own words, Cohen invites us to consider the case of a principle P which might be grounded on a certain fact F, such as "we should keep our promises (call that P) because only when promises are kept can promises successfully pursue their projects (call that F)" (2003, 216). In this case, if we were asked to explain why F grounds P, we would have to provide another general principled answer P1 which motivates the correlation, such as "we should help people to pursue their project". But then, it would be legitimate to reiterate our perplexities asking what does explain this second correlation: this question, in fact, could be indefinitely reiterated. Thus, it should be concluded that, if a sound ground for the principles that we advance must be found, this cannot lie on the recognition of some facts which explain their validity. Unless we do not want to fall into an infinite regression, thereby failing to justify why some principles should be regarded as authoritative, there must necessarily be a fact-insensitive principle P which explains why we hold some principles valid (Cohen 2003, 218). For this reason, according to Cohen, the question "What is justice?" is essentially different from the one "What principles should we adopt to regulate our affairs?"; and yet, in order to have a clear grasp of the second, we need to answer the first, which is unconstrained by factual considerations, hence by feasibility assessments too (Cohen 2003, 244).

Normative analysis of feasibility constraints: I have labelled the second type of analysis as 'normative' because the argument here advanced is based on a reflection about how the reasoning about the requirements of justice *should* proceed, not how it *could* proceed. Indeed, such an interpretation of feasibility constraints for ideal theory is

typically inspired by a fundamental stance: NPT should not let us easily off the hook, because it is supposed to provide a critical standpoint from which to assess our actual political world. According to the normative analysis, it would be conceptually inappropriate to let justice depend upon implementability (i.e. feasibility as interpreted by output realists: feasible here and now with reasonable expectancy of success), because such a conceptual framing would neglect the fundamental function that conceptions of justice are supposed to serve: the one of providing a *critical* standpoint for assessing, and hopefully improving, our imperfect political world. Indeed, by endorsing a conception of justice constrained by implementability requirements we would adopt an unduly permissive and adaptive attitude towards the status quo. We would fall into – what David Estlund (2008, 263) calls – "complacent realism". The fact is that, the argument typically goes, the set of states of affairs that we have the potential ability to bring about is wider than the set of states of affairs which are feasible in the "here and now". This is a point which output realists do not deny. For instance, there are several states of affairs that we could reach through chains of actions, which are nevertheless presently unrealisable[12]. So, even if we agreed that a conception of justice must be limited by some form of feasibility constraint, thereby contesting somehow the logical analysis, we could still challenge the idea that the appropriate constraint for a conception of justice is the narrow implementability constraint.

In fact, if we think about the function and value that we intuitively assign to claims of justice, designing a conception of justice on the proviso that its validity is conditional upon implementability would bring about unacceptable consequences. First and foremost, we would have to admit that a large part of (what we perceive as) severe injustices and blameworthy behaviours are, actually, not to be seen as cases of injustice at all. Pushing the output realist approach to its natural consequences, we could not – strictly speaking – condemn the occurrence of deep-rooted reproachful events, given the fact that they are not presently remediable (Estlund 2014 and Gheaus 2013). As

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[12] Pablo Gilabert (2012) well discusses the importance of conceiving political action in light of what we could achieve over time, not just presently. Indeed, according to Gilabert, the extent and the border of what is achievable through practical agency is much wider than the set of states of affairs currently implementable, because we can progressively change current circumstances and act according to long-term goals. For this reason, Gilabert (2012, 47-48) introduces the concept of *dynamic duties*: we could have duties to act in order to create the necessary conditions for the future realisation of just states of affairs. Similarly, Mark Jensen (2009) talks about the possibility of realising states of affairs taking advantage of *indirect diachronic abilities*.

David Estlund remarks, excluding from the domain of justice states of affairs which are believed that will hardly be realised (that is, extremely improbable) would lead to legitimise inferences like the following: given the fact that humans are hardly prone to behave according to principles of justice, behaving according to principles of justice should not be legitimately required. Against such possible outcomes, he points out "I do not accept the [...] perverse principle that if it's unlikely, however possible or easy, then it's not required. *It is not the case that ought implies reasonably likely*" (Estlund 2014, 265, emphasis added).

Because of these counter-intuitive consequences, offering an appropriate conception of the requirements of justice, it is argued, solicit endorsing a perspective which brackets considerations of implementability. Requirements of justice must be freed from implementability constraints because, otherwise, we would be prone to legitimise all those practices which are presently unlikely to be changed. In other words, we would endorse the attitude opposite to the critical one requested: we would favour adaptive preference formation.

At this point, recalling the main question that this paper deals with, we can summarize how methodological adequacy is interpreted among those who criticise the output realist approach and, accordingly, how the border of possible worlds for NPT comes to be conceived within their framework of analysis.

We have seen that the critics of output realism emphasise the complex structure of NPT as a discipline. NPT must include different theoretical layers which mutually contribute to an appropriate definition of our actual duties. Accordingly, the detractors of output realism claim that it would make little sense to impose a single and uniform methodological requirement on NPT – as output realist did, assigning to effectiveness in this real world the value of absolute standard of assessment of theories. The methodological adequacy of theories should be assessed in light of the specific function they play within NPT.

In particular, as we have seen, methodological adequacy is structured each time around the widening or narrowing of the feasibility constraints applied. So that, theoretical levels which are concerned with what should be done in *ideal* scenarios will be constrained by thin (or none) feasibility requirements, while theoretical levels

interested in providing prescriptions for the *actual* world ought to follow more stringent feasibility requirements. In other words, the methodological assessment of theories is structured around a binary correspondence between function of the theory we are engaged with and degree of feasibility which is required of it.

What is, then, the border of possible worlds for NPT the critics of output realism would be willing to accept? In the output realist case, a uniform feasibility requirement justified a certain maximum distance that could be admitted between the envisioned world and the actual world: the set of possible political worlds that NPT could refer to (in order to define what ought to be done here and now) had to be consistent with the states of affairs presently accessible to actual agents. According to the alternative strategy that the detractors of output realism defend, the maximum distance between the actual and the possible NPT can admit will be given by the less stringent feasibility constraints that applies to one of the theoretical levels which are meant to play a role in NPT. Then, the methodological analysis proposed here is still a form of output methodological strategy – the constraints discussed are, indeed, still constraints of applicability. However, the limits that ought to be imposed to NPT result here sensibly reinterpreted. In particular, two major interpretations of the border of possible worlds for NPT can be identified, and they usually come as consequences of an endorsement of logic or normative arguments respectively. Following a logical interpretation of feasibility constraints, there is one level of analysis in which there are no feasibility constrains that do apply; following a normative interpretation, there is at least a minimal feasibility constraint that does apply to the whole of NPT. This is due to the diverse rationale that moves the logical and normative interpretations respectively. According to Cohen, reasoning about justice should disregard any consideration about what *can be done*. Therefore, pure justice could require the realisation of worlds which are inaccessible to human agency. On the contrary, normative arguments challenged output realism starting from a recognition that human action has enough power to access states of affairs which go beyond what can be implemented given the current circumstances. So, granted that – according to normative arguments – a conception of justice should be consistent with what can be feasible, NPT should be constrained by a more inclusive notion of feasibility, comprising also states of affairs that are not presently implementable. On this vein, for instance, Andrew Mason, distancing himself from

both John Dunn and Gerald A. Cohen, claims that fundamental principles of justice should be consistent with certain constraints given by human nature. Specifically, Mason says, "no principle of justice could be adequate if it would make unreasonable demands upon some" (2004, 260-62).

Thus, according to this revised output strategy, in order to provide a definition of the appropriate border of politically possible worlds for NPT, we would have to define what are the theoretical levels that can be admitted in NPT and what are, correspondingly, the thinnest feasibility constraints that do apply to the less empirically-informed level. Moreover, in case we agreed with such a revised output strategy, there would be an additional theoretical challenge to face. We would have to show how the gap between levels of analysis can be filled; that is, how, and to what extent, ideal levels of analysis influence and inform less abstract ones. In other words, we would have to provide a sound account of the *transition* between levels of analysis[13].

4. The Input strategy

At the beginning of this paper, I said that are two fundamental ways to impose descriptive constraints on NPTs. We have just dealt with the output strategy, let me now turn to the second approach: the input strategy. The input strategy, which I am about to explain, remains largely neglected by those scholarly strands that mainly deal with the themes of ideal theory and feasibility in political theory. Indeed, the literature discussed so far interprets the challenge of realism in political theory as a challenge which essentially regards the adequacy of theories' outputs – their ability to be useful for guiding actions in the actual world[14]. But, as I am going to show in a while, the main challenge political realism raises against ideal theory comes from another direction. Political realism fundamentally criticise the justificatory procedure ideal theories adopt, which relies heavily on idealised or severely abstract premises[15]. The reason at the basis

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[13] The problem of transition remains a largely underexplored methodological issue. A valuable exception is offered in Valentini 2009.

[14] Examples of analyses in which realism in political theory is interpreted as a plea for the effectiveness of theories can be found in Runciman 2012; Valentini 2012; and Zuolo 2012.

[15] William Galston (2010), for example, who offers a wide overview of the realist tradition, seems often to conflate the two charges against ideal theorising. Anyway, the best way to qualify the realist tradition is to recall its origins. Political realists follow the steps of classical political thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Weber. Among the most prominent contemporary theorists which can rightfully be inserted within the realist tradition (even if they do not explicitly define themselves as

of such a neglect may be attributed to the similar stance that moves both output realism and input realism: a shared uneasiness towards forms of political theorising which ignore actual political reality[16]. However, systematising these two methodological interpretations of realism in political theory looks fundamental as the two methods (and the two correspondent critiques realism moves against ideal theories) are independent from each other, and lead to substantively different ideas of methodological adequacy in NPT, as well as to diverse procedures to define the border of political possibilities that we are looking for.

So, let us now turn to the input strategy – to the reasons that ground such a methodological approach and to its main characteristics. To begin with, let me clearly state what is the central claim defended by the proponents of the input strategy: the main fallacy of ideal theories is not their inapplicability to real-world circumstances – i.e. the practical impotence of the principles they advance, as output 'realists' claimed. Rather, ideal theories are flawed precisely because they are intended to (although indirectly) apply to real-world circumstances. Yet, input theorists point out, the typical structure of their justification makes the principles they derive invalid in the actual political context.

What is the reason behind such a criticism against ideal theories, and how does it affect the construction of NPTs? From a realist perspective, the main fallacy of ideal theories is that they fail to take the *autonomy* of politics seriously. They are, as Bernard Williams (2005, 1-3) says, paradigmatic examples of *political moralism* – expression which Williams introduces in order to emphasise the peculiarity of the opposite approach he favours: *political realism*, indeed. Picturing political realism as a form of political thinking opposite to political moralism is probably the most appropriate and efficacious way of conveying the core of political realism's thesis. At least, of that version of political realism that I define as *input* realism. According to Williams, political moralist approaches to politics can take two forms, the "enactment model" and the "structural

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realists), we can find John Dunn, Raymond Geuss, Stuart Hampshire, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, Glenn Newey, Marc Philp, and Bernard Williams, but certainly this list is far from being exhaustive.

[16] Along similar lines, Rossi and Sleat (2014) emphasise that political realism must be distinguished from non-ideal theory. While non-ideal theory is meant to clarify how and when political prescriptions are feasible, political realism is more concerned with specifying which are the appropriate *sources of normativity* for political theories. Expressed in this way, the difference between non-ideal theory and realist theory largely resembles the divide I am pointing out between output and input realism. Here, my hope is to further explore and systematise the methodological divide that Rossi and Sleat outline.

model"; however, what matters for the present purposes is what they have in common: "Under the enactment model, politics is (very roughly) the instrument of the moral; under the structural model, morality offers constraints […] on what politics can rightfully do. *In both cases, political theory is something like applied morality*" (2005, 1-2). In both cases, that is, morality takes priority over politics – what ought to be done in politics has to depend on some principles which are defined by political theory and then applied to the political realm. The circumstances of application of those principles do not affect the validity of the principles themselves: they merely define the set of the options available which the theory ranks. It is easy to realise why such a moralist approach to political theory resembles the methodology advocated by the supporters of ideal theory. We have seen that, according to the critics of output realism, ideal theories were judged necessary to understand our political duties in concrete circumstances. Moreover, such ideal theories, in order to be adequate, had to disregard political reality in substantive respects, either for logical or for normative reasons. In order not to fall into "complacent realism", ideal theories were elaborated bracketing the specificities of their circumstances of application – objectivity was sought by applying a normative framework designed at a higher order of generality to the particular circumstances. Williams, however, thinks that there is something inappropriate in such a way of proceeding. In fact, he declares "I shall try to contrast with [political moralism] an approach which gives *a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought*. This can be called […] "political realism"" (2005, 3). Indeed, as we will see shortly, for Williams the peculiarities of political practices encourage the endorsement of a "bottom-up" methodology: the circumstances of application ought to have a role in establishing which principles of action to follow. Then, the key theme against political moralist theories is the autonomy of the political: moralist theories do not understand the peculiarity of politics, and thereby betray political thinking[17].

Why do political practices require a *political* normativity – i.e. a normativity sensible to concrete political circumstances? Political practices are structured by specific internal dynamics and arise for serving particular social needs – this specificity makes political practices somehow ontologically irreducible to other forms of practical life. So that, in assessing principles for political conduct, we should evaluate those principles

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[17] On the irreducible character of political normativity see also Newey 2010.

within political practices and its own driving forces, endorsing a systemic view in which the adequacy of principles is judged in light of the purposes of those practices and the consequences they might bring about. Refraining to adopt such an inner perspective leads to political theories whose form may turn out to be internally fallacious, and/or whose normative content might prove to be unsatisfactory.

The attitude that underlies political moralism – its attempt to interpret political practices through principles insensitive to political reality – has been defined as an *irresponsible* way of understanding politics and political action. This classical charge of irresponsibility comes from Max Weber. Weber, in the *Vocations Lectures* (2004) introduces the distinction between "ethic of responsibility" and "ethic of conviction" precisely in order to underline the inappropriateness of approaching political decisions by means of an ethic of conviction – that is, by determining what ought to be done applying fixed principles for action to the political sphere. This request for responsibility is what motivates also Williams's realist proposal. Williams recalls Weber's notion of responsibility several times, explaining that political decisions are "political" when they are "responsible" decisions (Williams 2005, 14); and that the political realist approach to politics is what best serves a responsible attitude towards politics[18]. So, to better understand the realist unease against political moralism, let me recall the Weber's discussion of the role of responsibility in political judgment.

According to Weber, those who act following an ethic of conviction determine what ought to be done referring to a set of principles which hold unconditionally – that is, which hold no matter what political reality is or happens to be – the same political moralist approach Williams talks about, as we will see. Those who act on the basis of principles approach political circumstances by merely applying the content of their ethical views, i.e. selecting which course of action, among the ones available, best serve their cause (Weber 2004, 83). Being so, the conclusions reached by ethics of conviction are completely unaffected by the overall consequences that the actions prescribed might bring about. This blindness with respect to the side-effects of the prescribed actions is indeed consistent with the spirit that animates the ethic of conviction: if principles hold unconditionally, what they prescribe as right to do in some circumstances cannot be

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[18] Williams (2005, 12) suggests that "thinking politically" means reasoning adopting the Weberian ethic of responsibility. Moreover, he emphasises that the ethic of responsibility "is still very much an ethic. But many do not see this point" (2005, 72).

revised in light of the circumstances themselves; rather, the circumstances merely define the options available to us (Weber 2004, 83-83). For Weber, such insensitivity towards the consequences that actions might bring about is the reason why the ethic of conviction proves to be a form of normative reasoning inadequate for politics.

In fact, if we try to locate the ethic of conviction within political circumstances, some perplexities regarding its consistency and appropriateness as a form of *political* theory arise. To see the point, then, we must ask what are the circumstances of politics in which those principles are meant to be applied. According to realists, there are some basic and unavoidable facts which characterise and explain the existence of the practice of politics. Above all, politics arises in circumstances of disagreement and unbalance of powers. Politics, indeed, settles a social order where the lack of consensus and the use of force lead to conflictual relationships[19]. That is why Weber says that the crucial means for political action is violence: political goals can only be achieved through the use of force and are steadily imposed by coercion. In similar circumstances, establishing what ought to be done on the basis of the sole ethic of conviction would justify an unmediated use of force.

Being an ethic of conviction, the means to achieve a certain political goal are not taken into account when the validity of the principles that ought to guide actions is assessed: the side-effects cannot push towards a revision of the principles themselves. This means that, if some action is consistent with what a certain principle prescribes, it is judged irrelevant whether that action exacerbates conflict among parties. More worrisomely, that principle, independently validated, could push us to favour the use of violence in order to achieve a worthwhile goal: if we know what are the ethical prescriptions, we have a strong reason to try to force reality towards that achievement, in order not to collapse on a complacent acceptance of the status quo. In other words, from the point of view of the ethic of conviction, an unmediated use of force becomes a legitimate means to the fulfilment of some specific ends (Weber 2004, 89).

Now, is this potential consequence acceptable from a political point of view? As said, there are two reasons for being dissatisfied with a similar result. Firstly, there is something in the choice of endorsing an ethic of conviction that strikes as somehow inadequate for politics. In fact, we have seen that politics, according to political realists,

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[19] For a classical discussion of the "circumstances of politics" see Waldron 1999, 102-06.

arises as a response to situations of deep disagreement, which may lead to an uncontrollable clash of powers. Defending the achievement of some ends in the political domain, and acting accordingly, means trying to settle a certain equilibrium whereby such end can be pursued in a fairly stable and ordered way. In other words, politics seems to serve a value and a purpose that the ethic of conviction is unable to understand and respect. Hence, there seems to be a kind of normative loss by merely *applying* normative principles to a certain practice, without letting those principles to depend on an understanding of the practice itself[20].

Secondly, Weber suggests that there is a kind of tension between what the supporters of the ethic of conviction want to achieve on the one hand, and the constraints posed by political reality on the other. Indeed, following the picture of political reality offered by realists, to enforce a principle in political circumstances means trying to impose a certain conduct of action as the right one to follow, *against* contrary tendencies. Disagreement, indeed, entails that we will have to measure ourselves with those who do not have our same views regarding what is right or wrong to do in politics. Moreover, as our objective is not seeking conflict with the end of fostering conflict *per se*, but in order to defend the establishment of a certain political conduct, stability will be an implicit and fundamental interest of ours. Given the objective just explained and the circumstances in which it is pursued, the main contention of Weber is that, allowing room for an indiscriminate use of force, i.e. judging what should be done by deducting it from a principled reasoning, defeats the purpose itself of suggesting what principles ought to govern collective life (Weber 2004, 89-90). Hence, drawing normative principles disregarding the peculiarity of the practice they are meant to apply to leads also to a theoretical loss. For, if we want to suggest what principles ought to govern political reality, we should better know what principles could be consistent with the existence of political reality itself[21].

At this point, the reasons why political realists emphasise the importance of the ethic of responsibility in politics can be appreciated. Politics ought to be analysed and

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[20] In this vein talks also Bonnie Honig (1993) who emphasises the displacement of politics of current political theory. Contemporary normative analysis of politics seems to be unable to understand what is most valuable within political practices.

[21] This is why Newey (2001) says that contemporary political philosophy construe post-political paradigms, proposals which cannot be consistent with the reality of politics itself. The point of view of contemporary political philosophy is, in this sense, located "after politics".

assessed through a prior, and mature, understanding of politics itself – of its peculiarity, dynamics and sense. Avoiding this bottom-up approach leads to potentially dangerous prescriptions and weak political theories.

There are other examples that can be recalled in which the inadequacy of discussing the normativity of politics through principles drawn disregarding the specificity of politics emerges quite strikingly. For reasons of clarity, I am going to mention one more example: the case of the duty of truthfulness in politics. Williams discusses the case in "Truth, Politics, and Self-deception" (2005, 154-64). Here, Williams points out that from a (supposed) duty to tell the truth among individuals, we should not draw any conclusion with respect to the role of truth in politics. The point, for Williams, is that whether truth has any role in politics or not, should be established through an appropriate political reasoning. The deduction from the private to the political realm would sound as follows: "if it is a good thing (other things being equal) for people to be truthful, it is a good thing for people in government to be truthful" (2005, 157). Can we apply the same normative criteria both to individuals and to politics? Can individual morality adequately answer political questions? To this purpose, let us bear in mind that the relationship between rulers and ruled is a relation of subordination in which the ruling power, in order to rule successfully, must provide some effective reasons for acceptance. In other words, the benefits of accepting the established order must overcome the possible disadvantages. For this reason, rulers have special responsibilities towards their subjects which private individuals do not have towards each other. In particular, as the minimal condition for accepting a ruling power is the perception of being safer in – rather than out – politics, "any government is charged with the security of its citizens, a responsibility which cannot be discharged without secrecy […]"[22]. So, for governments, the security of the subjects is a fundamental function to absolve. The pursuit of this function might require that truthfulness be left sometimes aside as a politically dangerous reason for action. However, this case cannot be contemplated by those who apply individual morality to

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[22] Recall that the problem with political moralism consists in the fact that it approaches politics through the lenses of principles drawn from individual morality or, more generally, drawn disregarding the peculiarity of politics. Political moralism does not indeed negate the value of politics as a specific sphere of practical agency – thesis which would require other, possibly anarchists, arguments to be supported. Despite such recognition, political moralists judge methodologically correct proceeding by deducing normative principles for politics from more general normative commitments about individual morality.

politics. Individual relationships are substantially different, they do not host relations of subordination similar to the political ones. Hence, they cannot furnish the necessary means to define the role of truthfulness in politics as a specific political question. Political moralism, in other words, cannot see a reason for refraining from the truth, whereas politics, on the contrary, sees it. So, there are some circumstances which characterise governmental relationships, and which do not characterise individual ones, that make the superimposition of individual morality to politics a fundamentally inadequate way of discussing the role of a duty of truthfulness in politics. Certainly, this does not mean that truth in politics is not valuable. It merely means that, in order to assess the role of truth in politics, we should proceed endorsing a realist point of view – namely, from an appreciation of the reality of politics and its dynamics.

To sum up, what does these examples show? To a realist's eye, they show the intrinsic peculiarity of politics as a field of practical agency and the inadequacy of designing normative proposals independently from an appraisal of the practices that they are meant to guide. So – to recall our main question – how should political theories be adequately construed? What is the appropriate methodology to follow?

I will follow the account proposed by Andrea Sangiovanni (2008), in order to show how a practice-dependent justification of a NPT could proceed. The advantage of Sangiovanni's account, I think, is that it can be easily applied to the realist methodology more generally. The idea of a Basic Legitimation Demand that Williams defends can be reconstructed in such practice-dependent terms. Moreover, the idea of practice-dependence has been recalled by other authors who can be inscribed within a realist literature, like Enzo Rossi (2012), or that underline the importance of a bottom-up approach to the normative analysis of politics, like Aaron James (2013).

How is a practice-dependence justification supposed to work, then? According to Sangiovanni, in order to appropriately understand the normative principle that should guide a (political/social) practice we should proceed following two independent steps. We should start from an *interpretation* of the practice itself; from its point and purpose as a social form of interaction, and from the reasons participants show to abide by its rules. Then, this interpretation will need to be supplemented by a *critical* step aimed at assessing what principles could better serve the purpose of the practice so understood. In Sangiovanni's own words:

The content, scope, and justification of a conception of justice depends of the structure and form of the practices that conception is intended to govern. (2008, 138)

Let us better analyse the methodology suggested by Sangiovanni. Through the first, interpretative, step, we try to uncover the purpose underlying the existence of a certain practice. What are the dynamics and interaction that practice makes possible and protect? And, accordingly, what are the reasons that participants show for compliance? In this way, we attempt to endorse the point of view of the participants in order to understand, from an inner perspective, what is the ultimate sense of a certain practice and what are the values or functions it aims at defending. This first step provides the basic structure for the justification. However, it is with the critical step that the shape of the normative conception is defined. To critically assess the content of the normative principles a practice should be governed by, we need to focus on the relationships that practice generate – i.e. how it changes and affects social interaction, and, more importantly, we shall try to understand what role a normative conception is supposed to play within that practice. We assess, in other words, the content of the normative principles that should guide that practice in light of the purpose that practice aims at protecting, and the interactions that become involved in order to grant that purpose. In Sangiovanni's own words, our main question must be: "How does the demand for justice emerge within the contingent historical and political contexts constituted by the institutions?" (2008, 150).

Only once that these two steps have unfolded, the political realist says, we will be able to draw a normative account for the practice in question. In fact, the normative principles that ought to guide a given practice will be the ones successfully supporting its purpose, given the constraints posed by the contextual relationships in which that practice happens to be located. The content of the normative conception, in other words, will be entirely shaped by the function that conception needs to serve. Consequently, if the content of the normative principles endorsed depends on the function those principles are expected to fulfil within a given context, the content of the principles themselves will be practice-dependent: indeed, different contexts will generate different normative principles.

Therefore, the justification will be practice-dependent because the content of the principles endorsed will be derived from an interpretation of the practices themselves

within their contexts. So, following this realist account, we could appeal to values or principles in order to justify the normative framework that we are going to propose (a normative framework would not be possible without an appeal to values). However, crucially, the relevance or adequacy of such values or principles is subordinated to an appreciation of the role that the normative conception is supposed to play within that practice. Hence, it is not the case that some independent values or principles do apply uniformly to the different contexts, selecting what is the best course of action among those available. Here, the context itself shapes the content of the normative principles that ought to apply to it. The direction of the deduction follows the opposite course: the context establishes which are the principles or values we could choose among in order to define what ought to be done.

Sangiovanni is very clear regarding this point:

> Sharing context C_n shapes the *reasons* we might have for endorsing specific principles of justice J_n for which P [a given normative principle] is a premise (J_1 for the context C_1, J_2 for the context C_2, and so on), rather then the *courses of action* we should adopt in implementing them. (2008, 147; emphasis in original)

And Williams, similarly, labelling his method of normative enquiry a "bottom-up" approach, writes:

> The approach of the liberalism of fear[23] is bottom-up, not top-down. […] It does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances and then apply it. It regards the discovery of what rights people have as a political and historical one, not a philosophical one. (2005, 61)

Indeed, as I pointed out before, the argument in support of the well-known Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) that Williams defends could be interpreted as a special example of the justificatory method proposed by Sangiovanni, where the practice analysed is the one of *politics* itself. Thus, to clarify the point, I would like to sketch (very roughly) how the justification of the BLD proceeds in Williams and what role does it play in defining a normative framework for politics.

First of all, what is the BLD for Williams? The BLD, as explained in "Realism and Moralism", defines the basic conditions of acceptability of a given political power. This

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[23] Here Williams is referring to the rationale which grounds political realism itself. Political realism tries to take politics, hence fear, seriously. On this point, see Williams 2005, 3.

means that whether a form of political power will be considered acceptable will depend on its ability to appropriately answer the BLD (Williams 2005, 4). Translating the case in the terms that we have been using so far, we can say that, for Williams, the BLD represents a critical test in order to establish whether a certain political rule (and, hence, the form of collective life it purports to impose) is acceptable as a form of *political* practice.

How does Williams derive the BLD and what does it entail with respect to the normative frameworks that should guide politics? Williams, endorsing a practice-dependent perspective, starts from an interpretation of the practice of politics itself. The point and purpose of politics is defined as follows: "I identify the "*first political question* in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (2005, 3). Williams defines as *legitimate* those political systems which are able to answer the first political question so characterised. So, if this is the point and purpose of politics – namely, creating a system of mutual safety and cooperation – what form should political practices take? At this point, Williams's analysis takes the critical step advocated by Sangiovanni. Williams explains that the basic principles of conduct underlying a political system should have the role of structuring legitimate power relations. Moreover, he specifies that a study of legitimacy requires an analysis of political relationships within their context, because "the solution should not become part of the problem" (2005, 4). So that, for example, in contemporary democracies legitimacy will take the form of liberalism, as, for historical reasons, a given political power will be perceived as granting the protection and safety of participants only if it abides to certain liberal standards (Williams 2005, 7).

The BLD constitute such a critical test. Those political powers able to answer the first question will be considered legitimate, hence consistent with the point and purpose of politics. The BLD will essentially be, therefore, a contextual test, as the perception of legitimacy will depend upon the history of a particular context. Hence, different contexts will host different conceptions of legitimacy.

Here, I am not interested in assessing whether or not the justification proposed by political realists looks convincing. Of course, the most controversial point regards the initial interpretative step: how can we assess practices themselves? How can we defend certain practices without referring to some principle validated independently from the

practice itself[24]? And, accordingly, how should a critique of the practices themselves be conceived, if the normative reasoning ought to be entirely internal to that practice? I believe there could be ways to think about internal critiques of practices, but this is not my point here[25]. Instead, my point is to show that political realists do defend a bottom-up, contextualist, justification for NPTs. The methodological approach realist adopt is moved by a concern towards feasibility; but rather by a concern towards the autonomy of the political, and the necessity to construe normative frameworks able to respect and grasp such ontological peculiarity. So, their concern is entirely with the correctness of political theories and their appropriate method of justification, not with their action-guiding power[26].

So, we can now come again to *our* main concern, the one towards the methodological criteria of adequacy. In fact, as I said at the beginning, the methodological criteria of adequacy the two strategies adopt – the output and the input strategies – set constraints on the possible worlds NPT could be allowed to prescribe, thereby defining a certain border of politically possibility for NPT.

What kind of methodological criteria of adequacy input realists apply to theories? It should now be clear that political realism endorses criteria of adequacy which concern the justification of theories. In particular, these criteria concern the premises we should start from in order to construe a correct theory. As we have seen, for political realists, political theories should start from a particular descriptive appraisal of the practice that they are meant to analyse from a normative point of view. Political theories need to be construed starting from an *interpretation* of the practice that they are supposed apply to.

How does this methodological requirement affect the border of possible worlds for NPT? We have seen that the interpretation of a practice is intended to enlighten the point and purpose of the practice itself; namely, by looking for a correct interpretation

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[24] For doubts on this specific point, see Erman and Möller 2015 and Larmore 2013.

[25] For two examples in this direction, though framed within two much different traditions, see James 2005 and Roth 2012.

[26] As a further proof – even if minor – of such a focus of input realism on justification rather than application, consider the typical abstract way of theorising realist theorists employ to develop their analysis. Some writers, like Simone Chambers (2002), have underlined the abstract way of arguing of political realists as a sign of their failure of significantly distancing themselves from ideal theorists. Even if they are concerned with criticising the impotence of ideal theorising to address real world problems, it is said, they seem to reiterate the same error by recurring, as a necessity, to severe abstractions. However, it should be clear now that a similar accuse misses the point political realists intend to raise: the problem is not the detachment from, but the displacement of politics. On this point see also Baderin 2013.

of a practice, we try to sort out what the social significance of that practice is. In other words, we come to see the implicit reasons that ground the existence of the system of relationships that practice generates and sustains. Moreover, as Sangiovanni says, the interpretative step provides the *structure of the justification* of the normative principles that we will endorse via the critical step. Here, we begin to grasp how the interpretation of the practice we start from will affect the description of the worlds we will be allowed to prescribe. We have indeed seen that the principles that are able to pass the second step – the critical one – are the ones which better serve the underlying point and purpose of the analysed practice. From a political realist perspective, then, the content of the principles endorsed must be construed so as to reflect the underlying purpose of the practice, given the contextual features of its exercise. Hence, once we can count on a convincing interpretation of a certain social practice, once its social meaning and value will be unfolded, the possible worlds adequate to prescribe will be those compatible with the conditions of existence of the practice itself. That is, as a practice is initially isolated by identifying which interactions it gives rise to and sustains, the political possible worlds which could appropriately guide our courses of action will be those in which the conditions of possibility of such interactions will be respected.

For this reason, I dub the realist method here presented an "input" methodological strategy. Indeed, as we have seen, political realism's main concern regards the form of the justification of political theories. Following a realist perspective, theories must be construed starting from a particular descriptive appraisal of practices, and prescriptions will be substantively constrained by such descriptive starting point.

5. Output strategy and Input strategy: A comparison

Now that we have a sufficiently clear picture of what I have called the *output strategy* and the *input strategy*, I would like to briefly sum up the aspects over which they differ. This is meant to highlight how these two different methodologies affect the relationships between political possibility and NPT. In fact, whether we are going to endorse an output or an input methodological strategy is going to substantively change the way in which the appropriate border of possible worlds for political theory will be conceived.

We have seen that the output strategy assesses the adequacy of theories by placing

some criteria of adequacy on the conclusions of the theory themselves. As I explained, according to the output strategy, a theory is adequate in case the world(s) it prescribes are consistent with a set of descriptive constraints which define the facts that the theory must not attempt to change. For example, a theory may need to be compatible with basic facts of human psychology (i.e. the theory should not prescribe worlds humans could not lead themselves to bring about) or with basic facts regarding our present culture of institutions (i.e. a theory should be feasible enough not to require basic changes in our institutional structure). Hence, the output strategy adopts criteria of adequacy that concern the required degree of *applicability* of a theory. According to the specific theoretical goal we set ourselves – namely, what field of relevance the theory has – the outputs we should look for should be carefully consistent with the defined constraints. This requirement is precisely set in order to pursue our theoretical goals in the best possible way: if we are interested in what ought to be done here and now, some specific constraints will be relevant in order not to fall in utopianism or practical irrelevance. On the contrary, if we are mainly interested in understanding what justice *per se* requires, actual implementability will probably result an inappropriate constraint, unless we do not want to collapse on a form of complacent acceptance of the status quo – human nature, possibly, will qualify as a more adequate constraint. Thus, the criteria of adequacy, so conceived by the output strategy, are construed to be *external* constraints. Once the theory is developed, if it can be successfully adapted to the stated constraints, such theory is methodologically adequate, hence acceptable. According to this methodological approach, political theories can be relevant for the assessment of different levels of abstraction as well as different contexts of application, provided that they are able to successfully meet the applicability constraints required.

However, we have seen that there is another, much different, way to interpret the methodological adequacy of political theories. The input strategy assesses the methodological adequacy of political theories placing constraints on their premises. Following the advocates of the input approach, political theories are methodological adequate if they start from some – suitably specified – descriptive premises. In this case, therefore, the descriptive constraints do apply to premises, not to conclusions. We have indeed seen that, for those who defend the introduction of some descriptive constraints on the premises, political theories prove to be adequate only if they start from an

appropriate descriptive appraisal of the practice they are meant to theorise about. Following this methodological framework, answering the question "what ought to be done...?" always requires starting from an interpretative understanding of the practice in which the question arises. Here, then, the criteria of adequacy do regard the *justification* of the theory, not its application. Indeed, the methodological criteria of adequacy are introduced on the basis of an analysis of what a good construction of a political theory should look like. For this reason, the descriptive constraints that do apply to political theories are here conceived as *internal* constraints. The descriptive constraints a theory starts from define the very content of the theory, not merely its context of application.

What kind of impact do these two methodological strategies have on the definition of the set of possible worlds political theory might be allowed to refer to? How do these diverse methodological criteria affect the notion of political possibility that we should endorse in NPT? The crucial difference lies on which levels of abstraction the two approaches will be prone to judge useful in political theorising. According to the output strategy, the reference to ideal theories, understood as theories which make use of severe abstractions, could usefully be a point of departure to grasp what should be done here and now, provided that a good response to the problem of transition is offered (otherwise, in a *non*-ideal vein, we should find a way to construe feasible theories which do not need a reference to ideal ones). Therefore, the crucial point is the following: for the output strategy, provided that a transition from ideal to non-ideal is possible, ideal theories could be adequate starting points in order to understand actual practices. Hence, according to the output strategy, the border of possible political worlds for NPT would be given by the descriptive constraints which apply to the most abstract level of analysis regarded as useful to analyse actual practices. However, this option is unavailable to the proponents of the input methodological approach. Within an input methodological framework, what should be done here and now can be established only by theories that are construed starting from a careful interpretation of actual practices. Therefore, an input approach makes unavailable precisely the transition from ideal to non-ideal that output theorists are so much concerned about: even if – input theorists say – the transition were possible, it should not be pursued. Consequently, in case we agreed with input theorists, we would have to define the border of political possible worlds for NPT in a much different way: the

border of possible worlds for NPT would be given by the descriptive constraints placed on the premises of theories, which would correspond to a description of the relationships that characterise essentially a certain practice.

Then, the choice of placing constraints either on output or on input of theories affects which levels of abstraction would be licit to refer to in political theory. Input constraints make unavailable levels of theorising which would be judged perfectly useful and legitimate according to the output strategy. Then, a crucial consequence of such analysis is the recognition that the arguments usually provided in favour of ideal theories must be regarded, from a methodological point of view, as deeply unsatisfactory. For, even if it is true that ideal theories do not mean to provide action-guidance for present circumstances – hence, output charges result substantively weakened – their adequacy should still be entirely proven against the charges posed by input realism. Therefore, it is necessary to conclude that, in order to appropriately understand how to cope with the problem of the border of possible worlds for political possibility, we ought to take into consideration and assess both methodological strategies.

In the next, and conclusive, section I draw a first outline of how an appropriate procedure to tackle the problem of the border of political possibility for political theory could look like.

6. Conclusion: How to trace the border of political possibility for NPT

So far, I said that the arguments in support for ideal theories appear unsatisfactory, because incomplete. The advocates of ideal theories do not recognise that, when they refer to "political realism", they are arguing against a specific form of realism in political theory: the realism of outputs, the one concerned with the action-guiding power of theories. They fail to recognise the challenges posed by the realism of inputs – the one concerned with the adequacy of justification. Certainly, the original fault of this misunderstanding does not lie solely on ideal theorists. Realist writers are often not clear with respect to their methodological assumption and they seem to show unease with respect to both the (alleged) unfeasibility and moralism of contemporary

political theory[27]. Hence, a better understanding and systematisation of methodological assumptions would serve also the realist cause.

Thus, given a similar lack of methodological clarity, we must now ask: how should a research procedure able to take into consideration both methodological concerns look like? How, accordingly, should our research over the border of possible worlds for political theory be set up?

Now, to set up an appropriate analysis of the constraints that do apply to political theory, we must understand what kind of relationship occurs between these two methodological strategies. We must understand, in other words, what sorts of steps are *necessary* to follow in order to come to a well-designed answer. Indeed, if the two criteria of adequacy were somehow related, analysing one method could give us some tools to assess also the other, thereby making our inquiry easier. And yet, a crucial step to set up a satisfactory methodological inquiry consists in recognising that the constraints required by the two criteria of adequacy are *independent*. The two methodological strategies are not correlated: the presence or absence of one of the two kinds of constraint do not allow us to conclude anything with respect to the other. Therefore, we must assess them separately and, in addition, we might have to realise that both are required.

The independence of the methodological claims advanced by the two strategies emerges clearly if we try to construe different models of realist theories, based on the divergence between output and input realism advanced so far. Indeed, I contend, the independence of the two methodological claims emerges particularly vividly if we consider the case of realist methodologies.

Partly, the independence of the two realist methodological claims has been already showed when input realism was discussed. Here, I would like to state the point as clearly as possible and to highlight its implications for the present purposes. Why must the two realist methods be regarded as fully independent? First of all, because one methodological concern does not entail the other. In fact, we can construe consistent examples of political theories which perfectly respect one type of realist criterion of adequacy, while violating the other. We have seen, indeed, examples of both in the analysis conducted so far. Let us think, first, to the case of a political theory feasible

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[27] Miller 2008 and Geuss 2008, for example, clearly point out both stances.

according to output realist criteria, but not adequate from the point of view of input realism. Such a theory could be fruitfully represented by a theory which preaches truthfulness in politics. A similar theory looks, indeed, feasible and sufficient specific to be action-guiding. Nonetheless, it has to be judged inadequate for political realist standards, because it is in contradiction with the basic point and purpose of political rule. Now, we could easily imagine an opposite case. We could imagine a political theory which, despite its practice-dependent justification, would prove to be unfeasible anyway. We could, for example, construe a realist theory of legitimacy, starting from an appraisal of the practice of politics, of its point and purpose – a theory which would judge legitimacy as a prerequisite for any political rule, such as the theory of the BLD Williams suggests. However, it is by no means necessary that a similar theory could prove to be directly action guiding for current practices, given its high generality. Moreover, as Sleat (2014, 329) rightly points out, a fully legitimate political order looks hardly achievable, but it can work as a realist standard of assessment of current practices. This particular case aside, we have seen that input realism requires theories to start from an interpretation of a given practice. Thus, within the border set by this interpretation, we could suggest more of less severe changes of our political reality. So that, as Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat put it: "Utopianism may even be better served by a realistic take on which values can be genuinely transformative and which ones are merely ideological. [...] Conceptually nothing precludes realists from resurrecting the 1968 slogan "Be realistic. Demand the impossible"" (2014, 690-91).

Secondly, not only the two realist methodologies do not necessarily entail one another, they are not even mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is perfectly sensible to construe political theories which include both concerns. A similar political approach would echo, for example, kinds of political *decisionism* which, typically, follow a Machiavellian reading of politics and political action. According to (what I dub – recalling Mark Philp's (2010) use of the term) decisionist approaches, contingency governs politics. As a consequence, our appraisal of "what ought to be done" cannot but follow both methodological concerns: political actions should be guided by a careful appraisal of the sense and purpose of the practices that we are acting into, and, within such borders, our decisions are irremediably constrained by the contingent possibilities at present available. Following similar frameworks, political action can hardly be inspired by an idea

of progress or betterment: what should be done has to depend on the characteristics of the moment we happen to find ourselves in[28].

In conclusion, the two methodological criteria of adequacy are strictly independent. And, being the two realist methodologies independent, in order to understand what kind of constraints we ought to apply to a certain theory, we should address both concerns separately. Indeed, criteria of adequacy could be put on either side for independent reasons. Accordingly, ideal theorists, in order to successfully defend their own approach to political theory, ought to inquiry and discuss both methodological requirements; a discussion of output requirements will not suffice. For the purposes of the present study, this means that descriptive constraints could be applied on both premises and conclusions of a theory, starting from independent methodological concerns. The border of possible worlds for political theory would then be defined by *the sum* of the descriptive constraints applied both on premises and on conclusions of theories.

We now have a clearer idea of what would be required by ideal theorists in order to defend the methodological adequacy of the theories they advocate. Likewise, at this point, we can draw the outline of a procedure for defining the border of possible worlds for political theory – that is, the border of those worlds that could appropriately constitute the content of the prescriptions NPT advances.

Three are the main steps that it is necessary to follow:

1. An initial assessment of practice-dependence. We need to clarify whether political theories are, or not, allowed to refer to levels of analysis which are construed bracketing the interpretative appraisal of the practice they are going to be applied to. This first step would immediately state whether input constraints are necessary, thereby simplifying or restricting the analysis.

2. As a further step, and whatever the answer to point 1. might be, we would need to establish what feasibility threshold would be suitable to adopt. We have seen that feasibility variations could be admitted by both output or input approaches

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[28] For example, Stuart Hampshire goes in this direction. In *Justice Is Conflicts*, Hampshire (2000, x) declares "My political opinions and loyalties, when challenged, did not any longer include or entail any generalisable account of a future ideal societies or of essential human virtues. Rather, they pointed to the possible elimination of particular evils found in particular societies at particular times, and not to universalizable principles of social justice. It is necessary to turn toward the particular case and also toward the negative case, and only then one has sufficient grounds for political action."

– it is by no means valid the correlation between input constraints and status quo bias, or cynism.

3. Finally, to establish the set of the possible worlds for political theory, we would need to specify a criterion for the selections of the relevant facts, according to the constraints so defined.

The border we are looking for should be the result of the methodological constraints introduced through 1. and 2., and the sum of the descriptive facts selected through the criterion adopted in 3.

II.

ON THE JUSTIFICATION OF POLITICAL REALISM

1. Introduction: why political realism?

Political realism has become a popular topic of discussion among political theorists. In particular, two lines of research have recently attracted the attention of many of them. On the one hand, much effort and time have been devoted in trying to clarify the methodological specificity of realist theorising (i.e. what are the essential features of a realist approach to political theorising? What is the relationship between facts and principles in realist thinking?)[29]; on the other hand, sustained defences have been proposed to demonstrate the consistency of realism as an approach to political reasoning (i.e. is it really possible for realism to avoid moralism? Can political realism qualify as an autonomous approach to political thinking?)[30]. And yet, the very question of the *justification* of the realist approach has not received the same attention. The studies into the meta-theoretical basis of realism are still few and, as I will argue, they seem unable to offer compelling reasons for the adoption of political realism to a non-realist audience (Hall 2014; Hall and Sleat 2017; Prinz 2016; Sagar 2016).

Such neglect of the justificatory issue must not look as surprising as it sounds, though. Indeed, such refrain from justifications could be explained as a consequence of the anti-foundationalist tendencies of political realism. Notably, for political realists, theories ought to be assessed primarily by looking at political reality and what strike us as sensible to do, rather than by providing stable foundations and absolute systems of norms. And yet, it is of utmost importance to provide some compelling justification of political realism. Indeed, in case we failed to provide a persuasive justification of the realist method, political realism would result vulnerable against moralist critiques.

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[29] On the structure of realist political thought see, most notably, Baderin 2013; Galston 2010; Hall 2017; Jubb 2017; Philp 2012; Rossi and Sleat 2014, Sleat 2016, Stears 2007. A different, but strictly connected, debate has focused on the relationship between realism and conservatism. For this specific line of research see Finlayson 2017; McQueen 2016; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Raekstad 2016.

[30] For discussions about the ability of political realism to propose itself as an original and autonomous research method, see Erman and Möller 2015; Hall 2013; Horton 2010; Jubb and Rossi 2015; Larmore 2013; Sleat 2014.

So, why should we choose political realism as a method for normative political thinking? Is it possible to provide a justification for the endorsement of the realist method? I will try to offer a more efficacious justification of realism, building upon the complexity of realist thought and taking advantage of all the argumentative strategies that realists have moved against moralist thinking. More specifically, I will propose a *prudential* argument in favour of political realism. I must emphasise that my primary aim is not interpretive: I do not mean to suggest that the argument that I will outline is the one that the realist thinkers that I will consider (namely, Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams) had explicitly in mind – though I certainly do not exclude this possibility. Rather, I will try to bring to the surface a possible argument, more or less implicit in realist writings, which I take to be the most forceful strategy to employ against the detractors of political realism.

To do so, I will proceed as follows. I will first introduce a characterisation of political realism as anti-moralism. I will then outline in detail three possible arguments in favour of the realist approach to political theorising, by availing myself of the recent studies into the meta-theoretical basis of realism: the meta-ethical, the ethical, and the prudential argument, respectively. I will explain that the prudential argument offers the most solid basis to construe a defence of political realism, because – compared to the other two arguments – it relies on less controversial premises. Even though I regard the prudential argument that I propose as the most persuasive, there are two reasons why I first delve into the meta-ethical and the ethical arguments: first of all, the prudential argument is essentially built taking advantage of the theses defended by the rival arguments and, secondly, unfolding the diverse justificatory strategies gives me the chance to comparatively show the strengths of the prudential argument.

2. Political realism as anti-moralism

Political realism as a tradition does not constitute a uniform and systematic corpus. Rather, we could say that those who define themselves – or that have been defined – as realists share some core research interests and theoretical sensibilities (see Galston 2010; McQuenn 2017; McQueen forth.). The interpretation of realism that I will offer is based on Geuss' and Williams' writings. This choice is motivated by the fact that Geuss and Williams are usually regarded to be the scholars who have played a

major role in shaping the contemporary understanding of political realism (Rossi and Sleat 2014). Hence, my starting point is ecumenical in character: by choosing Geuss and Williams as references, I try to propose a (as far as possible) uncontroversial justification of political realism, despite the differences that can be traced within this tradition.

By drawing on Geuss' and Williams' reflections, I interpret political realism on the basis of what it aims to reject: *political moralism* (or, political theory conceived as *applied ethics*, as Geuss dubs it)[31]. Therefore, before proceeding with the outline of the justificatory arguments, we first need to understand what does it mean to develop an anti-moralist political thought. Let me introduce the idea of moralism in political theory (and, correlatively, of anti-moralism) by recalling Geuss' and Williams' own words. Geuss points out:

> "Politics is applied ethics" in the sense I find objectionable means that we start thinking about the human social world by trying to get what is sometimes called an "ideal theory" of ethics. […] The view I am rejecting assumes that one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step, one can apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents. (Geuss 2008, 6, 8)

In a similar vein, Williams points out:

> I start with two rough models of political theory […] with respect to the relation of morality to political practice. One is an *enactment* model. The model is that political theory formulates principles, concepts, ideals, and values; and politics (so far as it does what the theory wants) seeks to express these in political action, through persuasion, the use of power, and so forth. […] Contrast this with a *structural* model. Here theory lays down moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be justly exercised. […] My concern here is with what they have in common, that they both represent the priority of the moral over the political. Under the enactment model, politics is (very roughly) the instrument of the moral; under the structural model, morality offers constraints […] on what politics can rightfully do. In both cases, political theory is something like applied morality. (Williams 2005, 1-2, emphasis in original)

These two passages depict a common understanding of political moralism. For Geuss and Williams, a political theory is moralist when its normative foundations lie outside politics; that is, when the principles it defends are elaborated abstracting from

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[31] Notably, political realism has been mainly developed as a critic, negative, standpoint in the literature, aimed at challenging mainstream political thought (Galston 2010, 408). For this reason, characterising political realism from the point of view of what it rejects is the best way to introduce it and explain it.

actual political practices. Indeed, what Geuss and Williams mean to emphasise in these well-known quotes is that in ethics-first models an understanding of political reality is superfluous to the elaboration of the normative principles suited to it. In this sense, political moralism is a top-down method: in moralist theories, political reality plays just a secondary role, and it starts to matter when the normative principles are to be applied to political circumstances.

How would an anti-moralist theory look like, then? By definition, to qualify a political theory as anti-moralist, we need to look at the way it conceives the relationship between norms and reality. In an anti-moralist theory, political reality must play a crucial role in determining the *content*, not merely the application, of norms. Yet, this information is still insufficient to have a clear grasp on the substance of realist theorising. So, we have to examine in more detail how such relation of dependence between norms and reality comes eventually to be conceived. In Geuss and Williams, what ought to be done in a practical context is interpreted as a function of what would make sense to do in light of (a suitable interpretation of) the system of beliefs of its participants. Or, differently put, for Geuss and Williams, political practices ought to be reformed, or organised, in order to reflect what actual participants regard as valuable to achieve, or safeguard[32]. However, a good share of the final form that a realist theory will take depends on how this fundamental methodological requirement is interpreted. In fact, it is possible to develop different realist analyses of political normativity according to the criteria of acceptability of beliefs that will be adopted, and the general methods to elaborate norms that will be outlined. So, for instance, Geuss largely employs a "negative" methodology according to which we ought to orient political action by examining which beliefs must be rejected as ideological (and, correspondingly, by following those which pass the test of critical reflection) (Geuss 2016, Ch.1 and Ch.2; see also Prinz 2016; Rossi 2015). Williams, instead, adopts a less revisionist, and more constructive, approach: his method can be described as a practice-dependent method in which political practices ought to be reformed in order to fulfil their point and purpose and the value that their participants attribute to them (Williams 2005, 1-17; see also Jubb 2016a; Rossi 2012). However, for the present purposes, it is unnecessary to delve further into the details of the realist methodology. Rather, what matters for the purposes

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[32] Hence, the realist methodology must not be confused with a search for consensus-based principles, see Horton 2010; Sleat 2014.

of construing a sound justification of realist political thought is to get a sense of the insight that moves the realist approach to political theorising. Realists intend to ground political normativity on an interpretation of what is valuable from the point of view of real political actors. Hence, unlike moralism, which defines political norms by disregarding the political circumstances of their application, political realism is a bottom-up procedure which construes the normative analysis from an interpretation of contextual beliefs and practices.

Notice, then, that "anti-moralism" does not mean "anti-moral" (Geuss 2008, 1-4). Political realism, if properly understood, claims that a political theory ought to start from an understanding of the significance of political practices. Therefore, when political realism is described as a claim about the *autonomy of the political* (Williams 2005, 3), such claim must not be intended as a rejection of ethical thought, but rather as a rejection of top-down methodologies. Ethical thought can contribute to a realist understanding of political normativity precisely because realist political thought focuses on what actual agents find valuable (Geuss 2016, Ch.2).

Then, why is moralism troublesome? Why should political theory favour a bottom-up approach for the construction of political normativity? I will outline a justification of political realism by taking into account the corpus of Williams' and Geuss' works as a whole. Admittedly, mine is going to be just one possible interpretation of the grounds of political realism, but I will argue that it might be considered as the most powerful against moralists. Indeed, Geuss and Williams are not entirely systematic writers, and for this reason multiple interpretations of the grounds of political realism can be consistently offered. Before explaining my interpretation, I will briefly introduce two alternative strategies for the justification of political realism which have been outlined, more or less explicitly, in the recent literature (Hall 2014; Hall and Sleat 2017; Prinz 2016; Sagar 2016). Why, though, do I need to spend time on justifications that I aim to overcome? A first crucial reason is that my argument partially builds upon these alternative routes to come to a justification of realism, hence they are essential to the construction of my proposal. Secondarily, because by pointing out the diverse strategies outlined I can defend the comparative strength of mine.

3. The metaethical argument: from the limits and sense of ethics

The first argument that can be reconstructed from Williams' and Geuss' writings as a basis for political realism revolves around a crucial thesis that they share about ethics. Geuss and Williams are sceptic about morality; still, they believe that some form of ethical discourse is both meaningful and necessary. According to the first possible argument, it is realists' specific understanding of the scope and limits of ethics that ground their approach to political theory. In fact, this is the interpretation favoured by Ed Hall and Matt Sleat who have recently interpreted political realism as first and foremost an *ethical* thesis (see Hall 2014; Hall and Sleat 2017). So, let us see how this argument unfolds and what its limits might be.

I have just said that this first justificatory strategy is based on the substitution of morality with another form of ethical reasoning that, as far as politics is concerned, takes the form of political realism. How is it possible that realists are moral sceptics and yet do defend a particular *normative* approach to politics? Here words must be read and chosen carefully. Following Williams, I am making a very specific use of the concept "morality" in this context[33]. As Williams points out, "morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture" (Williams 2011, 7). In Geuss' and Williams' works, morality must be intended as a form of normative reasoning which aims at defining a system of principles that establishes what ought (or ought not to) be done in a given context (Geuss 2016, 28-33; Williams 2011, 80). The authority of such moral systems typically comes from an independent justification that proves their alleged objective validity, which is usually designed to demonstrate the universal validity of the system of norms. Morality, in this sense, resembles a scientific research: the philosophical endeavour is similarly devoted to the definition of a consistent system of objective laws whose justification requires universal recognition (Williams 2011, 193-201).

It is easy to see how morality, so conceived, relates to the notion of political moralism that I introduced in the former section. If morality has the sufficient means to define what ought to be done in every circumstance and universally, politics will be just one field of application of a moral theory independently justified. According to this conception, there would be no point in conceiving political normativity autonomously.

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[33] I am making use of the concept of morality as it appears in Williams 2011, 193-201.

As Hall and Sleat (2017) explain, however, Geuss and Williams harshly reject morality: and with morality, political moralism must be abandoned too.

But is it possible to overcome morality while saving some form of positive ethical thought? After all, if we reject the idea of an objective and universal normative knowledge, are not we doomed to fall into relativism or nihilism? Of course, Geuss and Williams attempt to positively construe an alternative proposal, and their answer is at the root of their defence of political realism – or, better, of a first possible defence of political realism. To understand how they come to defend realism – i.e. a bottom-up context-dependent normative thought – we first need to understand why, in their opinion, morality is untenable.

Williams and Geuss reject morality for the same reason. They both argue that it is impossible to provide a philosophical justification of a moral system. In fact, according to them, the failure of contemporary moral outlooks is not merely accidental; rather, it is the whole project of morality that ought to be dismissed and rethought. According to Williams and Geuss, at the bottom of contemporary moral theory there is a failure to understand the very substance of ethical life. Indeed, it is no coincidence that one of the major theoretical influences they share is Nietzsche[34]. Following Nietzschean leanings, both Geuss and Williams believe that the project of providing a philosophical justification of morality is doomed to fail because there is no foundation to be discovered. There is no stable basis upon which to ground our moral knowledge: ethical life is a product of history for which an ultimate support – be it rational, transcendental, theological or teleological – cannot be found. So, there is no hope to find an objective point of view, external to our contingent and partial one, to justify our ethical life, thereby proving that what we do, or claim, is ultimately right. Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (2011) is the work in which this thesis is most fully discussed. There, Williams meticulously analyses what he takes to be the most developed attempts to provide a philosophical foundation of our ethical life. He examines in turn Aristotelian (2011, 34-59) and Kantian (60-78) foundations, and the attempt to provide an objective grounding of ethics by seeking a convergence on ethical truths in the way that science does (146-72) and convincingly argues that all of them fail. In this way, Williams aims to give substance to the thesis that it is impossible for philosophy to find the ultimate

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[34] Both Geuss and Williams have written extensively about Nietzsche's thought. See especially Geuss 1994; 1997; 2005, 40-66 and Williams 2002; 2007, Ch. 20, Ch. 21, Ch. 22 and Ch. 23; 2014, Ch. 60.

ground of our ethical life. That foundation does not exist, and the failure of all the major philosophical strategies to meet our need of objective moral answers proves his point (see Hall 2014, 548-51)[35]. Geuss, albeit in a less systematic fashion, defends the same idea by discussing ethical beliefs in their historical evolution and context. For Geuss, morality is grounded upon illusions which become manifest once we engage in a careful genealogical analysis: what we, here and now, believe to an ethical truth – eternal, coherent, and progressive – is actually the contextual products of specific historical circumstances (see esp. Geuss 2001a; 2001b). In Geuss' view, there is no "view from nowhere" and we should deeply recognise this fact if we want to make proper sense of our ethical lives (2005, 4).

What should our reaction be, then, if we agreed with Geuss and Williams? Should the realisation that an ultimate support for our ethical lives cannot be found leave us in nihilism and despair? Actually, this would be a serious mistake. Geuss and Williams believe that the realisation of the contingent nature of our ethical beliefs does not imply their immediate rejection, let alone the impossibility of making sense of our ethical lives. Who thinks so, they claim, makes the fundamental error of falling back into the illusory belief that foundationalism is the sole way to ascertain the validity of ethical propositions. In fact, they argue, those who claim that it is impossible to hold any ethical beliefs as truthful in reason of their contingent nature are trapped in the same deception Williams and Geuss are trying to unmask. Indeed, a similar worry only arises if we are convinced that foundationalism is the sole way to make ethical life meaningful. Those who react with despair are still "under the shadow of universalism" (Williams 2005, 67).

The point, rather, is that Geuss and Williams are inviting to radically change our conception of ethics and ethical life. We do not freely embrace a certain ethical life, we do not simply discover ethical truth and change them as soon as we get better information about it. Ethics is a necessary part of human identity and relationships – we cannot simply detach from it and consider it like a fully independent object of inquiry: it makes ourselves who we are, hence we could not get free of it or examine it from a completely impartial point of view. That is why we ought not to regard the contingent nature of our ethical beliefs as troublesome. Contingent does not mean arbitrary, and

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[35] On the relationship between political realism and moral scepticism, particularly in its Williamsian version, see also Sagar 2016.

once we understand what are the substance and role of ethics in our lives, contingency ought not to raise suspicions (Sagar 2016, 377). In Williams' own words:

> Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientistic illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective. (Williams 2006, 193-94)

So, if this is how we should rethink ethics, our conception of the role of philosophy should change accordingly. Philosophy, as said, cannot help us is construing a moral theory. The role of philosophy cannot be the one of *justifying* ethics. Williams and Geuss conceive the activity of philosophising about ethics in a wholly different manner. Philosophy should help us to better understand, and possibly critically assess, the origin of our beliefs. The fundamental task of philosophy ought to be to enable critical reflection (Geuss 2016, Ch. 1 and Ch. 2). This might take different forms – such as genealogical and interpretive reconstructions, utopian reasoning, and artistic endeavours – and it must allow us to reach a truthful account of our beliefs, namely to allow us to have a better understanding about what our system of beliefs is, which of our beliefs are we ready to sincerely retain, and which ones to revise or reject[36].

Politics, as any other practical field, would have to be understood along these lines. Following this argumentative path, normative political theory needs to be realist because the whole field of ethics needs to be so conceived. There cannot be any moralism for the straightforward reason that ethics can never be merely *applied ethics*: ethical thinking must always start from the bottom, i.e. from actual practices (Hall and Sleat 2017, 281-82). Likewise, political philosophy needs to start from the contextual understandings of the ethical beliefs about politics, and needs to gain a normative

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[36] Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002) is entirely devoted to exploring how we can make sense of our lives – how we can retain some truthful belief – despite the contingent nature of what we hold valuable and take for granted.

appraisal of political practices from them – provided that the process is guided by critical reflection. Hence, according to this interpretation, political realism is motivated by a more general inquiry into the sense and limits of ethics.

As I pointed out above, my interest in this paper is not mainly interpretive; hence, I do not intend to thoroughly address the justifications of political realism alternative to mine. So, I am going to take them as correct and consistent possible interpretations of what Williams and Geuss had in mind while defending political realism. However, I said that my justificatory strategy might prove stronger and more convincing than the rival ones. I will deal with this point more directly later, but by now let me just point out some of the reasons why this first argument might be regarded as a weak defence of political realism. There are two reasons that might weaken realism when backed via the justification just introduced.

A first one regards the kind of justification pursued. This first argument is metaethical in content: as we have seen, it revolves around a fundamental thesis regarding the nature of ethics and the meaning that ethics might have for us. Convincing as this argument might be, it might nonetheless raise some perplexities that the ultimate justification for *realism* rests on a *metaethical* dispute, namely on an extremely abstract inquiry. This is by no means suggesting that such a defence naively falls into inconsistency. Rather, the point is that it seems to be an unfortunate choice, because realism typically requires starting from real politics, while such a defence remains purely theoretical[37]. There seems to be much more going on in political realism than a "mere" metaethical reflection: this justificatory strategy cuts off real politics and, with it, some of the themes dearest to the realist literature.

A second reason that might weaken this first argument regards its very structure. Even if it is possible to offer a reconstruction of the path from (a form of) scepticism to realism by making use of Williams' later writings and Geuss' scattered suggestions, some doubts regarding the tenability of the project might arise. As Paul Sagar (2016, 378-79) also notes, the analysis proposed so far might not result completely convincing[38]: a more radical sceptic might object that, given the unavailability of a stable ground for our ethical beliefs, it is hard to retain some belief as truthful – that is, it is hard that some

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[37] On this point see also Philp 2012, 640.

[38] For a critical perspective on Williams' approach to ethical life see Cottingham 2009. Hall (2014, 557-61) offers an elaborate response to Cottingham's arguments.

belief will pass the test of reflection and we will not regard every conviction of ours as the fruit of a persistent self-deception. The radical sceptic will have to find some other solutions to defend realism[39] or deny the validity of Williams' and Geuss' conclusions.

As I said, however, my interest is merely to emphasise the potential weaknesses of this first justificatory strategy. As far as this first argument is concerned, the point is that this first justificatory strategy would require a complex defence to qualify as a good support of the realist case – and this defence would mainly consist in a metaethical discussion.

4. Ethical Argument: From the dangers of moralism

As I said, setting aside the metaethical argument for the moment, there are two further strategies that it is possible to pursue to defend the adoption of political realism. The second argument could be defined as the "ethical" argument – where ethics must be intended in the realist sense that I briefly discussed above, i.e. as opposed to morality – because it is not centred around debating the methods of inquiry that normative political theories ought to follow (like the metaethical argument did). Rather, the ethical argument focuses on showing the undesirability of political moralism, namely the fact that some of its implications ends up being unacceptable. The ethical argument indeed revolves entirely around showing the practical dangers towards which political moralism leads; dangers that, the argument goes, ought to be eschewed and that realism is able to prevent.

A major part of Geuss' and Williams' writings are indeed dedicated to reflections about the dangers posed by moralist thinking in political circumstances. This is a well-known feature of realist writings which have often been described as overtly "destructive", because mainly focused on highlighting the shortcomings of moralism, instead of construing a full-fledged alternative (see Galston 2010; Hurka 2009). It is not a case, then, that this line of interpretation dominates a recent article by Janosh Prinz, which – by providing the first careful analysis of Geuss's political methodology – offers valuable insights on the justification of political realism (Prinz 2016). As Prinz correctly

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[39] Sagar (2016, 379) suggests that the sceptic might follow a "prudential" strategy to defend a bottom-up approach to political reasoning. This is indeed the idea that I will explore later on by outlining a prudential argument in favour of political realism.

points out (2016, 4-9), Geuss' crucial interest is not so much to engage in an abstract dispute aimed at establishing what is the best theoretical framework for guiding political action, but to denounce, and possibly contain, the perils of moralism. Even though Prinz does not deal with Williams' writings in his article, an analogous case could be made for Williams' political theory. A major part of Williams' political writings is deconstructive too: Williams most of the times deals with denouncing the absurd, in his view, implications of moralism and he does so by making manifest the consequences of such theoretical approach, without providing counter-proposals (see, 2005, 62-74 and 145-53).

However, this crucial aspect of their thoughts remains mostly neglected if we interpret political realism as a primarily metaethical stance. The metaethical route, though consistent, seems to lose sight of some of the distinguishing features of the realist thought. Instead, if we focus on such deconstructive dimension of political realism, it is possible to build a "negative" justification in its favour entirely based on the shortcomings of moralism.

So, how is this argument supposed to unfold? Why are moralist theories unacceptable in realists' view? The reason for which realists regard moralism as an approach to political reasoning leading to unacceptable outcomes is due to its very theoretical structure. The problem with moralist thinking is not, in fact, circumscribed to a single (or some) specific kinds of moral theories; rather, the dangers fostered by moralism are due to the type of reasoning it supports. Indeed, the troublesome feature Geuss and Williams identify in moralism resides in its insensitivity to reality. As we have seen at the beginning of this paper, moralist theories are top-down systems, in the sense that they conceive practical reasoning as a form of deduction in which general principles independently justified are applied to specific circumstances. It follows that reality – once the general principles have been identified – cannot affect in any sense the conclusions of the theory. The circumstances of application can, at best, determine the feasibility of the general principle. Moralist theories are, in this sense, pure rational systems (Williams 2011, Ch. 10). Importantly, this means that realism must not be confused with a form of consequentialism. Consequential theories too must be regarded as moralist theories. The general principles which a consequential theory defends require checking and weighting the real-world consequences of actions, but this requirement, *per*

se, does not affect in any sense the validity of the principles – which are then insensitive to reality[40]. The problem Williams and Geuss see in moralism does not strictly consists in its inability to take into account the consequences of political actions. The trouble, more correctly, resides in the irrelevance to which reality is condemned in moralist paradigms – in the stark separation between theory and reality such paradigms trace.

There are far too many examples, in Geuss' and Williams' writings, of cases in which moralism happens to lead to unacceptable consequences to provide an exhaustive account. However, without getting lost into the details of their discussions, it is possible to divide the theoretical shortcomings of moralism in three kinds of "blindness" towards reality, which – given my purposes – are enough for gaining a sense of the reasons that might justify the adoption of political realism. Moralism, given its structure, might neglect political reality along three dimensions: its complexity, its consequences, and its possibilities. In all the three cases, moralism appears to constitute an undesirable form of reasoning for politics, or so Geuss and Williams argue.

With regard to the first kind of "blindness", moralism is "blind" to the complexity of political reality because, as said, once the set of guiding principles is defined, reality cannot affect them. Such insensitivity has worrisome consequences. I will mention two examples which serve as schema for the several cases Williams and Geuss discuss. The first one concerns the application of a theory designed for interpersonal relationships to political circumstances. Williams discusses what would mean to apply to politics theories so abstractly designed by introducing the case of humanitarian interventions (Williams 2005, Ch. 13). What would happen, he wonders, if we applied the everyday Principle of Rescue[41] – according to which we ought to assist the ones we happen to find in peril

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[40] Williams, indeed, harshly criticises utilitarianism for its inability to make sense of some essential features of ethical life, which disappear once practical choices are taken exclusively on the basis of consequentialist considerations. On this, see the well-known example Williams proposes about Jim and the Indians. Williams imagines the case of a person, Jim, who finds himself in the following situation: he bumps into a group of Indian prisoners who are about to be killed by the captain in charge. The captain, who is pleased by having met Jim, decide to honour his presence by offering him the opportunity to kill one of the prisoners himself – and, if Jim accepts, the other prisoners will be let off. What would be Jim supposed to do? A utilitarian would have no doubt. However, Williams points out that the utilitarian view is too simplistic: utilitarianism reduces to a simple calculus a situation which is deeply tragic for Jim. There is, then, something in personal experiences that utilitarianism is unable to consider. Utilitarianism obscures the moral life of persons (Williams 1973, 97-99).

[41] Specifically, Williams defines the Principle of Rescue as follows:
   (1) If X is in peril and
   (2) Y is saliently related to X's peril and

and which we have the means to assist – to international relationships? The international case involves several complexities that make the Principle of Rescue inapplicable, unless we accepted its destabilising consequences. In international relations, in order to decide to intervene in another country to the aid of its population, several additional questions come into the picture: is the intervention welcomed by the government which would receive the aid? Would the intervention affect the political influences and alliances in the area? Which State is supposed to intervene? Is the intervention approved by the population of the country which is providing help? If the realities of politics are considered carefully, it looks manifest that the Principle of Rescue, if strictly followed, would severely undermine stability, and trigger collateral conflicts. Hence, it looks dangerous, therefore inappropriate, to apply principles designed for interpersonal relations to political circumstances. Once the principle is revised or rejected, and political theory is conducted by taking into consideration real politics, we are already accessing the territory of political realism. However – it might be objected – there are some political theories that have a moralist structure, but are specifically designed for political circumstances; therefore, moralism is not troublesome per se, rather it is the kind of abstractions the theory employs. The second example, taken this time from Geuss, tackles this sort of cases. A moralist political theory might well start from a conception of political reality, but if such conception is mistaken or insufficiently elaborated, the theory proves to be no less damaging than the first case illustrated. Geuss takes as an example *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1999), which he harshly criticises by pointing out: "one is immediately struck by the complete absence in it of any discussion of what I have described above as the basic issues of politics. The topic of "power", in particular, is simply one he never explicitly discusses at all" (Geuss 2008, 90). The trouble with this mischaracterisation of politics, at least according to Geuss, is that the lack of a discussion about power, and power dynamics, makes Rawls unable to "see" some of the gravest problems which affect politics. Consequently, his theory not only offers no guides to counteract these problems, it actually reinforces them[42]. According to Geuss, Rawls is above all unable to recognise the fact of ideological power, namely the idea that the interests of some people might be

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(3)   Y can hope to offer effective aid to X
(4)   at a cost to Y, which is not unreasonably high, Y ought to help X (Williams 2005, 146-47).
[42] On the relationship between political theory and ideology in Geuss, see also Prinz 2016, 6-7.

systematically manipulated and oppressed, because the dominant systems of thoughts does not contain the conceptual elements necessary to make the oppressed realise their disadvantage[43]. As a proof of such shortcoming, Geuss mentions Rawls' choice of construing his theory around the device of the *veil of ignorance*: the idea that principles of justice ought to be identified by agents unaware of any information about their concrete conditions of life in society, such as gender, class, or job. In this way, Rawls' crystallises ideologies because, by completely taking out of sight the concrete power dynamics, his theory does not contemplate any device able to tackle them (Geuss 2008, 86-89)[44]. As these examples are aimed to show, moralist theories might have dangerous practical consequences by ignoring some crucial aspects of political reality. The shortcoming of moralism consists in its inability to consider political reality in the elaboration of normative judgments: the theory is logically unable to "see" it as normatively relevant.

However, the dangers of such insensitivity to facts become even more striking when the "blindness" of moralism towards consequences is considered. Indeed, given their structure, moralist theories exhibit insensitivity to the collateral implications of their application. At this point, it should be pretty easy to understand why this is the case. In moralist theories, once the set of principles is defined, the collateral implications of their implementation are consequences which the theory regards as acceptable to the fulfilment of the principles[45]. Geuss happens to clearly explain what might be the damages of this insensitivity to side-effects when he says: "the moralizing approach

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[43] Guess specifically talks about a *normative* form of oppression, which is given whenever "the agents are prevented from pursuing their interests by a set of beliefs they accept" (Geuss 1981, 34-35).

[44] Similar criticism against Rawls' *Theory* have been advanced by McCharty 2001 and Okin 1989 who regard Rawls' proposal unable to tackle racial and gender injustice.

[45] Once again, this should not misguide the reader: consequentialist theories are not exempt from this sort of "blindness". Since consequentialist theories define a rigid set of principles to follow, they define, also, a rigid set of implications which the theory regards as acceptable: consequentialist theories regard as normatively irrelevant all those considerations that lie outside the consequentialist calculus. What Williams says about utilitarianism and integrity is revelatory: "The point is that [the agent] is identified with his actions as flowing from projects or attitudes which… he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about… It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his projects and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity" (1973, 116-17). As in the case of Jim and the Indians (see n. 40), Williams explains that utilitarianism loose something by systematising: utilitarianism may represent a threat to one's own integrity, because utilitarianism asks to follow a consequentialist calculus, leaving aside personal projects and identities.

tends to assign potentially infinite value to the struggle against certain […] visible forms of evil. If the task at hand is of infinite importance, some fabrication of evidence, suborning of or intimidation of civil servants, infliction of 'collateral damage' on innocent populations, etc. are forgivable offences" (2010, 33; see also 2016, 35-38). Here Geuss is pointing out that, in some of its forms, moralism becomes structurally unable to attribute relevance to a fundamental feature of political practices, namely the use of force, which is essentially required to the enactment and maintenance of any political reform. In similar cases moralism shows its most worrisome implications. If the theory demands the realisation of a certain good or, as in the present case, the prevention of some supposed "evil", the theory might become insensitive to the consequences of use of force. Similar considerations emerge also in Williams' discussion of human rights as political institutions. As Williams is keen to emphasise, the charge of violating human rights (hence, to recall Geuss' quote, to be in presence of some form of "evil") is "the most serious of political accusations" (Williams 2005, 72). The accuse of violating human rights has the force to justify the enactment of severe measure to eradicate the source of the violation. For this reason, Williams argues, defining some right as a "human right" is a choice that ought to be taken very carefully, it ought to be a matter of political good sense (Williams 2005, 72-74)[46].

Finally, there is another reason for concern that is vividly discussed by Geuss. By providing a vision of how the world is supposed to be, moralism does not require us to turn our sight towards, and therefore consider, the alternative political possibilities that are open to us (see Prinz 2016, 2-4). By doing so, in Geuss' view, moralism might even dangerously foster conservative tendencies. This happens when the circumstances in which we find ourselves are somehow coherent with the normative conclusions of the moral paradigms we embrace. In similar cases, moralism is a comforting (and Geuss would rather add *oppressive*) structure: "the fascination with evil […] is usually a cheap way to assume that one's own moral intuitions are basically in order. Almost obsessive discourse about "evil" can be […] a way to evade the necessity of using one's

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[46] As Williams acutely points out, an unwise enlargement of the set of human rights might end up in another, opposite, danger; namely, the one of ceasing to consider violations of human rights as radical forms of "evil", declassing them to mere rhetorical attributions. In this case, moralist theories would show another kind of blindness, similar to the ones above-mentioned: the inability to recognise the distinctiveness of some real political facts, like the seriousness of some forms of cruelty and oppression (Williams 2005, 64).

imagination to face reality", with the result that moralism might become a way of "reinforcing the status quo than as any kind of contribution to radical change" (Geuss 2010, 182-83). The clear structure of moralist thought gives us a clear picture of how the world should be and, once such understanding is gained, there is no point to seek alternative possibilities, as this would represent merely a useless and costly effort. When this structure of thought is consistent with the dominant normative ideology the result is a lack of critical reflection, a blindness towards political possibilities.

Those that I have been exposing so far must not be taken as features that *every* moralist theory presents. In fact, some of the alleged shortcomings introduced push in opposite directions: at times moralist theories can justify disruptive political actions (as for the case of humanitarian interventions), at others they can foster an uncritical conservation of the status quo (as for the case of moralist theories which are consistent with the dominant normative ideology). The examples discussed were meant to give a sense of the possible shortcomings that Geuss and Williams envisage in moralism as a form of political thinking.

However, despite being the most diverse, there is a common trait that unites all the criticism Williams and Geuss move against moralism. At the beginning of this paper, I defined it as a structural *blindness* towards reality, and now we can see why such structural blindness is regarded as unacceptable to a realist eye. Since moralism isolates theory from reality it is unable to clearly see what happens in this real world, and the results are the ones portrayed. Those results look manifestly unacceptable to Geuss and Williams, and should also suffice to convince us that moralism cannot be the appropriate guide in political circumstances.

Political realism, then, proposes itself as the remedy to the distortions of moralism. Being essentially a bottom-up type of political reflection, realism makes reality its source of normativity and, by being so characterised, it is constantly open to changes and revisions in light of the political circumstances at hand. Contrary to moralism, realism keeps an attitude of respect towards reality: the theory is not imposed upon circumstances, rather political reality becomes the most relevant part of political reasoning. In this way, realism manages to recompose the dangerous divide between theory and reality traced by moralism.

Is this line of defence of political realism convincing? A first doubt might be pointed out by arguing that such realist considerations commit a fundamental error since they collapse theory and reality, while these are two separate domains: theoretical inquiries are merely concerned with understanding normativity, they do not really have the concrete consequences on the real world feared by realists. This is a point which Geuss and Williams would harshly object. For Geuss and Williams, there is a fundamental connection between theory and reality: political theories are forms of political actions because they are able to generate effects in the real world (Geuss 2016, 20; Williams 2005, 72). Therefore, it makes perfectly sense to reflect on their consequences.

However, the major objection that might be raised against this second line of defence is that there seems to be something missing. Criticism *by itself* – as it has been commonly pointed out against realism – cannot work (Hurka 2009). If moralists are getting it right about political reasoning, realists might well find the implications of their theories hardly acceptable, but they should nonetheless respect those implications as true accounts of what ought to be done. Moralists, in other words, could remain unmoved by this sort of realist critiques. If realists want their reflections to be convincing, they must advance some alternative positive idea of how political thinking ought to be conducted. Someone, in fact, went as far as to suggest that there are implicit assumptions in realist arguments that motivate their unease against moralism (see Erman and Möller 2015; Larmore 2013).

Maybe, then, this second line of defence could be saved from the accuse of being inconclusive by making explicit the covert assumptions that allegedly ground their rejection of moralism. Following this route, there seem to be two sorts of implicit assumptions that might support the realist case: a meta-theoretical and a principled one. The trouble is that neither of them seem convincing. In the first case, the dissatisfaction with moralism could be grounded on an implicit prior understanding of the nature of ethical knowledge. As we have seen, this is the route followed by Hall and Sleat. In this case, the reason for which moralism ends up by looking unacceptable in the cases considered is that it contravenes what makes sense from the point of view of the agents involved, which is the only valid source of ethical knowledge[47]. However, if this was the

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[47] This would hold also for the case of unreflective conservatism seen above, precisely because the

case, the second argument would collapse on the first one, and I have already pointed out some of its potential weaknesses. Alternatively, instead of a prior metaethical background, there could be some principled reason why Geuss and Williams judge unacceptable the implications of moralist theories: for instance, they could believe that the first task of politics is the avoidance of oppression in all its forms (both on a normative and on a practical level) and realise that moralism fails to meet this fundamental principle, given the implications mentioned[48]. If this was the case, though, realism would seem to fall into a form of tacit moralism, since it could be charged of assuming a principle prior to politics, a fact-insensitive assumption. Overall, this second argument in favour of realism would seem to be doomed to fail, since either it results inconclusive, or it relies on implicit theoretical assumptions that weaken it.

But is this a necessary result? Actually, the realist has another way out, which I believe is the most interpretively accurate. The realist could reject the very initial claim and deny that every critique must be accompanied by a constructive alternative. Indeed, the whole point of Geuss' and Williams' reflections is to argue for the priority of reality over theory in ethical reasoning. It is then entirely consistent that they get to their point by "simply" showing political reality: by making manifest why moralism does not make sense to us as a guide for practical life[49]. They do not need an alternative account of what a valid ethical reasoning would consist in to do that, exactly because this is the "scientistic" way of thinking they are arguing against. Hence, there is a way to make the second argument in defence of political realism viable. However, this line of defence comes at a price: such argument is unable to convince the moralist of the preferability of political realism. Exactly because the realist defends his position by embracing criteria of validity which the moralist does not share, the realist argument cannot strike a chord with the moralist. The moralist and the realist would be like preachers of different faiths:

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acceptance of the status quo is unreflective: moralism in that case prevents from understanding what really makes sense to agents involved.

[48] Geuss explains that there are two kinds of oppression: manifest or normative. He explains the two follows: "Macht is the ability to prevent others from pursuing their interests. The exercise of Macht is repression. This exercise is either 'manifest' - open use of force or direct threat to use force - or 'normative.' Repression is 'normative' if the agents are prevented from pursuing their interests by a set of normative beliefs they accept" (1981, 34-35). Thus, given what as been said so far, the realist rejection of moralism could be explained as a rejection of oppression.

[49] In fact, Geuss explicitly argues against the idea that criticism must be constructive in ethical thinking. He firmly believes that we could make sense of a critique without having a clear idea of what could "substitute" what is being criticised (see Geuss 2014, Ch. 4).

convincing the moralist would be more like a matter of conversion than of rational persuasion.

This is why I believe that the third argument in defence of political realism that I am about to introduce has to be regarded as a better defence. As I will shortly explain, the third argument has tools to convince the moralist of the preferability of political realism, and it is also able to overcome the weaknesses of the first (metaethical) defence.

5. Prudential argument: From responsibility in political action

As I briefly pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the third argument is meant to overcome the weaknesses of the former two; however, to achieve this goal it makes use of both of them. This means also that, in order to get to the justification of realism, the third argument takes into account a wider set of realist topics, because it refers both to its metaethical and ethical dimensions, while the former two (as I showed) can be construed independently. For this reason, I take the third argument to be stronger also from an interpretive point of view.

I define this final argument as the *prudential* argument because it is centred around the idea that to endorse political realism as a practical guide for political action would be a prudent choice. Prudent, however, it is not meant to mean "convenient" in a derogatory sense; rather, it should be intended as "responsible", namely as a justification which follows from *taking politics seriously*.

The prudential argument is divided in three steps. The former two steps are taken from the arguments previously introduced and run as follows. To begin with, from the meta-ethical argument we can deduce that there is deep uncertainty about the conditions of validity of our ethical judgments and, accordingly, about how normative thinking ought to be conducted. In fact, we can loosen the conclusions of the first argument and make a safe use of it without having to deal with its metaethical core. To claim, as I am doing, that there is epistemic uncertainty around ethical claims will suffice to recognise that realists raise good arguments against the structure of ethical thought defended by moralists. The doubts raised against foundationalism in ethics are certainly worth to be taken into consideration – so much so that the disagreement around these issues is still

wide and far from coming to a resolution[50]. Hence, my first step consists in emphasising the fact that Geuss and Williams put some meaningful doubts about the capacity of moralism to provide us with the truth around ethical thinking, and consequently around political thinking too.

The second step takes advantage of the ethical argument. From the second argument, namely from the realist "negative" literature, we learn that normative theories are performative (i.e. they might have some impact on the real political world), and that the structure of moralist thought is in some specific sense worrisome. In fact, as we have just seen, moralist theories can lead to a series of concrete damages, to a greater or lesser degree manifest. In the previous discussion of the ethical argument, we have seen a few examples of such damages: moralist theories might foster an inconsiderate use of force, incite disruptive actions, or frustrate our capacity to critically question our practices and choices (thereby hiding or perpetuating concrete injustices). As explained, all these shortcomings that are imputable to moralism are due to its very logical structure: since moralism does not attribute normative relevance to the real political world, it makes political reasoning insensitive to it. By pointing this out, as stated above, I do not mean to suggest that *all* moralist theories will end up by fostering the sort of consequences mentioned. Rather, I more modestly mean to emphasise that these shortcomings are potential consequences inherent to their very structure. So, my second step merely consists in recalling Geuss' and Williams' suggestions about the potential practical dangers of moralism. Still, am I endorsing some sort of pre-political value-judgment at this stage, by defining such consequences as dangerous? This is a doubt I formerly considered as one possible objections against the ethical argument. Yet, my answer is negative: for the purposes of the argument I merely need to assume that the consequences of moralism that realists portray commonly strike us as grave. Hence, mine is a contingent interpretive claim, not an evaluative judgment. Some of the implications of moralism, in fact, appear to threaten what we hold dearest in politics, such as the "securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (Williams 2005, 3). I consider such interests as a common-sensical

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[50] For an introduction about the controversies on the foundations of ethics, see Shafer-Landau and Cuneo 2016.

"platitude" about politics – to use Williams' words – and, therefore, I take moralism to be regarded as dangerous from the point of view of actual political agents[51].

We can come now to third and final step of the argument. Given the previous two steps, we can argue for a rejection of moralism as a guide for political action, and the adoption of realism instead, for *prudential* reasons. This means that realism can be defended as the *less risky* form of practical reasoning to adopt in political circumstances. The choice of political realism as our guide for political practices safeguards at best our political interests, because it ensures the attainment of the best cost and benefit balance among them. The sense of this general prudential claim emerges vividly when we consider moralist reforms which engender the sort of political consequences discussed in the second step of the present argument and, more extensively, in the ethical argument previously considered. In similar cases, by choosing whether to favour moralist conclusions or a bottom-up normative guidance, we face a choice about what kind of interests to prioritise in the political domain: we might either defend moralism, because we believe (or hope) to have found the *truth* about how politics ought to be conducted, and we are disposed to promote (and accept the consequences of) its attainment; or we endorse realism, because we believe that the *preservation* of our political interests, and – with it – the *protection* from the dangers of moralism, ought to take precedence. Now, in similar cases, given the former two steps of the argument, it looks sensible to conclude that political realism is the most prudent approach to choose. In fact, on balance, given the persistent disagreement around the ability of moralism (and,

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[51] The judgment of moralism as dangerous on the basis on common-sense political interests is a theme that largely recurs in Williams' essay "The liberalism of fear", in which he draws from Judith Shklar's political thought to explain why liberalism in the appropriate doctrine to adopt in our political circumstances (Williams 2005, 52-61). According to both Shklar and Williams, a serious problem for political thought is that theorists tend to forget about the characteristics of political reality and the interests of real political actors. Realism is a "party of memory", not a "party of hope": it focuses on reminding us what are the fundamental political need upon which political coexistence has been construed and which ought to form the grounding pillars of any normative understanding of politics (Shklar 1989, 26). Fundamental political goals, such as the protection from cruelty and abuse of power – which are at the core, for instance, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and which, therefore, belong to our shared political culture) – usually vividly emerge as basic political interests in post-conflictual historical phases, and are somehow neglected afterwards. A passage of Shklar, recalled by Williams, is emblematic in this respect: "To those American political theorists who long for either more communal or more expansively individual personalities, I now offer a reminder that these are the concerns of an *exceptionally privileged liberal society*, and that until the institutions of primary freedom are in place these longings cannot even arise. Indeed the extent to which both the communitarian and the romantic take free public institutions for granted is a tribute to the United States, but not to their sense of history. *Too great a part of past and present political experience is neglected*" (Shklar 1989, 35-36, emphasis added). As it will become clear, the fact that moralism can be regarded as dangerous from a human point of view is crucial in order to develop a prudential argument in favour of realism.

relatedly, of the diverse theories it gives rise to) to deliver the truth about political normativity, and given its perceived potential shortcomings, to select moralism as a practical guide for political circumstances appears as an excessively risky choice: moralism generates a severe negative impact, while the gain it promises is uncertain. So, in this sort of cases, following moralism as a practical guide looks unwise, since the benefits it promises are overridden by the serious costs incurred. Moralism, according to this line of argument, is a gamble which is hardly worthwhile to take. Realism, on the contrary, offers a way to protect the fundamental political interests of actual agents, because it grounds normativity on a contextual interpretation and reflection about what political actors find valuable[52]. On balance, a prudential reasoning would conclude that, in this kind of circumstances, it would be politically wise to follow a bottom-up methodology. However, it might be replied, certainly not every moralist theory needs to engender the sort of practical implications portrayed above. So, is the prudential argument able to generalise its conclusion? After all, a possible objection might go, we could simply contrast the implications of moralist paradigms with the real world, and assess whether it is wise to follow their prescriptions. Yet – a realist would reply – this is precisely the sort of reasoning that makes the prudential argument a forceful general justification of the realist approach. Indeed, the prudential argument is precisely construed around the idea that moralist prescriptions could, and should, be weighed against what actual agents find valuable. But the prudential argument also suggests that, whenever the conclusions of moralist and realist analyses conflict, we have a reason to safeguard the interests of actual political actors, given the fragile status of moralist theories. Therefore, once it is accepted the idea that normative prescriptions ought to be subjected to a prudential analysis, moralism either becomes redundant (because it

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[52] In fact, Williams points out that political theorists favour the creation of normative political "systems" when they forget about the real political audience and its actual political interests. For Williams, to abide by the fundamental political interests of actual agents it is necessary to build context-sensitive, bottom-up, proposals – not political ideals abstractly justified. While arguing in support for the doctrine of the liberalism of fear, he points out: "the approach of the liberalism of fear is bottom-up, not top-down. Just as it takes the condition of life without terror as its first requirement and considers what other goods can be furthered in more favourable circumstances, it treats each proposal for the extension of the notions of fear and freedom in the light of what locally has been secured. It does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances and then apply it. It regards the discovery of what rights people have as a political and historical one, not a philosophical one" (Williams 2005, 61).

reaches the same conclusions of realism), or it becomes an unwise strategy (because it conflicts with what realism would counsel)[53].

Can this third justificatory strategy convince the moralist? Given its prudential nature, I believe that this third argument possesses the tools to persuade the moralist about the superiority of realism as a practical guide in political circumstances. In fact, even if the moralist regarded the pursuit of truth has a highly valuable goal, its uncertain status, and the risks entailed, could give her a reason to recognise that realism is a wiser strategy – at least for the time being, and on a practical level.

Still, a similar argument might look puzzling and fragile for a number of reasons. So, let me unfold it in greater detail by addressing some of the doubts that might be raised against it. A first group of objections can be directed against the very idea of a prudential justification. For these critiques, the very project of justifying prudentially political realism is troublesome. A similar doubt can take three different forms. A first one would consist in claiming that a prudential justification is by definition unsound. Since the task of the theorist is to seek a better understanding of normative political theory, an evaluation of the practical costs of the theories is irrelevant or, more correctly, a focus on the costs of theories might undermine the theorist's research. In other words, a prudential justification commits a category error: it focuses on practical advantages, while the aim of the justification should be that of uncovering what method delivers the best normative understanding of politics. However, a realist would not accept a similar objection. In order to appropriately understand the prudential argument, a fundamental point about realism must be understood. The reason Geuss and Williams would not regard a prudential justification as a category error resides in the fact that, in their view, theorising qualifies as a political action and, crucially, every political action must be conducted responsibly. In fact, I have already mentioned the fact that Geuss and Williams regard theories as performative constructs, namely as products that are able to have an impact in the real world. By being so characterised, however, they must be subjected to the sort of evaluations that every political action must go through. Among those evaluations, judgments of responsibility are a fundamental component of

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[53] Notice that this does not imply that moralism cannot have any role in political thinking. The argument claims only that moralism is an inappropriate source of prescription, i.e. an inappropriate guide for political action. Moralism, though, might play other roles in political reasoning. It might, for example, constitute a source of criticism of our own beliefs, by encouraging us to examine and assess our own interests and moral views.

realist thought, which has remained largely underappreciated, though. With responsibility in political action, Geuss and Williams refer explicitly to the traditional Weberian notion according to which political actions ought to be analysed and assessed in light of their expected consequences (Geuss 2010, 30; Williams 2005, 12 and 72). To act responsibly means, in this sense, to pass through a careful examination of the concrete impact of the intended action, and to attentively weight the costs that a course of action might confront. In this vein, Geuss' and Williams' appeal for responsibility in political action serves as a reminder that we act in a real world and that political choices might have a severe impact on it: it is a call to take politics seriously, and be prepared to be accountable for one's own choices. Hence, political theorising, which constitutes an active intervention in this real world, ought to be evaluated along similar standards. It is, then, perfectly legitimate to assess theories in light of the costs that their realisation would entail. Their analyses, as we have seen, are a warning against the concrete dangers of moralism which, if attentively considered, might dissuade us from backing a moralist approach. In a realist vein, we could even go as far as saying that the category error is rather committed by those who artificially, and unrealistically, separate reality and theory when the question of which guidance to pursue in political circumstances is at stake.

Let us now turn to the second possible objection against the employment of prudential reasons of justification. According to a second line of objection, the prudential argument would encourage the development of self-deceptive beliefs, because it would justify acting *as if* realism were the approach which truly reflected what ethical life demanded of us, where instead this behaviour is just the most convenient. The prudential justification, in other words, would go against the very foundation of the realist project, which demands a truthful understanding of our political world. However, the argument that I am proposing here merely claims that we should attain to the realist approach as a practical guide; namely, that the norms we endorse ought to be conceived following a realist methodology. The prudential argument explicitly declares that the adoption of political realism is dictated by an assessment of the risks of moralism, and it does not exclude the pursuit of parallel researches – metaethical and ethical – about what political practices would truly demand of us.

A final objection against the prudential justification could be made against its contingent nature. As every prudential argument, this kind of justification of political

realism is merely contingent: that is to say, it does not prove that realism is the form of practical reasoning that ought to govern our political life, but it merely shows us that, given the present circumstances, it is accidentally convenient. This is a very fragile achievement, which could be rejected as soon as circumstances change. A realist would reply that this is certainly true, a prudential justification is necessarily contingent. However, the realist would deny that this weaken in any sense the argument. First of all, the justification is less contingent than it might appear: the facts mentioned in its support are contingent but persistent. The facts upon which the prudential justification is built are: the deep disagreement around the conditions of validity of metaethical and ethical theories, the practical consequences that moralism might give rise to, and a shared interest in the preservation of some fundamental political values (like protection, order, trust, stability, and the conditions of cooperation). All these facts are stubborn political facts, which will hardly change in the foreseeable future. Secondarily, it is not even clear why arguments that are grounded on contingent facts ought to be regarded with suspicion. In fact, this is exactly the point that realist aim to challenge by arguing that between theory and reality a sharp line of separation ought not to be traced.

Leaving aside the possible objections against the idea of prudential justification, let us consider a final doubt regarding the argument, this time concerning the prudential calculus itself. Indeed, someone might object that the prudential assessment is wrongly conducted, because the pursuit of truth is infinitely more valuable than any other goal. Therefore – the objection would go – the prudential analysis would not allow us to exclude moralism, since taking the risk of moralism would always constitute the best choice, given the infinite value of the potential gain. There are two answers a realist might point out in this case. As a first point she might, once again, recall that the prudential argument does not prevent us to search for the truth about metaethical, or ethical, issues: political realism is just the best practical approach to follow. As a second point, the realist would emphasise that the prudential calculus aims to take into account the interests of the participants; hence, it does not matter whether the theorist would conceive the calculus in a different manner. The relevant point of view is the enlarged one of those who take part in political practices. This is done because, as explained, the prudential argument originates from the necessity of responsibly taking into account what happens in the real world when moralism is enacted, and this requires abandoning

the restricted point of view of the theorist, in order to endorse the enlarged human one. As Williams effectively emphasises, political realism "speaks to humanity" (Williams 2005, 59).

6. Conclusion: Going realist in order to take politics seriously

I want to close my paper by saying a few more words on what I tried to argue for, and its relevance. As I specified in the introductory section, the central goal of this paper was to outline a prudential justification for the adoption of the realist method in normative political theory. As I specified and explained all along the paper, though, the prudential justification is taken to be just *one* possible justification of the realist method. In fact, I argued that there are at least two other arguments – what I dubbed the meta-ethical and the ethical arguments, respectively – which might back the realist case for the adoption of a bottom-up methodology. However, I claimed that the prudential argument is the only justificatory strategy which might result compelling for a moralist. As I tried to show, the prudential argument has such potential because it employs means unfamiliar to the moralist: whereas attempted *theoretical* justifications – the ones pursued by the meta-ethical and the ethical arguments – prove unpersuasive, a prudential justification has some chances to appear convincing, because it maintains that the realist method is the wisest *practical* choice to follow.

Is this the sole advantage of the prudential argument? I do not believe so. By way of conclusion, I care to emphasise that I regard the prudential argument also the most loyal to the spirit of realist political thinking. Indeed, I take the prudential argument to be a fruit of the fundamental insight of political realism: namely, that politics ought to be taken seriously, where to "take politics seriously" means to place at the core of normative reflection an attentive comprehension of the reality of politics (Geuss 2008, 9-18; Williams 2005, 12-14). But it is important to emphasise that to such a requirement can be given two different – though deeply connected – readings, according to the importance we assign to "politics" and "reality" respectively. On the one hand, this requirement can be read as to mean that political thinking ought to be structured around a deep understanding of political phenomena. But, on the other hand, this same requirement can be read as to suggest that political theorists ought to be aware of the

fact that what they are reflecting about is, indeed, a part of reality[54]. On this second reading, political theory ought to be conducted in light of the fact that politics is not merely a theoretical object of study, it is the world we inhabit, in flesh and blood. For political realism, once we come to a serious understanding of *the reality of* politics, we come to recognise that normative theorising and judgment ought to be conducted by seriously inquiring the concrete implications that theories would have, and assessing which consequences we would be ready to accept. Political theories cannot merely satisfy a requirement of theoretical consistency, they need to be evaluated by paying attention to their expected functioning within real political practices, and to the comparative cost and gains obtained by assuming them as practical guides. The prudential argument, being structured around a call for responsibility in political action, precisely follows such need to take politics seriously: the prudential argument urges us to turn our sight from the theoretical machinery to reflect on what would be the wisest practical strategy to pursue. Hence, even though all the three arguments are built starting from attentive analyses of political practices, it is with the prudential argument that the realist invite (and the challenge) to take politics seriously becomes pivotal.

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[54] Williams, for examples, explains that his defence of the liberalism of fear is inspired by a "constant reminder of the reality of politics, that there is a political reality out there" (Williams 2005, 61). Similarly, Geuss points out that judging politically does not merely consists in pronouncing judgments about politics, but rather to judge the implications of actions within their concrete political contexts (Geuss 2010, 10).

III.

POLITICAL REALISM AS REFORMIST CONSERVATISM
THE REALIST (LONG) JOURNEY FROM THE STATUS QUO TO UTOPIA

1. Introduction: Political realism and the status quo

Since its recent resurgence, political realism has remained a largely critical voice in political theory. While it is disputable whether embracing a 'mere' critical attitude should be regarded as a flawed approach to political theorising, the fact that political realism has been for a long time so characterised is certainly revelatory of theoretical lacuna. Indeed, how realist political theory ought to be conceived, or what the proper role of a realist thinker should be, remain largely underexplored issues. In light of this gap, the debate has recently begun to offer the first contributions to the project of providing a constructive understanding of political realism. For those who are engaged in such endeavour, the challenge is clear: since political realism fundamentally criticises 'mainstream' political theory for failing to recognise the normative autonomy of the political, realists must explain how political thinking ought to be affected and constrained by political reality.

In the context of this broad theoretical enterprise, my paper aims at contributing to the discussion by addressing a specific issue: I intend to clarify what is the relationship between a realist political theory and its context of application. Notably, indeed, political realism is considered a 'contextualist' approach to political theorising, meaning by that that, in political realism, the contest of application of the theory represents its source of normativity. My goal is to explain how, and to what extent, realist political theories are dependent on the particular context they are conceived for. Ultimately, I will argue that political realism must be interpreted as a form of *reformist conservatism* which demands the political order for a certain context to reflect its subjects' beliefs about politics, but which also encourages a revision of those same beliefs. Hence, I will explain, political realism is both conservative, since it tends to preserve and justify the status quo, and – at the same time – reformist, since it allows to gradually modify

the status quo by soliciting a critical reflection on the beliefs that ground the normative theory.

By defending a similar interpretation, I mean also to take a distance from the positive reconstructions of realism that the literature has offered so far. The most recent contributions appear neatly polarised, indeed. On the one hand, some contributors interpret political realism as an approach to politics which – more or less explicitly – leads to an affirmation of the status quo (Hall 2017; Jubb 2017; McQueen 2016). On the other hand, it has been suggested that political realism, if correctly understood, might (and perhaps ought to) lead to radical transformations of the status quo (Finlayson 2015; Rossi 2015; Rossi and Prinz 2017). To a certain extent, a similar scenario is understandable and wholly expected. As I will explain, the fundamental theoretical tenets of political realism, when considered together, appear to be hardly reconcilable. Those who defend the conservative tendencies of political realism usually attribute crucial importance to the realist emphasis on the need of order and stability. On the contrary, those who interpret political realism as a progressive approach to politics tend to develop their interpretation starting from the realist warnings against the power of political institutions to oppress, often in subtle and unrecognised ways. However, as I will discuss, struggling to preserve order comes at the price of undermining the attempts of analysing and revealing the structures of power that sustain political institutions, and vice-versa.

Nevertheless, though understandable, I believe that forcing us into a choice between said alternatives is a mistake, both for interpretive and for theoretical reasons[55]. I will show that it is possible to reconcile all the basic tenets of political realism in a unique theoretical framework. To do so, I will propose an interpretation of political realist theories as tripartite theoretical structures composed by a prescriptive theory, an internal critical theory and an external critical theory. My strategy will be that of explaining political realist theories as structures in which the critical momentum does not entirely overlap to the prescriptive one. I will defend the idea that there are two different ways of criticising reality for political realists: an internal critique (which

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[55] In a similar direction goes Thaler 2012, which maintains that political realism ought to include both radical and conservative reflections. However, while he believes that it is not possible to provide general guidelines to choose between these approaches, since in his view only the particular political judgments can establish what is the appropriate approach to adopt, I attempt to reconcile these tendencies in a single theoretical framework.

criticises existing political arrangements in light of what the prescriptive theory prescribes) and an external critique (which challenges subjects' beliefs about politics and that does not have a direct impact on what ought to be done). I shall argue that such a partial overlap between political normativity and critique allows to consistently abide by the fundamental tenets that inspire political realism, and to overcome the tension between preserving order and unmasking oppression I mentioned above.

I will proceed as follows. I will begin by introducing the basic tenets of political realism and I will show the potential inconsistencies they raise. I will then propose my own interpretation of political realism as a tripartite structure able to overcome said inconsistencies. All along the paper, I will defend such interpretation showing its advantages, both interpretive and theoretical, over the rival ones. Overall, then, my aim is to picture what I take to be the most convincing reading of political realism in a constructive sense, which will result in an account of political realism as a form of reformist conservatism.

2. The five methodological tenets of political realism

As anticipated, I am going to devote the second section of the paper to the introduction of the basic tenets that animate realist political thought. The analysis will be conducted making use of the works of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss. There are two reasons that motivated my choice. Firstly, Williams and Geuss are usually regarded as the two most prominent voices in contemporary political realism[56]. Secondly, and more importantly, I chose to base my analysis on *both* Williams' and Geuss' readings of political realism because my goal is showing that – despite their differences – it is possible to reconcile their diverse theoretical sensibilities in a single interpretive account of political realism. However, since – as I formerly recalled – theorists have so far refrained from providing positive interpretations of political realism, my own understanding of political realism qualifies as a reconstructive endeavour: I start from Geuss' and Williams' analyses of political realism and draw further conclusions from them, partly overcoming their accounts. Specifically, from Geuss and Williams, besides taking – as said – my understanding of the basic theoretical

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[56] See, among others, Hall and Sleat 2017; Honig and Stears 2011; Philp 2012; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Scheuerman 2013.

tenets that animate political realism, I gain also some first scattered suggestions about how political realism ought to be construed. The conclusions I will defend regarding the relationship between realist political theory and the context will be reached exclusively seeking an overall consistent picture of the fundamental tenets that ground political realism. So, it is necessary to clarify what I take to be the fundamental tenets of realism as a first step.

I take the methodological tenets of political realism to be the fundamental theoretical commitments that guide Geuss' and Williams' normative analyses of political arrangements and actions. Though scattered, I identified five recurrent tenets that affect Geuss' and Williams' normative political theorising, without which we could hardly make sense of some of the conclusions they draw. Let me spend a few words on each.

i. Reject moralism. Often defined as the thesis for the autonomy of the political, "anti-moralism" is certainly the most distinguishing and discussed theoretical commitment of political realism. When Geuss and Williams refer to moralism in political theory they indicate a specific methodological approach to political theorising which they take to be dominant in contemporary political philosophy. In their accounts, a political theory is moralist when it understands the political sphere as a mere field of application of normative theories independently justified. That is to say, a political theory is methodologically moralist when it judges the empirical knowledge of political practices and political circumstances as irrelevant to a proper understanding of the principles that ought to govern political life. For moralist thinkers, normative principles are prior to politics and are valid cross-contextually, even if possibly adjusted in light of feasibility constraints. Political moralism means, in other words, methodological insensitivity to political reality (Geuss 2008, 6-9; Williams 2005, 1-3). In Geuss' and Williams' view, moralism constitutes a fundamental methodological error in political theory. According to them, politics must be considered *normatively autonomous* – which does not mean that interactions between ethics and politics will not be possible, but rather that what is appropriate to do in political circumstances must proceed from a prior understanding of those circumstances themselves. In fact, politics poses unique problematics that moral theories – which first and foremost deal with interactions between individuals – do not have the means to properly address[57], and involves a

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[57] See, for example, Williams' (2005, Ch. 12) discussion about humanitarian interventions, or Geuss'

particular understanding of values and their priorities[58]. Geuss and Williams, therefore, maintain that every political theory construed bracketing politics is doomed to achieve a distorted comprehension of the sense, and the proper conduct, of political action. Hence, for them, the first task of a political theory is to start from a deep understanding of political reality in all its forms, without allowing external principles to distort the analysis.

ii. Focus on order. Politics is both for Geuss and Williams a delicate activity aimed at imposing order over disorder. They indeed start their analyses from a common understanding of political practices. The first task of politics, they both point out in a classical Hobbesian fashion, consists in making possible a system of coexistence out of disorder, by generating a hegemony able to exercise coercive power and limit conflict (Geuss 2008, 22-23; Williams 2005, 3). Aligning themselves with classical realism, Geuss and Williams see in stability the first requirement of political practices, which in turn enables all the other political achievements. Accordingly, one of the primary focuses of political theory must be to study the mechanisms through which political powers generate and maintain through time, and to reflect about their implications, both theoretical and practical.

iii. Accept coercion. Despite necessary, the pursuit of order is never free of costs. As it is well-known, together with anti-moralism, one of the harshest critiques Geuss and Williams move against mainstream political theory is that of being irrelevant and dangerous by posing the consensual acceptance of the governing power as a requirement for its legitimacy (Geuss 2005, Ch. 1; Williams 2005, 2-3). Indeed, Geuss and Williams strongly argue against the utility of employing the notion of consensus in politics. As they explain, disagreement and conflict are ineliminable features of political life. Being so, every political order will never be attainable without a "remainder": there will always be a certain amount of disagreement about the legitimacy of the authority and, consequently, a certain amount of compulsion. Political realists, then, see the (at least partially) coercive affirmation of power as an ineliminable trait of politics (Geuss 2008, 23-30; Williams 2005, Ch. 1 and 5).

(2005, Ch. 1) comments against the liberal way of dealing with political disagreement.

[58] As Williams (2005, Ch.7) tries to show by explaining the *political* value of liberty, or as Geuss (2008, 70-76) argues while problematising the pre-eminence usually assigned to the value of justice in political circumstances by moralist literature.

iv. Exercise critical thinking. The tradition of Critical Theory is another fundamental influence in Geuss' and Williams' political thought. Despite differences, one of the basic theoretical commitments that animates both their political philosophies is the suspicion against unreflective thinking, namely the act of holding some beliefs without inquiring their origin, their basis, and validity. The problem with unreflective thinking consists in that it might prevent us from abandoning beliefs that we would rather reject (as invalid or unacceptable) if we just had the means to appropriately examine them (Geuss 2008, 90-94; Williams 2002, 225-32). In this sense, unreflective thinking must be intended as a form of epistemic blindness. However, it is not immediately clear why analysing the conditions for reflection ought to have any special role in shaping the thought of political thinkers. The reason the phenomenon of unreflective thinking gains a special weight in political theory becomes manifest once the conditions for reflection are analysed in light of the fundamental instrument politics employs to create order, namely – as said – power. Crucially, as political practices build stable hegemonies through power-relations, they might actively foster the formation of unreflective beliefs. In fact, as Geuss and Williams remind us, political actors and institutions have the capacity to produce the acceptance of certain beliefs, by obstructing individuals from seeing reality from a different perspective (whether this be by actively hiding pieces of information, or by unintentionally disseminating a positive perception the status quo) (Geuss 2008, 50-55; Williams 2005, 6). Geuss, which often refers to the fruit of unreflective thinking in politics as to 'ideology' or 'illusion', explains the phenomenon by saying that "an ideology (…) is a set of beliefs, attitudes, preferences that are distorted as a result of the operation of specific relations of power" (2008, 52). So defined, ideologies are shields that hinder individuals from seeing clearly political reality, and therefore from acting in the political world in full conscience of the sense and the purpose of their choices. In fact, beliefs that are induced by power-relations, by hiding reality to a certain extent, might prevent individuals from adequately judging the status quo, and consequently to reform, or radical transform, their political context. It is for this reason – Geuss and Williams believe – that unreflective beliefs are a particularly dangerous phenomenon in political life, and that political thinkers ought to beware of them by promoting critical thinking (Williams 2005, 161-63).

v. Act (and therefore theorise) responsibly. If the Hobbesian root of realist thinking is rightly recalled as one of its grounding pillars, the same emphasis has not been given to another crucial influence that has shaped political realism: the Weberian political thought. Still, Weber's *Vocation Lectures* (2004) play a major part in informing the political theory of Geuss and Williams. Weber's influence is manifest in several respects, but to the present analysis one theme is of central interest: his considerations about the role *responsibility* ought to play in political action. A responsible political action, according to Weber, is that action which is pursued carefully taking into consideration its possible consequences and side-effects, and evaluating its merit in light of such analysis. Being a responsible political actor, for Weber, means to be attentive to the empirical features of the political circumstances in which the action takes place – i.e. to understand the causal chains involved – and to ultimately decide what ought to be done in light of the expected consequences of the actions (Weber 2004, 90-91). Behind Weber's emphasis on the role that responsibility must play in political circumstances there is, notably, an invite to take politics seriously: political actors must realise that politics is made possible through the use of force, and that every political action takes place in a web of causal chains which is impossible to fully control. Hence, political actions are always potentially harmful and to take politics seriously means to be conscious that taking political decisions light-heartedly might be a disruptive behaviour. Following Weber, Geuss and Williams place a particular emphasis on the role of responsibility in politics. They often point out that a good political actor is the one who is able to exercise some sort of practical wisdom (Geuss 2010, 41). Indeed, what has to be done politically can never be decided by merely applying a rule in a given context; rather the political actor needs to be capable of evaluating and weighting the multiple factors at play in the circumstances at hand analysing the available alternatives and the risks involved in pursuing some course of action (Geuss 2010, Ch. 1; Williams 2005, 12-14). How are these considerations related to the shape that normative political theory ought to take, though? So far, I dealt with Weber's understanding of responsibility of political actors and this may rightly seem an issue unrelated to the realist conception of political normativity: realists could define some guidelines, principles, for political action, but the onus of establishing which course of action is the responsible one would bear on the actor. However, a similar understanding of the role of responsibility in realist thought

would represent a severe misinterpretation. The role of responsibility is realist political theory is much wider and directly bears on the content of realist normative theories. Indeed, for Geuss and Williams, one aspect of endorsing a realist attitude in political theory consists in recognising that the theorist himself has to be regarded as a political actor. Despite perhaps disposing of means of action less effective than other kinds of actor, the theorist, since promotes political imaginaries and is able to encourage or discourage political actions, can have a direct impact on the real world (Geuss 2008, 29-30; Williams 2005, 72-74). Theorising, therefore, fully qualifies as a political action. Normative theorising, in other words, must be conducted in a responsible way and can be constrained or invalidated if it is carried out without taking into account its possible consequences and contextual circumstances of application (Geuss 2010, 30; Williams 2005, 148-51).

3. A puzzle for realists

Even at a first sight, the list of realist tenets I just introduced might leave us perplexed. As a matter of fact, it is not at all clear how, from these theoretical commitments, political realism could build a stable theoretical proposal. Indeed, a tension between the Hobbesian and Weberian lineages of political realist thinking and its Critical Theoretical root seems to emerge. Political realism, as characterised according to the above-mentioned five tenets, shows an uncertain disposition towards power. On the one hand, following the Hobbesian and Weberian traditions, Geuss and Williams recognise that is necessary to establish a centralized power structure in order to make political life possible at all. Hence, power structures are necessary for political life and every change to the system that would undermine them ought to be evaluated with caution, given the responsibility constrain.

Yet, on the other hand, the realists' invite to exercise critical thinking, and have a clear grasp on the origin of our beliefs, points exactly in the opposite direction. By recalling the Critical Theory tradition, Geuss and Williams encourage us to reflect on our beliefs about politics and to be conscious that they might be generated by the structures of power in which we live. However, such critical exercise is potentially detrimental of political power. Indeed, reflection might push us to revise our beliefs in light of this newly-acquired awareness, and such reflective attitude can foment hostility

against existing power-structures. In fact, to exercise critical thinking means to continually stress the basis of our acceptance of the status quo, and to possibly come to know that we have reason to oppose the political arrangements in which we find ourselves. As Williams himself admits, reflection often brings with it "unsettling effects", because we might discover that we feel deeply uncomfortable to live the life we accepted before the reflection, and we might want to actively resist it (Williams 2006, Ch. 17; see also Williams 2002, 230-32). Hence, how such invite to welcome the unsettling effects of reflection can be balanced with the parallel admission that we need stable power structures and we ought to deal with them responsibly is certainly a reasonable question to ask.

To solve the puzzle, those who have dealt so far with the problem of construing a positive interpretation of political realism have preserved consistency by giving up one of the two commitments. On the one hand, building upon Williams' analysis of legitimate political orders, Edward Hall and Robert Jubb have recently defended the anti-moralist goal of political realism by providing guidelines about how to provide a context-dependent justification of political orders (Hall 2017; Jubb 2015a and 2017). Despite the emphasis Williams put on the role of critical thinking for the elaboration of a theory of legitimate order, in Hall's and Jubb's reconstructions the Critical Theory tradition cease to exercise any influence in the normative analysis. Hall and Jubb have both argued for an approach to political normativity that draws the normative commitment for politics from an interpretation of the purpose of political practices. Since the purpose of political orders is to make possible a rule able to overcome conflict without collapsing into sheer domination, the first requirement of political orders is to be locally recognised as legitimate forms of authority. Hence, according to Hall and Jubb realist political theory defines what ought to be done politically by understanding the contextual beliefs about legitimacy and defending those arrangements that best reflect such contextual beliefs. Therefore, in Hall's and Jubb's readings, political realism appears ultimately as a *conservative* approach to political reality: we have reason to overturn the political orders just when their subjects cannot recognise them as legitimate authorities, in most of the cases, however, such interpretation of political realism encourages partial adjustments of existing political arrangements in light of the beliefs about legitimacy actual subjects hold.

On the other hand, Janosh Prinz and Enzo Rossi have rejected the idea of providing a positive normative interpretation of political orders (Prinz and Rossi 2017). In their view, the strategy to fulfil the anti-moralist commitment of political realism is to engage in a process of "negative criticism" which they take to be, albeit in an underdeveloped way, the idea of political realism that Geuss has introduced (Prinz 2016). Instead of positively suggesting how we should evaluate and organise political arrangements, their fundamental idea is to define what ought to be done politically by examining – through a process of ideological unmasking – which beliefs about politics are tenable against reflection and can therefore have a role in governing our collective life. According to Prinz and Rossi, building a "positive" conception of political order would push us back towards some form of moralist political theorising, because the starting point from which we would build our conception of legitimate authority – the "Archimedean point" at the basis of the theoretical construction, to use a Williamsian phrase – would necessarily be pre-political and ideological in content: establishing some starting points to build up a normative proposal would mean to hold as *fixed* some (normative or interpretive) assumptions about politics, where political reality is constantly changing and cannot be defined once and for all (Prinz and Rossi 2017, 355). Hence, for Prinz and Rossi, political normativity as negative criticism is the only interpretation of political realism that allows us to avoid moralism in political theory. Contrary to the reconstruction offered by Hall and Jubb, such interpretation of political realism explicitly embraces *radicalism* in political theory; that is to say, Prinz and Rossi believe that a correct interpretation of political realism could foster radical changes of political reality (355-62). Since the ultimate aim of a realist political theory is to test through ideological analysis our political beliefs, political realism as negative criticism actually has a deeper critical potential. Here, the search for an ordered cooperation appears subordinate to the process of ideological unmasking, in fact negative criticism could encourage radical changes despite (and against) the actual beliefs held by the subjects and the accepted authority.

Contrary to these interpretations, I believe that the five tenets above-outlined can coexists in a unique theoretical framework without generating contradictions, i.e. without the need to radically weaken some of them. The reconstruction that I am about to introduce is manifestly just one possible interpretation of the realist political thought;

however, throughout the paper I will defend my interpretation by engaging with the rival accounts of political realism just sketchily presented. Ultimately, my aim is to argue for the comparative advantages of my account by showing its interpretive and theoretical superiority over the alternatives.

4. And its solution: The tripartite structure

Before beginning my reconstruction, let me put forward the basic idea behind my interpretive endeavour. I abide by the five tenets listed and disentangle the theoretical puzzle just outlined by conceiving realist political theories as tripartite structures. According to my interpretation, realist political theories are composed by a prescriptive theory, an *internal* critical theory, and an *external* critical theory. Since, as it will shortly become manifest, just the first two parts regard what ought (or ought not) to be done, while the third concerns the free exercise of reflection, it is possible to fully preserve a role for critical thinking substantively limiting its power of undermining the stability of political institutions. This is obtained by denying that there is a direct link between the outcomes of reflection and the reasons we might have for rejecting, or fighting, the political authority; these two dimensions ought to be kept distinct. The account of political realism that will emerge from this picture will result in a *conservative reformist* form of political theory, but I shall say more on this point later on. So, let me start with the prescriptive theory and give a sense to the sketch just drafted.

4.1. Prescriptive Theory

In a conventional fashion, I take the first part of realist political theory to be its prescriptive theory, namely an analytic reflection about how politics ought to be evaluated and what ought to be done in political circumstances[59]. The best way to give a

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[59] Someone might object that Geuss would never accept the idea of a *realist normative* theory, and so argue that I should not introduce the idea of a prescriptive role of political realism so easily. Rob Jubb, for example, has claimed that Geuss is one of those realists "hostile to idea of normativity as such" because, as Geuss affirms repeatedly, he is suspicious "about the normative standpoint as a whole" (Jubb 2015b, 922; Geuss 2005, 21-28). Jubb takes Geuss' position as a motive to dismiss his philosophy because useless to the purpose of construing a normative version of political realism. In any case, if a similar interpretation of Geuss' thought were true, the very possibility of a realist normative theory could be troublesome and ought to be defended. However, I take the objection to be the fruit of a misunderstanding. In fact, Geuss never claims that normative reasoning is irrelevant or impossible in the political realm; rather, Geuss harshly criticizes the idea of a political normativity

sense of realist political theory in its prescriptive role is to follow Williams' discussion of the notion of legitimacy as a *political* value. Indeed, the analysis of legitimacy that Williams proposes in "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory" (Williams 2005, 1-17; hereinafter RMPT) is the first attempt to develop the realist paradigm in a positive form, and I will build on his basis.

As it will shortly become clear, the empirical and the normative dimensions of politics are deeply intertwined in realist political thinking. I recall, in fact, that the anti-moralism tenet requires political theory to be somehow sensitive to the specificities of political reality. Williams is accordingly interested in making possible a political understanding of the key evaluative notions that are usually employed in political circumstances, such as – as said – the notion of legitimacy. His strategy to develop a political understanding of legitimacy can be explained as a three-steps procedure which generates a contextually-valid conception of legitimacy starting from a descriptive appraisal of political reality[60]. So, in order to gain a first grasp on the relationship between political context and theory in political realism we need to delve into each of the three steps that compose the procedure.

As a first step, Williams isolates the practice that is the focus of his interest and provides a description of its essential features. Since Williams' argument in RMPT is entirely meant to explain what does it mean to give greater autonomy to political thought, the practice under scrutiny is *politics* itself. In Williams' view, a situation can be described as political every time there is a structure of power able to coercively enforce a set of rules over its subjects and, crucially, which claims to have the authority for doing so. In Williams' own words:

> A coerces B and claims that B would be wrong to fight back […] By doing this, A claims that his actions transcend the condition of warfare, and this

as a universal system of principles that could tell us what is right or wrong in a given situation deductively. Specifically, Geuss defends the idea of normative reasoning for politics as the art of producing context-sensitive judgments that can never appeal to universal principles (Geuss 2010, Ch. 1). The reading I am proposing of political realism is precisely conducted in the attempt to account for a context-sensitive normativity for politics.

[60] In fact, as Jubb has pointed out, Williams' procedure has strong similarities with the practice-dependent methodology for normative political theory elaborated by Sangiovanni (see Jubb 2016a and Sangiovanni 2008). Williams does not explicitly introduce his realist account of legitimacy as a three-steps procedure; however, I discuss them as separate steps in order to clearly present his argumentative strategy. This will allow me, in the final section of the paper, to better counteract some of the criticism that have been raised against Williams' method.

gives rise to a demand for justification of what A does. When A is the state, these claims constitute its claim of authority over B. (2005, 6)

According to Williams, then, politics as a practice must be carefully distinguished from warfare, namely from a condition of sheer domination. The political is given when a justification for the use of coercive power is offered by those who dictate the rules of cooperation (*A*, in the previous quote) to those who are subjected to those rules (*B*). Correspondingly, a political relationship is established whenever the justification offered by the governing power is accepted (i.e. it is not the consequence of mere imposition).

In a second step, Williams analyses the practice so identified in light of its sense and purpose from the point of view of its participants. Crucially, here is where the shift from description to normativity is made possible. Williams famously declares that the reason we have politics is because of the first question it is meant to answer, namely "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (2005, 3). In Williams' opinion, Hobbes got it basically right when he defended the idea that politics exists to prevent the terror we would experience in a state of nature. Hence, politics, in Williams' interpretation, is a complex phenomenon which has both an empirical and an evaluative dimension: it is an identifiable practice (securing order without resorting to sheer domination) that has a value to its participants (defying terror). Somehow, the prescriptive theory will have to be sensitive to such conception of politics if it must be able to give autonomy to political thought, which – as formerly pointed out – is Williams' central goal in RMPT.

It is in the third momentum of the argument that the possibility of a properly realist political theory is finally outlined. For Williams, thinking politically means conceiving the prescriptive theory for politics in light of its point and purpose: what ought to be done politically needs to reflect the purpose of politics itself, and no other external considerations. Hence, the normative turn is reached by Williams by reflecting on what would be required of politics to fulfil its core purpose, namely answering the first political question (FPQ). So, in Williams' view, the task of a realist political theory is to unfold how politics ought to be organized to appropriately answer the FPQ.

To solve this normative issue, Williams introduces another fundamental idea: the basic legitimation demand (BLD). As Williams explains, answering the FPQ equals meeting the BLD. In fact, the BLD – argues Williams – is inherent in there being a

FPQ, namely in there being something called politics. In Williams' definition, "meeting the BLD implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power to each subject" (2005, 4). This is essentially required because, since the aim of politics is to avoid the basic evils we would encounter in the state of nature, the construction of order cannot be pursued through violence and domination. Answering the FPQ through sheer domination would simply replicate the problem politics is meant to solve. In order to make politics possible, the governing power needs to provide an "acceptable" answer to the FPQ; namely, it has to offer a legitimation story that can serve as a justification for its authority to its subjects. In other words, the governing power has to be legitimate in the sense its existence needs to have some sort of justification for those who are subjected to its rules. So, legitimacy comes to be regarded as the first value of political institutions, that is, as the first requirement the satisfaction of which every other political achievement must be subordinated.

However, we need to unfold a bit more the functioning of the BLD to adequately understand what is the relationship between a conception of legitimacy and its context of application. Recall, indeed, that my main task is to clarify the relationship between theory and reality in realist thinking, so we need to understand how the substantive content of the conception of legitimacy is ultimately derived. Williams explains what might qualify an acceptable answer to the FPQ through the notion of *making sense*, which is a "category of historical understanding […] a hermeneutical category" (2005, 11). An answer to the FPQ is acceptable – and therefore makes a regime legitimate – if the regime that provides the legitimation story makes sense as a form of political authority to the addressee of that story. "To make sense" means to be recognisable as a thing of a certain kind: a regime that makes sense as an authoritative order to its subjects is recognised *as an example of that thing* by them. In this sense, Williams deliberately departs from consensual forms of political legitimations: to make sense is a much less ambitious goal. To make sense as a form of authoritative order means that, given some historical and cultural circumstances, and so given the subjects' "political, moral, social, interpretive" beliefs (2005, 11), a certain regime consistently fits as legitimate with the set of beliefs held, and it will be probably perceived as such. The answer to the BLD, then, will always be contextual, since what is perceived as fundamentally harmful or as brute domination is relative to a certain time and place.

Having unfolded the main lines of Williams' prescriptive method, let me sum up some conclusions regarding the relationship between norms and reality in realist political thinking. According to Williams' account, normativity is conceived in light of the practice it is meant to regulate. Specifically, normative political theory is founded on a certain conception of the meaning and sense of politics. In this sense, realist normative theory is practice-dependent. In fact, legitimacy comes to be thought as the first value of politics because this follows from an interpretation of the purpose of politics. More specifically, from such a practice-dependent approach some other normative consequences with respect to legitimacy follows. Firstly, Williams' account entails that regimes must seek legitimacy as their first essential task, meaning that they must make sense as legitimate political authorities to their subjects. Secondly, it follows that judgments about the legitimacy of a certain regime will have to be political too: complaints about legitimacy will be justified only insofar as they are consistent with the possibility of a political order, namely if they are grounded on reasons that most of the subjects would recognise as conditions of legitimacy. Complaints about legitimacy that do not fit this requirement ought to be judged impolitical, hence irrelevant.

Similar conclusions allow us to gain a first picture of the kind of conservatism political realism brings us to. Political realism in its prescriptive version is an approach to political theory that starts from *already* existing practices and aims to reform them in light of the beliefs that are *already* hold by their participants. Indeed, as we have seen, the process is entirely hermeneutical: we gain a sense of how practices ought to be (and correspondingly ought to be reformed) by referring both to their general meaning as practices of a certain kind and to their particular interpretation in a given context. No other external argument can be considered a form of normative theorising adequate to politics. Therefore, it looks like realist normativity shows eminently conservative tendencies towards the status quo. Still, this is just one part of realist thinking. Things are more complex than this, as I am about to explain.

However, before proceeding, I need to deal with a criticism that has been raised by Prinz and Rossi and which I touched upon formerly. The Williamsian approach to political theory has been accused of being covertly moralist by Prinz and Rossi[61].

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[61] Williams' BLD has been accused of being a moralist political proposal by many commentators (see, for instance, Erman and Möller 2015 and Larmore 2013). However, here I cannot deal with the extensive debate that has grown around the Williamsian idea of the BLD. Since my intent in this paper is to

Specifically, they have argued that to derive a normative political theory starting from a conceptual appraisal of politics represents a form of moralism because:

> We have no usable concept of politics until we decontest it, i.e. we flesh out its meaning by reference to a wider set of normative commitments. […] And so the question re-emerges as to whether the contentious normative connotations used by Williams in his decontestation of the concept of politics do not themselves originate in pre-political moral commitments. (2017, 355)

In other words, as I formerly explained, according to Prinz and Rossi every definition of politics is doomed to be moralist because it must provide a fixed representation of a constantly changing phenomenon, and, being so, such definition cannot be but determined by pre-political commitments.

I chose to explain the Williamsian procedure as a three-steps practice-dependent procedure to counteract this possible objection. As the three-steps procedure shows, Williams – who often openly declares that he does not intend to offer any "definition" of politics (2005, 12) – does not start from a definition of politics which asserts to be universally true and immutable. The starting definition of politics is, like the subsequent steps of the procedure, an interpretive step. The initial definition of politics is a definition which is taken to be a credible description of a phenomenon given an empirical appraisal of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Moreover, the initial interpretation is supposed to gain strength in light of the subsequent steps of the procedure: for the initial description of the practice to be plausible, it has to be possible to actually identify a shared understanding of its purpose and at least one possible instantiation of said practice in the context under exam. Hence, the starting point of Williams' procedure is taken to be strongly plausible given the available empirical and interpretive data, but is always taken to be provisional and potentially subject to revision, given its interpretive nature. In this way, the Williamsian approach is able to offer an anti-moralist grounding, yet with a sufficient theoretical strength to constitute the basis of a positive normative interpretation of political reality. In fact, some sort of starting point seems to be necessary to construe a normative appraisal of politics, and it

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argue for the comparative advantages of my interpretation of political realism, I am here interested in dealing with criticisms that come from points of view sympathetic to the realist project. Hence, my defence will exclusively address Prinz and Rossi's point of view.

is meaningful to wonder how Prinz and Rossi can provide such an appraisal without offering a positive grounding – I will address this further issue shortly.

4.2. Internal Critical Theory

So far, following Williams' work on political realism, I outlined the basic features of a prescriptive theory intended in a realist sense. But there is certainly more to say. If we delve further into Williams' account we discover that it leaves open large spaces for criticising the status quo – namely for showing where political conduct is wrongful or political institutions ought to be reformed. When political realism is engaged is such effort of actively criticising the status quo, I take it to be engaged in an operation of "internal" critique. I dub it "internal" critique because such active scrutiny of political circumstances descends from the prescriptive theory itself. Then, internal critical theory is the counterpart of the prescriptive theory: everything that departs from what the prescriptive theory prescribes can be an object of such (internal) criticism[62]. However, if this is the case, it might be questioned the opportunity to divide prescriptive theory from internal critical theory. There is a reason for such a choice, though: by keeping the two parts separated I aim to emphasise the possibility of another kind of realist criticism, the external critical theory (with which I am going to deal shortly), and to carefully distinguish it from the internal one.

Sticking to Williams' account of realist prescriptive theory, four different ways of arguing for a change of the status quo can be identified. Let me spend a few words on each.

First of all, as it has already been suggested, the purpose of the practice we are concerned with might be not entirely fulfilled; namely, the BLD might have been just partially met. However – precisely because in Williams' framework politics entails meeting the BLD – if a regime is just partially legitimate, because it does not make sense to every subject as an authoritative order (scope of legitimacy), or because it still inflicts fundamental harms to its subjects (degree of legitimacy), there are good reasons to

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[62] The correlativity between normative theory and active critique of the status quo might be challenged by denying that we need a prior understanding of how the world should be in order to advance complaints against the status quo; namely, by arguing that criticism *need not be* constructive. I will deal with this specific issue later on, when I will address the latest constructive interpretations of political realism. By now, it will suffice to say that I take political realism incompatible with criticisms that are not constructive. For an extensive analysis of this problem, see Geuss 2014, Ch. 4.

advance complaints against the status quo and to seek reforms. This does not entail that a regime that partially meets the BLD is to be considered wholly illegitimate (and that therefore ought to be overcome); this judgment cannot be but contingent and relative to the circumstances considered. A regime will be recognised, in most of the cases, at the same time legitimate, partially legitimate, and totally illegitimate by some of its subjects: in the latter cases subjects will have a political reason to advance complaints and seek a change, but the response of the governing power will have to be subjected to contextual considerations of political opportunity.

Secondly, Williams' account leaves open the possibility that more than one political arrangement be compatible with the requirements of legitimacy. When this happens, reasons other than political (e.g. moral or prudential) must be invoked to choose between options. Therefore, the realist approach so far outlined admits the possibility of challenging the status quo by invoking criteria other than the political ones. Specifically, similar circumstances occur when two conditions apply: a) the political arrangements set up, or pursued, are broadly recognised as legitimate, b) general disagreement over particular policy issues is given. In such cases, the realist prescriptive theory is unhelpful since legitimacy is not at stake (given condition (a)) nor could be increased because there is no further reform that makes sense collectively (given condition (b)). To clarify with an example, a circumstance of the sort just portrayed often presents itself when issues about public health are to be discussed. In Italy, there is a broad agreement over the necessity of a public health system able to provide affordable (or free) healthcare for every citizen[63] and such system is operative and well-functioning[64] (hence (a) is satisfied), however disagreements might generate over the particular services that the system ought to provide (hence (b) is satisfied too) – e.g. should abortion, sex reassignment surgery, or aesthetic surgery, be provided by the public healthcare system? In similar cases, it is admissible to invoke moral (or other) reasons to back one of the options, because the role of the moral theory is entirely subordinate to the political theory, which preventively sets the boundaries of what is politically demanded and which is unable to provide further guidance.

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[63] Source: 48° Censis Report (2014).
[64] Source: Bloomberg Global Health Index (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-20/italy-s-struggling-economy-has-world-s-healthiest-people).

Thirdly, I formerly explained that the prescriptive theory for realist thinking is practice-dependent, meaning that is entirely tailored to the sense and purpose of the practice of politics. Yet, we live in a world of overlapping practices, and it might be not immediately clear what practice has normative priority in a certain context, or how to mediate between the different claims they raise[65]. A clear example is given by the EU and the nation-states that compose them. Are we in a political relationship with the EU, or with the nation-states which we belong to? How should we judge EU policies that go against the requirements of legitimacy that single states are expected to fulfil? These questions call for complex historically-sensitive answers. However, we might consistently think of cases in which supra-national policies ought to partially decrease national legitimacy, to the aim of preserving the correct functioning of the supra-national institution[66]. Indeed, given the practice-dependent framework, where supra-national institutions come to have a value for its participants, it might be the case to argue for a decrease of internal legitimacy[67].

Finally, Williams adds a further condition to evaluate whether the BLD has been met or not. Williams explicitly claims that the recognition of an authoritative order as legitimate must pass the Critical Theory Principle, according to which "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified" (2005, 6). The reason why Williams adopts this principle is strictly related with his own interpretation of the practice of politics and could be effectively summarized in his motto: "might does not imply right" (2005, 5). Indeed, as we have seen, the whole point of having political institutions is that they

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[65] For an extensive analysis of the challenges raised by overlapping practices see Banai et al. 2011.

[66] I take the relationship between the EU and Greece in 2015 to be an example of overlapping political practices which poses conflicting demands upon political institutions. In 2015 Greece was forced to enact a series of austerity measures deeply fought by the citizenry, but nonetheless necessary to preserve its status as a member of the EU. The policies enacted were, unfortunately, at the same time a source of conflict *within* the State, but sole means to avoid disruption *outside* the State. Of course, it can be disputed whether the EU could have enacted more legitimate policies, but the point of the example remains: what is legitimate to do within certain political practices can conflict with the requirements posed by others and in such cases a balance or a choice is required.

[67] In fact, I am convinced that a fully developed Williamsian theory of politics ought to deal with international politics. Given the extent of the interconnection and overlap that contemporary political institutions present, the practice of politics seems to be fragmented in multiple sites. Consequently, it is hard to think that the purpose of politics is fulfilled by a single authority. Such a perspective would raise many interesting and challenging questions: above all, how are we supposed to identify the relevant constituencies, and to rank practices? But also, how is the hermeneutical work to be conducted if relevant constituencies are sensibly enlarged? So far, however, realist political theory in a global perspective remains an (almost) entirely unexplored field.

must not qualify as brute domination, that is, they must be recognised as legitimate authoritative orders by their subjects. So, crucially, the simple fact of being successful does not qualify a regime as right – might does not imply right, precisely. However, if the acceptance of the justification offered by the regime is produced by the regime itself, there would not be any form of recognition to justify the regime, because the point of view of the subjects would be absent (it would in fact coincide with the point of view of the regime itself). When the acceptance is produced by the coercive power, "might" and "right" cannot be distinguished, therefore it cannot be said that the coercive power has been justified. For this reason, realist political thinkers must be engaged in an attentive work of critical analysis aimed to identify when the acceptance has been produced by the regime itself. In such cases, the order cannot be said to be justified and we have a reason to reject its authority. But how far should this criticism go? As Williams himself notices, the trouble with the CTP is to establish what does count as "produced by". For reasons that I will discuss more extensively later, I take these cases to be exceptional. Specifically, I consider cases of failure of the CTP that must lead to a sever revision, or rejection, of the status quo all those cases in which the governing power demonstrably hides factual truths to manipulate consent or exercises a subtle, though significant, control over its subjects' belief-formation.

By defending a similar position, I am taking a distance from both Hall's and Jubb's readings of political realism and Prinz and Rossi's one. On the one hand, as I formerly said, Hall and Jubb do not deal with the CTP Williams discusses in their reconstructions of political realism. However, following what has been said so far, this is a serious shortcoming of their proposals. The CTP is not an accessory part of the Williamsian project, it is a necessary complement for a theory which is based on the notion of "making sense". Besides, without the CTP, those interpretations sensibly curtail the normative capacity of realism by leaning towards a justification of whichever power is sufficiently able to manipulate its acceptance (see Sleat 2014, 330-31).

On the other hand, as I formerly recalled, Prinz and Rossi go in the exact opposite direction by conceiving political realism entirely as a process of critique of beliefs. As it can be understood from the previous discussion about the alleged moralism of the Williamsian procedure, Prinz and Rossi guard with suspicion every attempt to positively set criteria for selecting the political beliefs that ought to ground a

conception of legitimacy: in their view, every positive criterion of selection may incur the risk of being affected by pre-political judgments, i.e. by a moralist bias (2017, 355). Yet, it seems that we cannot avoid introducing some mechanism of selection (as Hall and Jubb appear to do) as such a choice would – as emphasised – severely curtail the normative power of the theory. To overcome the difficulty, their proposed solution consists in adopting a wholly *internal* criterion of selection, employing tools typical of the critique of ideology. Here, the tenability of beliefs is assessed by testing their correspondence with political reality: "there is a difference, on this approach, between the 'manifest' and the 'operative' concept, i.e. between the concept as it appears to ordinary speakers as opposed to the concept revealed by an empirical investigation into the causal history of how the concept come to play the role it plays within the relevant social practice" (2017, 358). When a discrepancy emerges between the manifest and the operative use of concepts the political beliefs related to those concepts ought to be revised or abandoned. Therefore, their approach is intentionally wholly "negative", meaning by that that the normative standpoint is obtained as a remainder of the process of criticism: what is left untouched by the critique can be retained normatively valid. In this framework, no positive grounding can be offered for construing the prescriptive theory.

I regard a similar proposal unacceptable for two reasons. First of all, it is at least implausible to regard every political belief that we hold as potentially ideological until it has been proved to be otherwise through to a process of critical analysis. Indeed, as Jubb has emphasised, it is more credible to hold our long-lasting and well-established beliefs about politics as provisionally authentic, not as the fruit of some sort of illusion or manipulation, for the sake of a realism itself: it would require an extensive effort by the dominant group, or a systematic and collective self-deception, to generate illusions of such a magnitude (Jubb 2017, 120-21). A realistic attitude towards politics would counsel caution in accusing political beliefs of being ideological.

However, there is another reason for rejecting Prinz and Rossi's interpretation of political realism. In fact, their approach is an irresponsible form of political theorising. Indeed, as said, Prinz and Rossi intentionally avoid providing a positive definition of what requirements a belief ought to possess to be regarded as non-ideological. Yet, in absence of a similar positive outlook, there are reasons to worry that the process of

criticism suggested by Prinz and Rossi could proceed indefinitely, without reaching any stable and solid base to defend some normative understanding of political arrangements. This suspicion is motivated by the fact that every political belief is, as they do argue, historically situated and determined by the specific context in which it arises; hence, there is always potentially a discrepancy between the manifest concepts held – which are taken to be truthful convictions autonomously chosen – and the operative ones – which can always be explained as contingent product induced by forces external to the subject. By this, I do not mean to say that a criterion of validity of beliefs cannot be argued for in such circumstances; rather, the problem is that Prinz and Rossi explicitly do not intend to define such a criterion. Being so, Prinz and Rossi's proposal is potentially deeply destructive, without at the same time providing any indication of what ought to be done or what ought to be saved of our political world. As a consequence, their interpretation of political realism is unacceptably irresponsible (given the tenets formerly outlined) because a similar theoretical outlook can have disruptive consequences, but this fact is not noticed nor considered a matter relevant to the elaboration of the theory[68].

Against these features of Prinz and Rossi outlook, my interpretation always considers the subjects' beliefs about legitimacy a provisionally valid ground for a realist prescriptive theory; namely, it considers the subjects' beliefs the ground for the political theory unless the exceptional circumstances above-mentioned demonstrably hold.

Now that the main features of the realist internal critical theory have been unfolded, the diverse theoretical tools that a Williamsian political theory provide to criticise the status quo should be clearer. Ultimately, what does emerge from the previous analysis is a form of conservatism able to gradually reform the status quo. Indeed, a Williamsian approach to politics does not merely lead to a passive acceptance of the status quo: Williams' realism encourages active reforms of the status quo in all the four circumstances above-mentioned. However, has we have seen, these reforms (excluding some rare applications of the CTP) are mostly conservative, since they fundamentally attempt to fulfil the purpose of already existing practices. Still, if political realism consisted solely of these first two parts – namely, the prescriptive and the

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[68] In fact, Geuss himself happens to underline that deconstructions ought to be conducted carefully in political contexts and ought to be accompanied by some – at least vague – constructive idea of what ought to substitute the circumstances criticised (Geuss 2014, 85).

internal critical theory – it would appear far too conservative even to a realist eye. It is for this reason that political realism necessitates also an external critical theory.

4.3. External Critical Theory

The realist prescriptive theory so far depicted, even though allows us to depart from the status quo in several ways, it does so by interpreting and systematising our pre-existent beliefs. This is why realists cannot be satisfied with such a theory. Indeed, a similar normative approach not only does not offer tools to positively reflect on our beliefs (since the whole method presupposes them without scrutinising them), but also it strengthens them, and so it actively discourages reflective thinking. Such side-effect is naturally due to the fact that the conclusion of a realist normative analysis, in most of the cases, confirms the fundamental traits of our pre-existing beliefs: through a realist prescriptive theory we often discover that the political world ought to be governed almost as we already thought it ought to be. In fact, remember that the whole point of political realism is that we ought to *recognise* the regime as a form of authoritative order. If politics must be distinguished from sheer domination, the governing power must not be perceived as an enemy, hence it must at least partially reflect its subjects' beliefs about the requirements and sense of coexistence.

This is why political realism – as far as it is conceived as exclusively formed by the prescriptive and the internal critical theory – discourages reflective thinking: because besides avoiding providing tools to assess our beliefs, it tends to corroborate them. But a similar unreflective tendency is deeply troublesome for political realism, at least as far as Geuss and Williams are concerned. The reason is twofold.

First of all, it would be a blatant form of unrealism to regard as valid, without any form of scrutiny, our political beliefs. A realist attitude would demand an inquiry into the origin and justification of our convictions, in order to ascertain whether they might be wrong and whether there could be alternative political possibilities open to us and preferable (Williams 2002, 220). The prescriptive theory outlined, instead, makes agents blind towards the existence of alternative political possibilities, and diverts them from an active assessment of their convictions, by simply assuming as valid the existing beliefs[69].

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[69] Geuss often warns against the ideological power of normative thinking and the necessity of constantly reflect on our intuitions (see Geuss 2008, 84-94).

Secondly, because we have seen that in Williams' prescriptive framework it is crucial to understand when the recognition of the authority is produced by the same power that has to be justified. Without a similar test, we would not dispose of a normative criterion able to evaluate regimes: every power that happens to effectively impose order would result satisfactory. Nevertheless, as Williams himself acknowledges, to identify when power produces acceptance is not an easy task. In most of the cases the conditioning does not take the form I introduced discussing the CTP, rather is subtler, and might include situations in which the political relationships are so entangled and steady that both the coerced and the coercive parties hold some beliefs in a prejudicial manner, namely because they are induced to do so (Williams 2002, 219-24). Yet, every time the acceptance of the status quo is due to some form of political conditioning, it cannot be said that the regime has been justified. It is then essential, in a Williamsian perspective, to subject our political beliefs to a constant critical reflection aimed at identifying their origin and tenability.

Therefore, for both these reasons, a reflective scrutiny of our political beliefs cannot be a mere ancillary part of realist political theory; it must be one of its essential tasks. The external critical theory is supposed to remedy this lacuna. External criticism is that part of realist political theory aimed at testing our political beliefs by allowing us to take new perspectives on our habitual worldviews. I name it "external" precisely because it provides a critique not of politics itself, but of our beliefs about politics; namely, it provides an assessment of the source of political normativity. Specifically, there are three tools that serve the purpose of external critical theory: the evaluative theory, the critique of ideology, and art. Let me spend a few words on each of these to give a sense of the functioning and purpose of this last part of realist political theory.

First of all, what I dub "evaluative theory" indicates a systematic study into the idea of desirable society. This is the theoretical space where it is possible to actively argue in favour of some visions of the political world, providing reasons for their preferability against rival accounts. This part of realist normative thought, then, can host the typical tools employed for inquiring the idea of good society: metaethical and ethical reflections can find a space in realist thought as external forms of critical theorising. Indeed, as said, the possibility of preserving a similar dimension of reflection around the idea of good society descends from the fact that the evaluative theory is not meant to

have any prescriptive role: since the evaluative theory is a mere theoretical exercise, it is not required to follow the practice-dependent procedure formerly outlined. Hence, the methods of inquiry that the theorist will be allowed to employ in the ECT will be much more varied than the ones outlined so far. However, despite being a space of philosophical reflection unconstrained by the procedures belonging to a prescriptive inquiry, the research methods allowed in the evaluative theory will have to be restricted at least in a sense: for reasons of consistency, the arguments advanced by the evaluative theories will not be allowed to contain assumptions or conclusions which defy the realist project, i.e. which make impossible to endorse the realist approach to normative political theory depicted so far[70].

Secondarily, I mentioned the critical theory tests. As I recalled, indeed, for Williams many forms of subtle conditioning of our beliefs do exist, and Geuss has certainly harsher opinions in this respect[71]. They both make use of critical-theoretic tools to counteract this phenomenon which, as we have seen, constitutes a danger for a realist approach to politics. For both, the technique that ought to be employed to unmask beliefs that have been induced by some external agent is, following the critical-theoretic tradition, to employ a genealogical reconstruction. Genealogy would allow us to become aware of the reasons that led us to hold a certain set of beliefs. Such reconstructive endeavour is supposed to give us the chance of rejecting, or confirming, our beliefs in light of an understanding of their origin[72].

Finally, art constitutes a third fundamental tool of external critical theory. Differently from the previous two tools, artistic expressions are unsystematic forms of

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[70] This necessary requirement merely states that the evaluative theories must not *imply* a rejection of the realist approach. Notice, then, that the set of possible evaluative theories that can find a place in the ECT is wide: if an evaluative theory is compatible at least with a prudential endorsement of political realism, it can have a role as an external critical reflection. Some of Williams' reflections around liberalism can be interpreted in this vein: Williams is convinced that, given the conditions of modernity, liberalism constitutes the best conception of legitimacy under present circumstances; however, he is also aware that judgments of legitimacy must be political since "there can be practical consequences of applying or withholding "LEG" in the contemporary world" (2005, 14). Hence, judgments of desirability and political judgments forms two partly independent sets in Williams.

[71] Geuss, in fact, believes that Williams has been unable to seriously engage with criticism of ideology. In a harsh passage, he criticises Williams for "paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J. S. Mill and Isaiah Berlin" (Geuss 2014, 184).

[72] The works in which Guess develops a genealogical type of analysis are countless, but see especially Geuss 2001a, 2001b and 2005: Ch. 9 as clear examples. As regard Williams, his most systematic and developed use of the genealogical method can be found in *Truth and Truthfulness* where he employs genealogy in a *vindicatory* sense, to defend the value of truth and the virtues of truthfulness (2002, esp. 20-40).

reflection, and precisely this feature constitutes their strength. Artistic expressions, of any form, do not necessarily have to be realistic nor they need to have a specific purpose. The value of art resides in its being a source of unusual and unexpected reflection. Art works as a gadfly and urge us to abandon our habitual ways of thinking by inviting us to perceive the world from a different perspective[73]. Geuss, particularly, strongly emphasises the role that imagination and utopian thinking have in politics – as unsystematic, hence emancipating, forms of reflection. By imagining utopias, we get the chance to bracket the ideologies we hold and, by so doing, to adopt a wholly new point of view[74].

Once again, it must be clear that these three tools for reflection do not have prescriptive purposes; they are not meant to suggest what we should do politically, nor how politics ought to be organised. They are more modestly, but crucially, supposed to allow us to have a better grasp on the convictions we hold about what would be desirable to do politically. External critical theory makes this possible by developing our knowledge about the values we refer to in political circumstances (evaluative theory), unmasking sources of ideological belief (genealogical analysis), and pushing us to assume a different perspective on our political world (art). So constituted, the ECT represents as essential part of a realist approach to political theory for the above-mentioned reasons.

Still, albeit necessary, the ECT so conceived might sound troublesome for two separate motives. At first glance, the ECT might give the impression of covertly reintroduce moralism in realist political thought. Moreover, such exhortation to actively reflect on our political beliefs might be regarded as an irresponsible action in political circumstances. If one of these charges were sound, the idea of ECT would result untenable, so let me address both these worries.

For one thing, the ECT seems to clash with what has been said so far, while discussing political realism in a prescriptive form. Indeed, if politics ought to be governed as the Williamsian procedure indicates, are not we supposed to gain our understanding about what is desirable for politics from that procedure alone? Yet, the ECT allows us to test our beliefs about politics drawing from resources external to the

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[73] Geuss particularly emphasises the political role of art; see Geuss 2005, Ch. 11; 2010, 78-80; and 2014, Ch. 13.
[74] See Geuss 2010; vii-xiii; and 2016: 42-48.

realist prescriptive theory. Hence, it must be the case that the ECT refers to normative criteria of evaluation independent from the Williamsian practice-dependent procedure. Then, the ECT is a form of moralism and it cannot play any role in realist political theory without undermining its consistency – or so the criticism would go. However, a similar charge would be grounded on a misinterpretation of the theoretical account I am outlining. Notice, indeed, that in the realist theoretical framework here discussed the notions of being politically prescribed and being politically desirable are not coextensive, but just partially overlapped; or better, it must be kept in mind that there is a crucial difference between what is desirable for us to do politically (i.e. what politics demands us to do) and what we believe desirable for politics to become. In the first case, political desirability signifies what we ought to do politically, given a collective assessment of our beliefs (as defined by the practice-dependent procedure outlined). In the second case, political desirability indicates what we individually would like politics to become, bracketing the political circumstances in which we find ourselves in. Hence, what is politically desirable is partly independent from what is politically prescribed: not every belief about political desirability informs the prescriptive conclusions about what we are politically required to do. For this reason, the ECT does not generate inconsistency in the realist theoretical account I am proposing, because testing our beliefs about politics does not mean to invalidate the prescriptive conclusions reached by the Williamsian procedure[75]. Clearly, though, the two dimensions are importantly related: in case enough people changed the set of beliefs held about politics, the prescriptive conclusions would have to change accordingly.

Coming now to the second possible objection against the idea of an ECT for political realism, it might be feared that the act of exercising an external critique on realist theories constitutes an irresponsible political action and, if this were the case, the very idea of an ECT would result inconsistent in a realist framework. Indeed, to "externally" criticise realist theories certainly constitutes a political action. As I explained, external critiques are aimed at testing our political beliefs and this practice might have a concrete political impact, since it might lead to a change in the requirements of legitimacy, thereby pushing towards a modification of the rules of

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[75] In fact, Williams explicitly talks of the necessity of being "double-minded" in political circumstances. Regardless of the beliefs we happen to hold, the political requires autonomous decisions which take into account its specificity (Williams 2005, 125-26).

coordination adopted by the governing power. But there is something more: as the above discussion has shown, such activity cannot be regulated – it must consist in a *free* reflection – because it needs to test beliefs against the possibility that they have been produced by the ruling power itself. Hence, the ECT encourages political actions which are potentially destabilising and whose consequences are unpredictable. Being so, the objection would go, the ECT foments the recourse to irresponsible political actions, and this is not acceptable in political realism. On the contrary, I believe the exact opposite is true: the ECT represents a responsible way of dealing with reflection in politics. Indeed, the activity of reflecting on our beliefs about politics is an ineliminable component of political life. Imaginative thinking and moral reasoning are recognised by realists to be among the fundamental factors that explain the political identities we assume and the institutions we create (Geuss 2008, 10-11). The ECT manages these crucial elements of political life by assigning them a specific, and limited, role and by clarifying their use in political circumstances. The ECT transforms imagination and moral reasoning in three activities belonging to an *external* critique of politics. By doing so, the ECT allow us to directly face – not to blindly ignore – these political phenomena and to limit their politically unwanted effects, such as the recourse to moralist actions. So, the ECT must be regarded as a way to responsibly engage with the activity of reflecting on our beliefs about politics, because it gives us tools to manage these elements of political life and to prevent their undesirable effects.

5. Conclusion: Political realism as reformist conservatism

I began my paper asking myself how the relationship between status quo and realist political theory ought to be conceived. Contrary to the current debate, I believe that political realism ought not be considered strictly conservative nor radical. In fact, I labelled my interpretation of political realism as a form of conservative reformism, and the reason for a similar choice should now be clearer. On the one hand, political realism defends political arrangements that make sense as legitimate authorities: by doing so it construes normative proposals in light of the beliefs subjects already hold and, therefore, it can rightfully be conceived as a *conservative* approach to political theory. However, on the other hand, political realism can sensibly foster political change by providing tools to reflect on the very beliefs that justify the prescriptive theories. In this

sense, political realism is also *reformist*: it stimulates a gradual change of the set of beliefs of the subjects, encouraging, accordingly, a gradual change in the prescriptive theory. Therefore, in my view, political realism invites radical reflection, but it takes cautiously real political change.

How I ended up here? My conclusion, as argued, follows from an attempt to provide a solution, and give a sense, to an apparent paradox contained in realist literature. As I tried to explain, in realist literature both the conservation of a stable order through power and the invite to critically examine the reasons behind our allegiance to power structures have a prominent role, but these two methodological commitments seem to push in opposite directions. If we must attempt to offer a constructive understanding of political realism, we have to cope with this problem – whether by trying to dismiss one of the two commitments, or by finding a way to solve the puzzle.

I chose the second route and argued that the puzzle can be overcome by splitting the critical momentum of realist normative political theories, i.e. by conceiving realist theories as tripartite structures in which the critical theory is not always directly relevant for a prescriptive understanding of political reality. As I tried to explain, once critique is not regarded as coextensive with prescription, political realism can conserve its vocation to reflective thinking while, at the same time, assigning a priority to the preservation of order.

Realist Normative Political Theory (1, 2, and 3)		
Prescriptive Theory (1 and 2)		
	Critical Theory (2 and 3)	
1 (Positive) Prescriptive Theory Practice-dependent method	2 Internal Critical Theory i. Failures of the PD method ii. Overlapping practices iii. Multiple implementations of the PD method iv. Critical theory principle	3 External Critical Theory i. Evaluative theory ii. Critique of ideology iii. Art

Yet, my decision to follow the second route is not so obvious – as we have seen, the interpretive endeavours attempted so far have pursued a different direction – so something must be said to explain the strengths of my interpretation against rivals. All along the paper I have presented what appear to be the shortcomings of the two major approaches that have been recently put forward (Hall's and Jubb's, and Prinz and Rossi's), but let me add a brief synthesis to clarify my analysis. I believe that the reasons for favouring the outlook I provided are both interpretive and theoretical. In this paper, I dealt with the interpretive reasons. The tripartite structure offers a way to make sense of the realist alleged paradox, and to abide by all the five realist tenets above-listed. On the one hand, as I showed, if we conceived political realism as solely composed by the first two parts we would curtail the possibility to actively reflect on political reality, leaning towards a blind acceptance of the status quo. On the other hand, if we thought of political realism as a mere endeavour of negative criticism, we would build an irresponsible theoretical proposal. Hence, the tripartite structure is able to give a better, and more charitable, sense of Geuss' and Williams' unsystematic political writings.

Certainly, a mere interpretive justification is not sufficient to provide a defence of the approach here outlined. My interest, though, was modestly the one of showing its interpretive superiority over the rivals. However, there are also theoretical reasons to prefer my account, reasons with which I cannot properly deal here, since it would take a whole justification of political realism as a method to offer a satisfactory explanation. But let me just provide a conclusive hint to the theoretical reasons that could back my case, and which I put forward as a final motive to favour the outlook here provided. Why should we care about both reflection and responsibility in politics? Differently put, why ought political theory to enable a critical assessment of political reality and, at the same time, slow down political change? The explanation resides in the guiding insight behind political realism: namely, that political reality ought to be *taken seriously*. For realists, to take seriously political reality means to constantly make an effort to understand what are the specific features, both empirical and evaluative, in which a political action takes place, and what is the potential impact of acting politically. In fact, politics is not a mere object of theoretical interest, it is both a fundamental dimension of human life, but also a complex and potentially dangerous site of interaction. Therefore, for the realist theorist, serious political theorising must involve a constant critical

appraisal of political reality and a prudent attitude towards political action. The tripartite structure here outlined tries to respect this fundamental vocation and to safeguard the richness of realist thought.

CAN YOU BE A REALIST AND DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE? FEASIBILITY CONSTRAINTS ON REALIST IDEALS

1. Introduction

What is the relationship between political realism and feasibility? Should the political proposals defended by realists abide by any feasibility constraint? The question might puzzle some because, for a long time, political realism has been interpreted as a theoretical endeavour primarily interested in concrete action guidance. For those who endorse this interpretation, there would not be much of a mystery in the relationship between realism and feasibility: a realist theory would coincide with a concretely implementable theory (Freeden 2012; Valentini 2012; Zuolo 2012). Yet, more recently, such thesis has been challenged from multiple fronts. On the one hand, it has been argued that the essential feature of political realism consists in the sources of normativity that it chooses to endorse, not in the action-guiding character of its proposals (Rossi and Sleat 2014). On the other hand, it has been claimed that political realism can be compatible with utopianism (Geuss 2016, 42-50; Raekstad 2016) or, in a similar fashion, that it might demand the impossible (Rossi 2015).

However, as soon as the original association between action-guidance and realism comes to be rejected, a number of methodological problems for political realism arise, which make an analysis into its relationship with feasibility urgent. For one thing, as I will argue, if we admit, as much contemporary literature does, that political realism is an independent approach to political theory which might prescribe unfeasible ideals, realism begins to face all the methodological problems that have haunted the ideal/non-ideal debate. Indeed, if realism can defend unfeasible normative proposals, how are they supposed to guide action in concrete circumstances? This is a particularly troublesome issue for realists, since they claim to be concerned primarily with the study of concrete political action (Geuss 2008, 11). Moreover, in case it was possible to provide a solution to this first problem, what sort of practicability constraints ought to apply to realist normative theories? In what sense, if at all, realism can prescribe the impossible? To

clarify this second issue is fundamental to achieve a complete understanding of political realism itself – of its theoretical structure and methodology.

However, there is something more. As I will explain all along the paper, another reason for aiming at an analysis of feasibility constraints according to specific realist standards is the following: given the fundamental features of realist political thought, the role of unfeasible realist proposals cannot be appropriately framed into any of the methodological accounts of the structure of normative political thought developed so far. That is to say, the recent literature about the methods of normative political thought is unable to provide us with any model able to explain how unfeasible proposals can inform concrete political action in realist political theories. So, if it is maintained that realism can defend political proposals that are not directly implementable, a specifically realist analysis of feasibility constraints needs to be developed.

In this paper, I will pursue a first inquiry into the problem of the relationship between feasibility and realism, and I shall do so by availing myself of the methodological literature that has investigated the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory. In fact, even if this literature cannot offer satisfactory solutions to the question that I raise, it nonetheless proves to be a valuable source for disentangling the problem of the relationship between feasibility and realism. This is done in a spirit of mutual gain. On one side, the choice of combining these two debates will help to clearly systematise the issues at stake and to define the proper place of political realism within the methodological literature. Political realism, in other words, has much to gain from a dialogue with the discussion around the methods of political theory. On the other side, given that, as I said, the realist case is unable to fit any of the methodological interpretations of the relationship between and ideal and non-ideal theory, in order to explain the structure of realist political thought it will be necessary to introduce a new interpretation of that relationship. Therefore, I take the present analysis to be fruitful also outside the realm of realist theorising, since – by delving into the realist case – it is possible to introduce a new perspective in a debate which, so far, has not reached completely satisfying results (as argued, for instance, by Wiens 2015a).

My paper will be divided in three sections. First of all, by borrowing a terminology employed in the analysis of ideal theories, I will introduce the concept of "realist political ideal", to clarify the object of the present analysis and to explain in which sense

a realist theory can be "unfeasible". Secondly, I will discuss several possible solutions to explain if and how, despite their possible unfeasibility, realist ideals can be relevant in concrete circumstances. Here, I will conduct my analysis by dealing with the three major interpretations of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory provided – those which interpret ideals as targets, as benchmark, and as useless theoretical constructs, respectively – and I will show that none of these can be acceptable from a realist point of view. I will then introduce a fourth category, the *model* interpretation, which better explains how political realism interprets the relationship between theory and reality, and which is able to overcome the shortcomings of the alternative interpretations. Finally, in the last section, I will be able to clarify which feasibility constraints apply to the realist normative thought in light of the discussion outlined in the course of the paper. In the end, I will explain that realist ideals ought to be construed by taking into consideration the *limit* of practical possibilities; hence, they ought to be construed by disregarding their relative probability of realisation.

2. Political realism as ideal theorising

When, some decades ago, the methodological debate in political theory started to gain attention, there were not so many stable pillars grounding the research, the field of methodological studies in political theory was – and somehow still is – pretty messy (Valentini 2017). However, the classification of political realism as a form of non-ideal theory represented one of the few solid assumptions underlying the debate. The reason behind such conceptual association was intuitive. Since the core interests animating political realism were taken to be understanding the functioning of real politics and assessing the limits of political action, and since non-ideal theory was commonly defined as that part of political theories interested in defining what ought to be done in *real* contexts (as opposed to what ought to be done in ideal scenarios), interpreting political realism as a form of non-ideal theory was an immediate conclusion (Freeden 2012, Valentini 2012, Zuolo 2012). Hence, according to such a common view, political realism and non-ideal theory were pursuing one and the same endeavour: they were investigating what ought to be done given the constraints and specificities of actual political circumstances. Realist analyses fundamentally sought action-guidance, whenever abstract normative theorising failed to provide concrete advice for actual

circumstances. When the methodological debate started to gain interest, then, there were few doubts regarding the substance of the link between political realism and feasibility. Feasibility, specifically understood as the possibility of implementation (i.e. concretely achievability in actual contexts), was the core interest of realist theories. A realist theory was fundamentally an implementable theory.

Yet, as I explained in the introductory section, this paper aims to propose a general inquiry into the relationship between realism and feasibility. So, what happened since then? Why is it necessary to delve further into the relationship between feasibility and political realism?

For those who supported the realist project, the methodological assimilation of political realism with non-ideal theory amounted to a grave misunderstanding of its aims and motivations. In fact, it would not be unfair to say that, since the resurgence of interest in realist political theory, a major part of realist efforts has been dedicated to dismantling that fundamental error. In particular, two argumentative strategies have been pursued to defend realism against such non-ideal interpretation: on the one hand, it has been argued that realism is not primarily interested in action-guidance; on the other, it has been pointed out that realism might demand the achievement of unfeasible arrangements. Let me spend a few words on both these theses, because they will allow us to understand why it is possible to define political realism as an ideal form of political theorising.

For one thing, it has been forcefully argued that the specificity of realist theorising does not lie in proposing action-guiding prescriptions, rather in the sources of normativity it chooses to endorse (Rossi and Sleat 2014). A realist theory is so defined not because it proves to be *realistically implementable*, rather because it is built *starting from an appraisal of political reality*. Realists are not so much, or primarily, interested in effectiveness, but rather in understanding the standards of adequacy of action in political contexts. Indeed, as it has been often recalled, the appeal and originality of realism lie in its attempt to construe a normativity wholly internal to politics (Jubb and Rossi 2015, Sleat 2014, Williams 2005)[76]. Methodologically, such approach has taken the

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[76] Or so it is argued. Indeed, it is currently debated whether realism effectively manages to construe a political normativity without relying on standards external, and prior, to the reality of politics (Erman and Möller 2015, Larmore 2013). However, my goal in this paper is not that of proposing a defence of political realism. Rather, my intention is to clarify how political realism should relate to feasibility assessments, assuming political realism as a tenable theoretical position.

form of a bottom-up normative construction. Realists construe normative proposals as a function of (a suitable interpretation of) the value that real practices have from the point of view of their participants. In a realist perspective, what ought to be done is given by what it would be required to do to fulfil the purpose of existing practices, as understood by those who participate in them. Williams' discussion of legitimacy in political thought is possibly the most cited example of the realist method so conceived. Indeed, Williams' conception of political normativity is conducted starting from an understanding of the value of politics itself, according to those who take part in political practices. Since, Williams claims, the ultimate purpose of politics is "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation" (Williams 2005, 3), we ought to regard legitimacy as the primary value to safeguard in political practices. Such normative conclusion, according to Williams, follows precisely because it is only under legitimate institutions – namely, institutions whose authority is somehow recognised by its subjects – that it is possible fulfil the ultimate purpose of politics as defined above (Williams 2005, 4-6). For Williams, therefore, the priority that contemporary theorists are used to assign to justice in political thought reveals a profound misunderstanding of political reality and its dynamics, and leads to a flawed conception of political normativity (Williams 2005, 1-3; see also Horton 2012; Rossi 2012). The core insight of realist thought is to bring political reality back at the centre of normative political theorising. Therefore, realists explain, describing political realism as a form of non-ideal theory severely impoverish the significance of its methodological approach – if, by non-ideal theory it is meant a mere exercise of providing action-guiding prescriptions. Realism is a more ambitious project: it proposes an independent vision of the grounds and structure of normative political theory (Sleat 2013, 9-12; and 2014).

However, as I anticipated, the analogy between political realism and non-ideal theory has been essentially criticised from another direction too. Besides describing political realism as not primarily concerned with action-guidance, it has been argued that realism can defend proposals which are not easily implementable, or that might even prove to be radically unfeasible. If we look carefully, indeed, such a thesis is entirely consistent with what has been pointed out so far. In fact, according to the sketchy account provided, political realism fundamentally defines where the normative political

inquiry should start – not where it is supposed to end. Indeed, the mere fact that, for realists, the normative starting point is an interpretation of the point and purpose of actual practices is not, by itself, sufficient to grant that realist normative proposals will be easily implementable (Finlayson 2017, Prinz and Rossi 2017). In fact, by engaging in an interpretive appraisal of participants' beliefs we could come to discover that existing practices substantively depart from, or violate, the values that they would be supposed to safeguard and promote (Jubb 2016a). To take the former example, following Williams' reasoning we could come to realise that actual institutions are not legitimate for a vast part of the population, or that certain authorities are recognised as more legitimate than others, or even that the present structures of power are forms of sheer domination. Relying on what Williams says about the priorities of political practices, realism could demand a complex departure from the existing arrangements when legitimacy is violated[77]. Of course, a realist analysis of similar cases would require an attentive and extensive discussion, but my intent here is merely to suggest that, as far as the bottom-up approach realists endorse is considered, realism might lead to a severe revision, a radical change, or even a suppression, of the existing state of affairs[78]. As a further proof of the unnecessary correlation between realism and non-ideal theory, it will suffice to say that Raymond Geuss and Enzo Rossi have come as far as to claim that political realism might be compatible with some form of utopianism (Geuss 2016, 42-48), or can demand the impossible (Rossi 2015).

So, the debate has managed to challenge the equivalence between realism and non-ideal theory by showing both that the core goal of political realism is to reconceive the sources of normative political thinking (i.e. it is not primarily interested in action-guidance) and that it might even defend normative proposals which are not immediately achievable. Therefore, to borrow a terminology belonging to the methodological debate on ideal and non-ideal theory, we can say that it is possible talk about a *realist ideal theory*

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[77] It is important to get this point correctly: I am not claiming that realist ideals can be *unfeasible* because they can be *radical*. Feasibility and unfeasibility are not coextensive to conservatism and radicalism. In fact, it is possible to think about cases in which a radical reform is more feasible that the conservation of the status quo (for instance when a dominant power comes to be openly rejected by the majority of its subjects). The present discussion is only meant to show that political realism might advance political proposals which require possibly hardly implementable reforms of the status quo – a point which is easier to argue for and understand when radical reforms are considered.

[78] For extensive discussions along these lines see Jubb 2016a. See also, Banai et al. 2011, and Sangiovanni 2008 which prove to be extremely useful to understand the practice-dependent approach, even if developed outside the realist tradition.

in the specific and restricted sense so far outlined: political realism proposes itself as a method to define what would be desirable to do politically, but its normative conclusions might well be unachievable[79]. Then, since the methodological debate started, a lot has changed with respect to the understanding and elaboration of realist political theory.

Such change of perspective, however, is not free of costs. Once political realism is saved from being interpreted merely as a form of non-ideal theory and, consequently, the possibility of talking about realist ideal theorising is introduced, a number of new troubles – well-known to those familiar with the methodological debates around ideal theory – arises. Realists, on their part, seem still not enough conscious of those methodological implications.

The first methodological issue realists must face concern the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theorising. As ideal theorists are well aware of, as soon as realism comes to be read as a form of theorising which might defend unfeasible ideals, it becomes urgent to explain how realist ideals are supposed to relate to concrete action, and how realism would provide guidance in actual circumstances. This problem is generally recognised as a crucial issue in political theory; however, it strikes even more forcefully when political realism is considered. This is so for the fundamental reason that realists claim to be interested in keeping the focus of their analyses on *real* politics. The dimension of *action* is possibly the most crucial and distinctive aspect of political reality[80] and a realist theory which would not be able to say anything about, or to, political agents would betray its guiding aspiration (Prinz and Rossi 2017). As said, this

[79] Someone might think that to talk about ideal and non-ideal theory in this context overtly muddles the analysis, since there is no consensus on the appropriate use of these categories. Moreover, as it is well known, realists fiercely reject mainstream ideal theory; therefore, it might result particularly controversial to employ this category in a discussion about political realism. Some clarifications are due, then. As I suggested, I use these two categories in a very specific, and limited, sense. Drawing from Robert Jubb's "Tragedies of Non-Ideal Theory" (2012) I use ideal theory to indicate that part of political theorising aimed at identifying what is desirable or perfect, which might lead to unachievable prescriptions (but not necessarily so); whereas I take non-ideal theory to be that part of political thinking concerned with actual action-guidance. Hence, I make no reference to the much more contested concept of *idealization*, which have dominated the discussions around ideal theory and which is the actual target of realists' critiques against ideal theory. Employed in this restricted sense, the use of this terminology helps the discussion, since it allows to systematise the issues at stake and to make use of the arguments developed within that methodological literature. So, despite counterintuitive at first sight, if employed correctly, the categories of ideal and non-ideal theory allow to establish a dialogue between two debates that have remained for the most part separated. By doing so, it is possible to make some progress in both fields, as I shall show.

[80] Geuss goes as far as to say that to study politics means first and foremost to study political action and its context (Geuss 2010, 1-16).

is far from saying that realism ought to be *primarily* concerned with guiding action. Nevertheless, a realist theory structurally unable to provide a normative analysis of concrete political action would represent a failed project.

Secondarily, it is still largely obscure what claiming that realist ideals can be unfeasible amounts to. Even more controversially, it is hard to make sense of the idea that political realism is compatible with utopian thinking or with defending the impossible, as Geuss and Rossi claim. Are there any feasibility constraints that do apply to realist ideals? That is, must realist ideals prove to be practically possible in some sense? Notice that this is not merely a theoretical curiosity. As those who take part in the debate around ideal and non-ideal theory well know, the feasibility constraints that apply to ideals directly affect the content of normative proposals (as they set boundaries to what is regarded practically demanded) (Cowen 2007, Jensen 2009). Moreover, clarifying which feasibility constraints do apply to ideals is connected to a more general understanding of the entire structure of political theories. Is the role of ideals, for instance, that of conceptual exploration, evaluation, orientation, or prescription? In all these case, as it is extensively argued in the methodological literature, ideals will be subjected to different feasibility requirements, in accordance to their role[81]. In other words, feasibility constraints over ideals affect both the content and the conduct of political theorising; hence, this is not an issue that can be superseded.

However, the contemporary literature on political realism has so far neglected the importance of discussing similar topics. The rejection, on the one hand, of mainstream ideal theorising and, on the other hand, of the equivalence between realism and non-ideal theory have set a dramatic distance between the two debates[82].

In the following, I will address both issues starting from the first mentioned. This argumentative strategy looks necessary in virtue of the questions at stake: as I said, in order to understand which feasibility constraints apply to political theories, it is necessary to understand their overall structure first. If we were unable to explain what is the normative role of ideal theorising in realist thinking, it would be pointless to inquiry the feasibility constraints that apply to realist ideals. I will, then, first try to clarify the nature of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theorising in realist thought.

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[81] For different takes on this issue see Gheaus 2013, Jubb 2012, Simmons 2010, Stemplowska 2008, and Swift 2008.
[82] There are a few exceptions, see Baderin 2013 and Sleat 2016.

Section 3 will be entirely devoted to this problem. As we will see, clarifying the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory in realist theorising will be a pretty challenging task and it will require an extensive analysis. Given the structure of the discussion conducted in Section 3, the answer to the second of the methodological problem mentioned – namely, clarifying the feasibility requirements that realism ought to abide by – will somehow already emerge from the ongoing analysis; however, I will point out an explicit answer in Section 4.

3. Realism and the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory

Let us begin, then, with the first of the two tasks ahead. As I said, the core objective of the present section is to explain the nature of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theorising in realist thought. To disentangle the problem, I will make use of the interpretations of the relationships between ideal and non-ideal theory already available in the methodological literature. I will indeed proceed by checking whether any of the interpretations provided could suit the realist case. In fact, addressing this problem by making use of the diverse solutions proposed in the literature will facilitate the task ahead to a great extent: the methodological literature provides a first systematisation of the issues at stake, and allows to clarify the comparative weaknesses and strengths of the diverse models outlined. Specifically, I will address the three major interpretations of the role of ideals in normative political thought: the interpretation of ideals as targets, of ideals as benchmarks, and of ideals as useless theoretical constructs, respectively[83]. I will explain, crucially, that none of these models is compatible with the realist approach to political theory. Realism, I shall argue, requires the adoption of a new interpretation of the role of ideals, if it aims at distancing itself from non-ideal theorising, while preserving an action-guiding role. Hence, at the end of this Section, I will propose an alternative interpretation of the role of ideals, compatible with political

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[83] This classification recalls both substantively (Stemplowska and Swift 2012) and terminologically (Wiens 2015a) the surveys of the literature that have been recently proposed. The reasons for this choice are twofold. Firstly, I would like to enable a fruitful dialogue between the methodological literature and political realism, and a proliferation of diverse classifications would make this task harder. Secondly, keeping the categorisation of the methodological panorama relatively simple allows me to maintain the discussion at a sufficient level of generality to enable a constructive discussion of the problem at stake. Hence, while I am aware that the methodological debate is more complex that the one I here portray, I believe that the overview proposed is accurate and functional enough to conduct a clear and profitable analysis.

realism: the interpretation of ideals as models. The discussion that will bring me there will also provide all the necessary tools to answer the main question this paper aims to answer; namely: what sort of feasibility constraints do apply to political realism?

3.1. Ideals are targets

The Target View is one of the most defended interpretations of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory. As the name suggests, according to this reading, the role of ideal theory is to define the *target* towards which politics should ultimately aim, and the subordinate task of non-ideal theory is to trace the best route to that target. Following this interpretation, the relationship between ideal theory and non-ideal theory can be expressed as a means-ends relationship, in which the ends are set by the ideal part of the theory and the means are provided by the non-ideal one. In this picture, then, the state of affairs the ideal theory defines as desirable is the one we are required to implement (Robeyns 2008, Simmons 2010, Valentini 2009).

Therefore, according to such approach, the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory looks straightforward: in concrete circumstances, we ought to reproduce the ideal. Of course, things are not so simple. In fact, it might be the case that the ideal cannot be readily instantiated. Here is where the methodological literature starts to problematise the relationship between the ideal and the non-ideal. In cases in which the ideal is not implementable, how is the ideal supposed to relate to actual circumstances? Target theorists dissolve the problem of the unfeasibility of ideals in concrete circumstances by emphasising that the relevance of ideals is supposed to be only *indirect* (Robeyns 2008, 345). Indeed, the unfeasibility of ideals ceases to constitute a problem as soon as their function is correctly understood. Since ideals play the limited, and very specific, role of endpoints of political agency, they are not supposed to be directly applicable; rather, it is sufficient that a route towards their realisation can be identified in principle. This last role is precisely the one pertaining to non-ideal theory. Non-ideal theory has the fundamental function of identifying which steps are required to reach that mostly desirable political arrangements as defined by the ideal theory. So, contrary to ideal theory, non-ideal theory is concerned with understanding what ought to be done taking into account what can be concretely pursued here and now. Indeed, those who defend the target approach often define non-ideal theory as a "transitional theory",

precisely because non-ideal theory traces the route to the ideal: it guides political agency into the transition from the present (in many ways wrongful) state of affairs to a better (possibly ideal) one (Gilabert 2009, 678; Robeyns 2008, 346; Simmons 2010, 22). In this context, Gilabert (2009, 676) usefully introduces the idea of "dynamic duties" to explain that, given the relationship that it is supposed to hold between the ideal and the non-ideal, non-ideal theory might be required to define intermediate duties; i.e., duties which hold under imperfect circumstances, and which are justified only as instruments to help us to reach our final goal.

There is a specific consequence of such conception that must be underlined, and which will become relevant in the discussion to follow. Given the structure of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory that the target view defends, non-ideal theory might demand the pursuit of reforms which might be judged suboptimal with respect to the states of affairs that are *presently* feasible, but that are nonetheless justified because necessary to the achievement of a *future* superior goal. That is to say, the target approach might require making a step backwards here and now, in order to make two steps forward in the future (Simmons 2010, Gilabert 2009). Such consequence is necessary given the logical structure of the method so far outlined: since reforms are ultimately justified in light of the ideal, provisional suboptimal results ought to be accepted as part of the process.

Ingrid Robeyns (2008) offers a useful metaphor to understand both the structure and the risks of the target view. She explains that interpreting non-ideal theory as a transitional theory means to conceive political theory as a map. In this map, which contains all the elements of a political theory, the *Paradise Island* is the product of the ideal theory, and the route to get there exemplifies the results of the non-ideal theory. However, as she correctly points out, "in some seas it is dangerous, indeed impossible, to just sail straight in the direction of the destination" (Robeyns 2008, 345). Hence, the route traced by non-ideal theory might be complex and thorny, and might require efforts and sacrifices.

According to the target interpretation, then, the problem of the unfeasibility of ideals is readily solved by interpreting ideals as endpoints of political action, which indirectly set the direction of feasible reforms. Could a similar solution be adequate for political realism? Can realist ideals be conceived as endpoints of political agency?

Unfortunately, the answer must be negative, and there are two reasons which explain the incompatibility between the target approach and realist theorising.

For one thing, within a realist paradigm, the target approach would result an irrational interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory. In order to understand this first reason of rejection, we must bear in mind what are the main features of a realist approach to political theory. As we have seen, political realism employs a bottom-up procedure in normative political theory. This means that realist ideals are context-dependent, meaning that their justification is based upon some features of the context in which it is elaborated (specifically, upon an interpretation of the selected practices according to the beliefs of their participants). It is the bottom-up methodology that disqualifies the target method as a good interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory for political realism.

Indeed, the fact that the justification of ideals is context-dependent implies, by definition, that realist ideals are not universal, nor stable. Realist ideals change as soon as the relevant features of the context change. Moreover, similar contextual changes might happen for the most diverse reasons. Realists are usually keen to emphasise that the beliefs people happen to hold in a certain context are the product of historical circumstances and of the cultural environment (Geuss 2008, 3-4; Williams 2005, 36-39). Hence, the theorist admittedly can have only a partial and limited role in shaping a political culture: despite being able to contribute to the public discussion and to the formation of political ideas, contextual changes will be external to her control and, for the most part, beyond her capacity of prevision. Therefore, a realist theorist can only be particularly attentive to contextual changes and re-elaborate political ideals accordingly (Prinz and Rossi 2017). In sum, realist ideals cannot be fixed once and for all: the theorist is unable to dictate the ideal, as she partly receives it from reality[84].

This feature, as I am about to explain, makes the target method hardly compatible with a realist approach to political theory. Let us have a look, indeed, at the structure of political theorising that would be generated by mixing the target method with a context-dependent approach. In a similar scenario, on the one hand, we would have that the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory is conceived as a means-ends

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[84] Williams is explicit on this point: "there is no way in which theory can get all the way ahead of practice and reach the final determination of what can make sense in political thought; it cannot ever, in advance, determine very securely what direction might count as "ahead."" (2005, 26).

relationship. On the other hand, given the context-dependent approach, we would have to concede that the ideals we strive for might change over time. So, the point is that the context-dependent approach radically modifies the structure through which the target view organises political thought. Indeed, in a context-dependent framework, a target approach to political thought would still interpret the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory as a means-ends relationship, but the ends themselves would be unstable. The target approach justifies the pursuit of a possibly long and costly chain of reforms in light of the final attended achievement that would repay the efforts. But when the goal is unstable, such a justification becomes suddenly weak and objectionable. In fact, as a goal might change, all the costs sustained for its pursuit could suddenly loose sense: we could find ourselves in the middle of a path which is meant to take us nowhere and that has required us much effort to follow. If the methodological approach is context-dependent, organising political agency as a series of non-ideal steps towards the ideal is an irrational practical strategy, because, since our goal is not fixed, it is not worthwhile to organise our actions to the end of reaching it. So, when associated with a context-dependent approach, the target method ceases to represent a compelling or plausible way to conceive the structure of political theory and the conduct of political reasoning.

Yet, the critique against the target approach just outlined sounds compelling only insofar as the target view comes to be associated with a context-dependent method. As the critique so far discussed hinges on a previous acceptance of the realist paradigm, the target approach could still be considered a plausible interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory by all those who do not share the same realist methodological commitment. However, I opened this paper claiming that an inquiry into the relationship between feasibility and political realism is not supposed to interest only those who align themselves with the realist party. In fact, as I am about to show, political realism has good arguments against the target approach even if the context-dependent assumption were suspended. So, it is possible to reconstruct a second line of critique against the target approach by recalling arguments typical of the realist tradition.

Even assuming – as said – ideals as fixed target-points, realists would find deeply objectionable the idea of organising political agency as a chain of steps towards the fulfilment of an ideal. This is because, in a realist perspective, even keeping the endpoint

fixed, it is impossible to say whether we will ever be able to reach it. Notice that this is something different from claiming that the endpoint is outside the feasible set – i.e. outside the set of states of affairs we could in principle reach. The issue realist would raise is another one. The crucial point is that, despite their alleged feasibility, in politics we can never know whether a chain of actions will manage to reach its goal, and this fact has a huge impact on the methodology of political theory – among which the rejection of the target approach.

The impossibility of knowing whether a chain of actions will lead to the aspired goal is a pivotal theme in the realist literature. Realists usually explain this fundamental impossibility to fully govern political outcomes by pointing at two factors which essentially characterise the political domain: the complexity of political phenomena and the unpredictability of human motivation. On the one hand, political outcomes are the product of layers of causal factors that make prediction and control hard tasks to pursue (Geuss 2010, Ch. 1). On the other hand, realist often urge political theorists to take into account the high complexity of human psychology (Galston 2010, 398; Geuss 2008, 9-10). Humans are far from being fully rational actors ready to follow collectively a common goal (Philp 2007, 12). Together, these factors make politics a domain largely dominated by contingency.

Why would contingency matter in the context of political *theory*? Is not political theory supposed to guide us through contingency defining a clear goal? In a realist perspective, the weight of contingency in politics should crucially affect political theorising itself (Bourke and Geuss 2009, 1-26). If a goal requires a chain of actions sufficiently complex to make it impossible to establish whether we will be able to reach that goal, that is a reproachable strategy to pursue. For a realist, the crucial point to note at this point is that political actions are not simply moves in a game on which we can freely bet: the political strategies we pursue have profound impact for us and for those around us (Philp 2007, 11). Hence, there is a special responsibility that weights on the political agent. For this reason, when the success of a course of action is improbable or highly uncertain, the efforts required to pursue that goal might not be a price worth to pay, given the special onuses that acting politically entails.

Therefore – this second realist objection to the target approach would go – establishing what ought to be done in concrete circumstances ought to entail an

attentive assessment of the feasible options available and their relative prospects of success. So, it is not enough to claim that an ideal is in principle feasible to go for its pursuit, if its probability of realisation is low, we might be required to break the chain towards the ideal and orient our actions differently. Overall, describing concrete political action as an instrument of the ideal represents both an irresponsible and a naïve interpretation of political agency. As a consequence, the target approach ought to be regarded as an unacceptable interpretation of the relationship between the ideal and the non-ideal.

The argument so far outlined does not imply that ideal theory cannot have a role in realist theorising, though. By addressing the target approach, I just excluded a first possible interpretation, but I also had the chance to start clarifying the realist approach to feasibility. The rejection of the target approach merely asserts that non-ideal theory in a realist vein needs to involve an assessment of relative probabilities, and that – correspondingly – realist ideals cannot be interpreted as targets. However, as I said, the target approach it is not the only available interpretation of the role of political ideals, so let's proceed with our inquiry.

3.2. Ideals are benchmarks

I just argued that, despite its failure, the argument for ideals as targets teaches us something: the probability of success of political reforms ought to have some weight in non-ideal theorising; therefore, whenever an ideal is unlikely to obtain, it might be the case to turn our sight to the states of affairs that are concretely accessible to us and seek to reach one of those by ranking their relative desirability. The second interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory – that I am about to introduce – precisely recognises the role of assessments of practicability in non-ideal theory and re-thinks the function of political ideals accordingly.

I am referring to the interpretation which sees political ideals as *benchmarks* for non-ideal theory (Wiens 2015a, 440). Indeed, according to this common interpretation, political ideals are interpreted as standards that should guide our practices by defining the principles that ought to govern our conducts, rather than goals that ought to be actively pursued. The merit of ideals lies in the fact that – by allowing us to imagine what perfect political conditions would entail – they provide us with a clear and

undistorted picture of the principles that ought to govern political practices. Ideals, in this sense, are seen as theoretical constructs which define the criteria through which we ought to compare and evaluate feasible options, not as teleological theories. (Gilabert 2012; Sangiovanni 2009; Stemplowska 2008; Swift 2008).

In fact, such understanding of the role of ideals has been usually put forward as a reaction to those criticism which saw the gap between ideal theory and non-ideal theory far too wide to provide any meaningful, or practicable, insight with respect to what ought to be done in concrete circumstances (Goodin 1995, Sen 2006). For those who endorse the benchmark interpretation of the role of ideals, it is not the case that non-ideal theory ought to trace a transitional route towards the ideal. Rather, non-ideal theory is supposed to proceed a more articulated way. In a first stage, non-ideal theory should assess which is the set of states of affairs that are attainable from our current standpoint; namely, what are the accessible political alternatives at our disposal[85]. That is to say, non-ideal theory is supposed to trace a feasibility threshold more restrictive than the one that applies to political ideals: the selected states of affairs must prove to be likely enough to be considered concretely realisable. In a second stage, non-ideal theory ought to identify, among the selected states of affairs, the one that represents the most desirable alternative given the ideal principles identified (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012).

Then, in a realist perspective, the benchmark approach – by conducting non-ideal theory through the identification of feasibility thresholds that take into account the probability of achievement of the political goals – certainly represents a better interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory. However, despite offering a more convincing account of the structure of political theorising, there are reasons to believe that the benchmark approach would be incompatible with political realism.

So, why is the idea of selecting the courses of action that are available to us by referring to the criteria defined in ideal theorising inadequate for realist political theory? The answer lies on what is possibly the fundamental vocation of realist theorising: the

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[85] Defining what is politically accessible is a highly controversial issue. For my present purposes, though, I do not need to define political accessibility. Here, my interest lies exclusively in pointing out that the benchmark approach conceives non-ideal theorising as an attempt to select the most desirable accessible alternative given the normative conclusions reached in ideal theory. For accurate discussions on feasibility in non-ideal circumstances see Lawford-Smith 2013a and Wiens 2015b.

central commitment to develop a conception of *political judgment* adequately sensitive to the specificities of political reality. For realists, political judgments must be adequately *political*. This does not simply mean – as Raymond Geuss efficaciously points out – that realist political judgments must be judgments *about* politics; rather, it means that they must show a *political character*. For Geuss, political judgments must be construed as to appropriately respond to the complexity of political reality: "To say that a judgment "has a political character" […] means that someone can *look at it* in a certain way, namely as an action with implications for further instances or forms of collective human action" (Geuss 2010, 10, emphasis in original). Geuss is here suggesting that political judgments are truly political when they are adequately sensitive to the complexity of the context of action in which they take place. To formulate a political judgement means to assess courses of action by carefully taking into account a number of contingent factors that characterise their context: such as the possibilities, the risks, the consequences involved (Geuss 2010, 1-16).

Hence, the idea of assessing what ought to be done by referring to an ideal benchmark is doomed to be rejected by realists on the basis that political reality is far too complex to be adequately oriented by merely applying an ideal on it. Given the complexity and specificities of political reality, realists argue that, by simply applying some ideal requirements to political circumstances, it is far from clear that we would reach the best outcome.

This is something Mark Philp also makes clear in his works on the assessment of political conduct. Philp explains that, in order to appropriately judge what ought to be done in political circumstances, it is required a particular attention to several factors like – among others – the interests at play, the circumstances of action, the capacities of those involved, the possibilities open to us, and the consequences that actions are likely to have (Philp 2010). It is worth quoting his own words:

> One reason […] for resisting the view that the principles of that ideal provide an appropriate standard of evaluation is that […] we have to ask what those principles demand (and with what realism) in terms of the motives and ambitions of their members, and we have to recognize that the process through which institutions are created, interpreted, and progressively reworked is itself a political process, rather than a merely deductive one. […] As political problems *they call for political solutions*, and political solutions, even when they are inspired by grand ideals, have a local

and contextually shaped character. (Philp 2007, 239, emphasis added)

Philp here is suggesting that, in political circumstances, assessing what ought to be done cannot be a mere exercise of bridging the gap between ideal and reality (i.e. a deductive process), but it must always be the fruit of a contextual assessment of all the variables at play. The specificities of the circumstances under exam might require a departure from what the ideal would counsel, because the pursuit of the ideal could be politically unwise: it could be dangerous, unsettling, or simply too costly, to act in accordance to the demands of the ideal theory.

Williams' observations about the politics of human rights provide a useful example of how a realist would examine and problematise the gap between the requirements of the ideal and the constraints posed by reality (Williams 2005, 18-28, 62-74). As Williams explains, human rights theories vividly show the complexity of applying a theoretical framework to reality, because of the kind of practical demands they impose on political practices. In political practices, Williams points out, declaring that some right is a *human* right implies that it has a fundamental and inviolable stance. Human rights are uncompromising: "the charge that a practice violates fundamental human rights is ultimate, most serious of political accusations" (Williams 2005, 72). This is a crucial feature of human rights discourses in Williams' view. The point is that talking about human rights is not supposed to be a mere theoretical exercise, but it brings with it all sorts of political consequences, and philosophical reflection ought to seriously recognise this fact and be conducted accordingly. Indeed, because of their political importance, denouncing a violation of human rights can foster a process of severe reform of the status quo; for this reason, defining the set of human rights that are valid in some context, is not a choice that can be made irrespective of the political circumstances upon which the theory is supposed to apply. Hence, Williams emphasises, human rights discourses can be either dangerous or flawed if the theory is not tailored to the specific circumstances of application. On the one hand, human rights might foster conflictual relationships, whenever their defence is at stake. So, the set of what we proclaim "human rights" ought to be traced pretty carefully: claiming that something is a human right signifies choosing enemies and friends, and which battles ought to be fought. On the other hand – somewhat paradoxically – given their potential effect, the political inopportunity to define some claim as grounded on a defence of a human right

might lead to a substantive revision of the meaning of the concept of human right itself, depriving it of its very reformist power. In fact, when the set of rights we dub as human rights comes to be unduly extended, we might end up by undermining its political seriousness. Given their uncompromising nature, "it is a mark of philosophical good sense that the accusation should not be distributed too inconsiderately" (Williams 2005, 27). Williams is explicit on this point when he says that "since in many cases governments cannot actually deliver what they peoples are said to have a right to, this encourages the idea that human rights represent simply aspirations" (Williams 2005, 64).

Hence, Williams underlines, "whether it is a matter of philosophical good sense to treat a certain practice as a violation of human rights, and whether it is politically good sense, cannot ultimately constitute two separate questions" (Williams 2005, 72). Whether it is the case to invoke a conception of human rights in a certain context ought to depend on the particular circumstances at play. If we simply apply an ideally defined set of human rights to concrete circumstances, we might either foster unwanted consequences or we might deprive human rights of their very original meaning and power; in a nutshell, we might come to pursue a course of action which is inappropriate or practically irrelevant. Therefore, to recall Philp's words, merely deducing the consequences of a theory to reality cannot be an adequate procedure in political theory. Ultimately, political realism raises sceptical complaints against the idea of approximating reality to theory – i.e. choosing to pursue the state of affairs which mostly satisfies the ideal – because what ought to be done in concrete political contexts depends on a careful evaluation of the all the variables at play. "No political theory […] can determine by itself its own application" (Williams 2005, 28).

Therefore, for realists, what it makes sense to do must make sense *politically*. This is the reason why the benchmark interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory cannot be accepted in a realist perspective. For a realist, the task of non-ideal theory cannot consist in a mere effort to approximate the ideal. Rather, non-ideal theorising ought to be conducted by taking into account the specificities of the context at stake. Selecting what is the best course of action to pursue in concrete circumstances is a much more complex exercise than the one portrayed by the benchmark approach.

What could then be the role of the ideal in realist thought? Does ideal theory

retain some function in realist political theory or, rather, political action ought to be entirely judged from a non-ideal perspective? After all – it could be argued – if what ought to be done must always be the fruit of a contextual assessment, we might well get rid of political ideals and focus on what makes sense to do given some specific circumstances. In fact, someone has suggested that this is the direction in which the methodological debate should go (Wiens 2015a). Since, however, I believe that ideal theorising maintains a crucial role in realist political theory, let me first address this alternative point of view – the view that interprets ideals as useless theoretical exercises – to better explain why it should be rejected on realist grounds, and what form a realist interpretation of the relationship between the ideal and the non-ideal should, instead, take.

3.3. Ideals are useless

I just argued that political realism maintains that understanding what ought to be done in concrete circumstances should be the fruit of a context-sensitive analysis, and should not consists in a mere application of a set of ideal principles to reality. How is non-ideal theory supposed to relate to ideal theory, then?

A somewhat largely criticized, or otherwise neglected, reading of the problem I am discussing maintains that – given the fundamental context-sensitive character of political judgments – judgments about what ought to be done here and now do not require any prior understanding about what ought to be done in ideal circumstances. According to this unorthodox view, non-ideal theory would be entirely independent from ideal theory. In fact, those who have defended a similar thesis have defined ideal theory as either "unnecessary" (Sen 2006, 222) or "utterly uninformative" (Wiens 2015a, 434). However, this last interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory has not received the attention it deserves, particularly in its last developments (Wiens 2012 and 2015; except from Jubb 2016b). When political realism is at stake, this lack of engagement becomes especially surprising, though. Despite sharing a similar context-dependent take on political theorising, realists – as I recalled – push themselves as far as proclaiming that political realism *can* demand the impossible, thereby radically distinguishing their approach from non-ideal theorising (Rossi 2015). So, realists certainly need to defend themselves against this possible challenge – at least if they wish

to maintain a distance from non-ideal theorising. Hence, in the following, I will outline a realist response to those who claim that political ideals are unnecessary. This will allow me to further clarify the realist position within the methodological debate, and to finally outline, in the next section, a proper realist interpretation of the role of ideal theory and of its relationship with non-ideal reasoning.

Let us begin, then, by introducing this dissenting interpretation. The first and most discussed contribution in this sense is due to Amartya Sen. In his much-cited, and much-criticised, article "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?" (2006), Sen provocatively argues that political theory has, up to that point, been conducted in the wrong way. In his opinion, all the efforts that theorists have put on clarifying political ideals have been pointless: this is because ideal theory is "neither sufficient nor necessary" for understanding what ought to be done in concrete circumstances (2006, 219-22). Hence, the conduct of political theorising ought to be radically reformed. Here, we are not much concerned with the "sufficiency thesis": a realist would not deny that political ideals, by themselves, cannot provide all the answers we need about concrete political agency – after all, realists put a lot of efforts in contextualising their claims. Rather, it is the "necessity thesis" which might cause troubles. Sen explains the point in the following way. Ideal theory is not necessary because we can perfectly manage to compare two states of affairs and decide which is the better one without the need to know how a perfect world would look like: "We may indeed be willing to accept, with great certainty, that Everest is the tallest mountain in the world, completely unbeatable in terms of stature by any other peak, but that understanding is neither needed, nor particularly helpful, in comparing the heights of, say, Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc. There would be something very deeply odd in a general belief that a comparison of any two alter natives cannot be sensibly made without a prior identification of a supreme alternative" (Sen 2006: 222). Sen's point is that we can know when something is going wrong, and hence ought to be remedied, even if we do not know what a fully perfect world would require (2006: 224). In Sen's opinion, it is rather worrying the tendency of philosophers to indulge in ideal theorising, when urgent injustices ought to be overcome (2006, 228); and in order to identify recognise injustices, Sen argues, we certainly do not need a sophisticated account of what perfect justice would require us to do. Non-ideal theory, then, can be conducted without looking at ideals, since we are able to engage in

comparative political judgments; besides, it must be also regarded as a more compelling endeavour to pursue. Therefore, according to Sen, ideal theory is certainly unnecessary, since for practical purposes a comparative analysis will be sufficient.

Since its publication, it has been extensively argued that Sen's proposal proves to be fragile on multiple fronts[86]; still, it contains a fundamental insight that ought to be taken seriously. Indeed, David Wiens has recently followed Sen's original provocation and has reframed it by building a compelling challenge against ideal theorising. It is, then, against Wiens' rephrase of Sen's claims that argumentative efforts in support of ideal theorising should be directed. And yet, as I said, Wiens' arguments have not received the attention they deserve. In "Against Political Ideals" Wiens sets itself the task of demonstrating that "political ideals contribute nothing to our reasoning about what to do amidst nonideal circumstances" (Wiens 2015a, 434). The analysis elaborated by Wiens is complex and detailed, but its core thesis can be summarised in the following way. Wiens' entire argument hinges on a specific interpretation of the structure of political theories. According to Wiens' view, political theories are structured around three fundamental elements: directive principles, basic evaluative criteria, and empirical constraints (2015, 435-37). Directive principles are those principles which define what ought to be done under certain circumstances. Basic evaluative criteria express the values that ground the theory, and which allow to rank the diverse political possibilities. And, finally, empirical constraints define those facts that the theory must take as fixed, i.e. those constraints that trace the set of worlds that the theory can consider feasible. Given these core elements, Wiens explains that in normative political theory "a set of directive principles is justified in virtue of the fact that it optimally reflects certain basic evaluative criteria given a set of empirical constraints" (2015, 437). In other words, in Wiens' interpretation, the directive principles that are supposed to apply in a certain context are those which to greatest extent fulfil the basic evaluative criteria endorsed by the theory, given the states of affairs that (by assumption) can be realised. Wiens takes this structure to offer a general model of normative political theorising[87].

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[86] Attentive analyses and criticism can be found in Gilabert 2012; Robeyns 2012; Sangiovanni 2009; Swift 2008; Valentini 2011.

[87] For example, Wiens explains that Rawls' comes at his two principles of justice by employing the kind of reasoning just outlined. As Wiens explains, in the case of Rawls' (1999) theory, the basic evaluative criteria are freedom and equality, and the empirical constraints are material scarcity, the fact that the society ought to be conceived as closed, and a sense of justice by those who will be subjected to the

Then, if Wiens is correct in portraying the conduct of normative political theorising as he does, it suddenly becomes clear why ideal theory ought to be considered "utterly uninformative" in order to establish what ought to be done in concrete circumstances. Since directive principles are strictly dependent upon the feasibility set considered, ideal theory cannot be relevant in non-ideal circumstances. Normative political reasoning derives principles by applying evaluating criteria to a given context. Hence, precisely because the empirical constraints are different in ideal and non-ideal circumstances, ideal theory is useless at best, and misguiding at worst. Therefore, we need to focus exclusively on non-ideal theorising.

So, could realists share Sen's and Wiens' insights? Should political realism be understood as an elaborated form of non-ideal theorising? Recall indeed that my first objective is to clarify how realist theories can be relevant in non-ideal circumstances and, given the survey of the debate so far conducted, it might turn out that realism should entirely dismiss ideal theorising.

In some sense, as we have seen, realism does share many of the concerns that motivate Sen's and Wiens' projects. In particular, realists emphasise that the specificities of political circumstances must play a crucial role in determining what ought to be done in a given context. Realism regards political judgments as context-sensitive both in the sense that they need to take into account the feasibility of reforms, and in the sense that they cannot be merely deductive (because they need to be tailored to the circumstances at hand). Hence, realists would agree with Wiens when he points out that empirical constraints fundamentally shape the practical conclusions we reach. But they would also share Sen's concern about the need to ground theory in reality. While we look at ideals, we risk losing a clear sight on actual failures and problems; therefore, we need to be

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norms identified. Then, Rawls' reasoning to identify the directive principle that ought to apply in those circumstances is construed with the precise aim of abiding by the said criteria and constraints. The theoretical device Rawls employs to solve his inquiry – namely, the original position – is modelled as an imaginary deliberative process conducted by agents which are ignorant about their status within society, but that are motivated to define the terms that will allow to build and maintain a system of mutual cooperation under the empirical constraints outlined. According to Wiens, "the veil of ignorance is introduced to situate parties fairly with respect to each other, to ensure that the chosen principles eschew "arbitrary distinctions…between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties," (Rawls 1999, 5) thereby respecting individuals' freedom and fundamental moral equality" (Wiens 2015a, 436). Then, in Wiens' reading, Rawls precisely follows the general process to identify directive principles above-mentioned: through the original position, Rawls defines the two principles of justice as those principles which at best reflect some evaluative criteria given certain empirical constraints (2015, 436-37).

primarily interested in carefully examining the circumstances in which political action takes place. However, this is still far from saying that realists can stay content with non-ideal theorising. In fact, there are also reasons to suspect that realists would not be satisfied by Sen's and Wiens' methodological analyses.

The main complaint that a realist would advance against Sen's and Wiens' analyses would certainly amount to an accuse of offering an overly simplistic account of the structure and conduct of normative political theory. For one thing, realists would certainly share the critiques of those who point out that Sen's non-ideal methodology can work only in very simple circumstances (namely, in circumstances in which injustice is clear and the hierarchy of values is simply definable) but is unable to assist practical choice in complex scenarios. Sen's account would need to offer a more developed theory of values and of their priorities (Sangiovanni 2009). This is a problem shared by Wiens, which nowhere seems to explain how we are supposed to identify the relevant values in particular circumstances, nor how we are supposed to rank them[88]. There are reasons to believe that to clearly understand our evaluative commitments some form of ideal theorising would be required (Jubb 2012; Swift 2008). However, this is not the line of criticism I presently want to follow. For our purposes, it is more relevant to emphasise another shortcoming: in Sen's and Wiens' accounts, the discussion of feasibility constraints appears excessively schematic and static. Wiens and Sen discuss empirical constraints treating them as clear and absolute boundaries. But this an unrealistic and naïve interpretation of empirical constraints.

Wiens, for example, employs the notion of empirical constraints defining them as "certain assumptions about which states of affairs can be realized" (2015: 436). Here, the notion of empirical constraints Wiens employs seems, oddly enough, to allude to the ultimate border of practical possibilities – that is to say, to the limits of what is achievable through human action (Jensen 2009, 168). This is an interpretation hardly compatible with an approach that intends to offer non-ideal guidance, though. Admittedly, the lexicon does not help us here, so it is time to disambiguate a bit. Feasibility, as it has often been argued, can indicate both *soft* and *hard* empirical

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[88] Wiens does not address the issue of the justification and assessment of our evaluative commitments even when he positively explains how non-ideal theorising ought to be conducted (see Wiens 2012). In "Prescribing Institutions Without Ideal Theory" he defines values as "moral ideals in the ordinary sense" (2012, 55).

constraints (Gilabert 2009, Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012). Hard feasibility constraints are those which divide the possible from the impossible, i.e. the practically possible from the outright unreachable. Soft feasibility constraints are those which divide the probable from the improbable, i.e. they select some levels of probability are normatively relevant. Wiens does not take into consideration these different meanings in his analysis. Yet, it is crucially important to keep these two meanings of feasibility in mind, when we are trying to get a sense of relationship between ideal and non-ideal reasoning in political theory. Indeed, Wiens construes his argument by treating every feasibility constraint as a hard constraint. His argument sounds appealing when hard feasibility constraints are considered. After all, realists as well clearly explain that normative reasoning should be tailored to political reality: we ought to reason in light of the concrete possibilities open to us and the ways required to reach them. However, it seems that the lexicon of hard constraints does not really suit concrete political scenarios. In concrete circumstances – the realm of non-ideal theorising – our sight is short and obfuscated. We often cannot know how to reach a certain goal, nor what kind of obstacles we will have to face, and not even the costs we will incur into. But these are not hard constraints: in concrete circumstances, we deal with probability thresholds.

This is one of the reasons why realists would regard ideal theorising as a necessary part of political theory. Indeed, since feasibility thresholds are mutable and relative (rather than fixed and absolute), in order to appropriately understand what ought to be done here and now, it is essential to know what political desirability would entail if hard constraints were taken into account. That is, in a realist perspective, exploring the limits of practical possibilities to gain a sense of what political perfection would consists in proves to be a fundamental theoretical exercise to guide non-ideal political action.

This is due to the fact that soft constraints, being probability thresholds, are *established* not simply discovered. In non-ideal theory, we actively decide to impose some probability threshold as relevant for normative reasoning. Hence, defining which feasibility constraints do count as relevant in non-ideal theory is the fruit of an evaluation: we actively establish that non-ideal political theory ought to be conducted *as if* certain improbable goals were utterly unachievable. This is a crucial feature of soft empirical constraints. Indeed, being actively chosen and not simply discovered, soft feasibility thresholds involve costs: by imposing a certain degree of probability of

success as normatively relevant, all those alternatives judged too far from us to be achievable are discarded – even those that represent highly desirable states of affairs[89].

Given this understanding of soft feasibility constraints as probability thresholds, there are three reasons a realist would regard as fundamental a research into political desirability given the limits of practical possibilities. First of all, as realists are keen to emphasise, theories are not constructs detached from reality; rather, they are part of the context and have a practical impact (Geuss 2008, 29-30). To know what is left outside our reach, what are the shortcomings of our world and the actual wrongs that remain unanswered, can actively affect political culture, and transform some goal from being unreachable to be included within the set of the achievable alternatives[90].

Secondly, given the fact that soft feasibility thresholds are imposed, not merely discovered, in order to establish what is the relevant threshold to consider we need to know what ideal political arrangements would look like. Political decisions are extremely complex: deciding to pursue a course of action rather than others depends, among other things, on the balance between gains and losses at play. When the political options that are easily accessible are highly disadvantageous, it might be preferable to pursue a course of action which has a low prospect of success (Geuss 2010, 12-16). Political actors might choose to set the bar of the feasibility threshold quite low, given the balance between gains and losses at stake. Hence, reasoning on ideal desirability proves to be crucial in order to decide which feasibility threshold would be appropriate to set.

Thirdly, since the goals that are relatively probable to achieve change over time and through contexts, it means that it is possible to work on the political circumstances to make them more favourable to the ideal (Geuss 2016, 44-45).

In all these three cases, knowing what is ideally desirable plays a fundamental practical role. For all these tasks, ideals are required, because we need to know what desirability demands bracketing assessments of probability – that is, when the limits of practical possibilities are considered.

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[89] To be aware of what is left behind, of the costs and renunciations, is crucial to conserve a disenchanted and truthful knowledge of political reality – this is something realists would certainly judge valuable. However, a being aware of what could be regarded as desirable to achieve outside the soft constraint, is not merely epistemically relevant for a realist. What does matter for our present purposes is to show that an inquiry into political desirability which considers the limit of practical possibility can be relevant for guiding concrete political action.

[90] See Geuss 2016, 44: "there are things that can become possible only if enough people want them (and pursue them) in the right way, and that otherwise are "impossible.""

For all these reasons, I maintain that ideal theory – meant as that form of reasoning which explores what desirability entails within the ultimate limits of practical possibilities – must be regarded as a fundamental dimension of realist political thinking. Sen and Wiens, by failing to consider the distinction between soft and hard constraints, outline an unconvincing account of political theorising. As a consequence, they are unable to provide adequate tools to understand political action in non-ideal contexts, which requires a more complex analysis than the one they outline.

At this point, however, it seems that we have reached a deadlock. On the one hand, I have just claimed that ideal theorising is a fundamental component of realist thought. On the other hand, the interpretations of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory that have been proposed so far seem to be incompatible with realist political thought. Must we conclude that political realism is a project doomed to fail? In the next section, I explain that it is possible to interpret the role of ideals in a way that is consistent with realist political theory. Indeed, I will argue that realist political ideals ought to be interpreted as *models*. So, let me turn to this final possible interpretation of the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory.

3.4. Ideals are models

We have come to a point in which we are looking for an interpretation of realist ideal reasoning which is consistent with the conclusions reached so far; namely, realist ideals cannot play the role of targets, nor that of benchmarks, and yet they seem to actively inform non-ideal political action. If the function of realist ideals cannot be explained in those terms, how can it be interpreted?

I want to suggest that realist ideals ought to be interpreted as models; where, by "model", I do not mean "standard" or "blueprint" – an interpretation, this one, that would bring us back to the benchmark approach. Here – somewhat usually – I employ the notion of model drawing from the conceptual tools which belong to the philosophy of science[91]. A model, as understood in the studies of scientific methods, is usually

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[91] This is not so unusual though. In fact, James Johnson, in his "Models Among the Political Theorists", has persuasively argued that political theorists could benefit from analysing their methods in light of the conceptual tools provided by the philosophy of science (Johnson 2014). The attempt I here make to explain realist ideals as models takes inspiration from his original work and tries to develop a similar insight.

taken to refer to a simplified version of the part of the world under exam, which helps to reach a better understanding of it by playing some specific epistemic and heuristic function (Frigg 2009)[92]. Let me disambiguate a bit by applying the concept to realist political theory. As I understand political realism, realist ideals ought to be interpreted as theoretical devices which, by focusing on a simplified version of the problem under exam, are able to provide some specific information that contributes to a clarification of the problem. Specifically, realist ideal reasoning contributes to a clarification of what ought to be done in concrete circumstances by providing a better understanding of the politically desirable, and it seeks such understanding by simplifying the subject under exam – i.e. bracketing relative probabilities and focusing on specific parts of the larger problem at stake. I will shortly turn to a better specification of the structure, function, and use, of ideals as models. Before saying more, though, let me introduce an example of realist ideal reasoning to facilitate my task.

Once again, I will make use of Williams' work because it provides the most systematic discussions of the realist methodology. In "From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value" (2005, 75-96), Williams sets himself the goal of answering an abstract and fundamental question: he wonders what pursuing freedom in political contexts might entail.

"From Freedom to Liberty" is a dense and thought-provoking essay. For the purposes of the present discussion, unfortunately, many of the insights Williams argues for in that essay need to be left aside. Here, I am mainly interested in the structure of his analysis; so, this will be my narrow focus. While introducing the problem at stake – i.e. the interpretation of freedom in political circumstances – Williams programmatically declares: "we will not understand our own specific relations to that value unless we understand what we want that value to do for us – what we, now, need it to be in shaping our own institutions and practices" (2005, 75). What is Williams suggesting here? He is claiming that, if we want to understand what does it mean to strive for a certain value in a given context, and when it is appropriate to do so, it is necessary to check what are the general purposes of our practices, and how our values can fit in that

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[92] I am conscious that the debate around the interpretation of models in the philosophy of science is extremely wide and that I am somehow proposing a simplistic definition of the concept. However, this is usually taken to be the most basic and shared definition of models in the philosophy of science (see Frigg 2009 and Morrison 2016). Moreover, for my purposes I only need to build a notion of models which suitably explains the role of realist ideals in political theory.

broader framework. To this purpose, Williams explains that freedom has an intuitive, common-sensical, meaning: when we usually refer to freedom we mean something like "being unobstructed in doing what you want by some form of humanly imposed coercion" (2005, 79). So, for Williams, the central question to investigate is whether freedom could be an appropriate evaluative concept to employ in political circumstances and what would it eventually entail. Can we complain in political circumstances when our primitive freedom is violated? Should such violations be remedied? As I pointed out, Williams invites us to turn our sight to our practices and their general purposes, when such questions need to be addressed.

Williams' reflection, then, consists in an attempt to understand what are the values that ought to be taken as primarily important in the practical context under exam. As already recalled, Williams argues that in political contexts "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions of cooperation" (2005, 3) are the most important values to safeguard, since disagreement and conflict are ineliminable facts of the world as we know it. Therefore, since it guarantees a legitimate use of coercion, Williams explains that the creation and maintenance of a political system is the primary goal we ought to strive for – a goal which is primary in the sense of being the condition of possibility of the cultivation of all other values (2005, 3). For Williams, from this understanding of political practices a number of things follow with respect to our comprehension of freedom and its political demands. Indeed, because it ought to be understood as a *political* value, primitive freedom must be regarded as an untenable concept in political contexts. Primitive freedom is, by definition, incompatible with the conditions that make politics possible: while politics employs and disciplines coercion, primitive freedom would in principle justify complaints against any form of coercion.

Does this mean that we ought to entirely avoid invoking freedom in political circumstances? We certainly could not and should not. Williams is keen to emphasise that no legitimate government could ignore freedom as a basic human need. However, given the incompatibility highlighted, freedom should be re-interpreted according to political standards. When it comes to be so reinterpreted, freedom comes to be dubbed as *liberty* by Williams (2005, 83). In particular, Williams concludes that liberty in political contexts can be invoked just as long as the use we make of that concept does not subvert the supposed hierarchical order of our evaluative commitments: in a nutshell, "a

practice is not a violation of liberty if it is necessarily involved in there being a state at all" (2005, 90). Does this imply that anytime a claim in liberty is compatible with the conditions outlined by Williams politics ought to be reformed accordingly? In fact, when Williams hints at possible concrete applications of his analysis around liberty as a political value he is clear to point out that, under the conditions specified, "if someone feels that some action or arrangement imposes on him a cost in liberty, then it does indeed do so. *This does not mean, of course, that the action or arrangement should not be allowed*: the cost in his liberty is very often outweighed by the values served by the action or arrangement. Moreover, *it need not justify or call for any compensation*. He need not have a claim in liberty in any court. But *a cost in liberty is still what it is*" (2005, 91, emphasis added). Therefore, the analysis conducted by Williams allows to better understand when we could complain about a cost in liberty. However, whether we should actually do so, would require another kind of judgment. Williams is clear on this point: political decisions must be *political* – i.e., in concrete circumstances, what ought to be done ought to be fruit of an independent political assessment.

I have made quite a long digression into Williams' discussion of liberty as a political value. However, this should be useful to understand the features I attribute to realist ideals that make them conveniently interpretable as models. I will proceed in order by explaining the structural characteristics, the epistemic function, and the proper use, of realist ideals respectively.

As far as the structure is concerned, as we have just seen, the theoretical machinery Williams employs is abstract and makes an accurate use of simplifications. In particular, two kinds of simplifications seem to be involved in Williams' reasoning. For one thing, Williams analyses a very specific normative problem, and he does so by focusing solely on those aspects of political normativity that he takes to be relevant for his case: he analyses liberty with respect to the purposes of political practices, and draws some normative consequences from this (relatively) simple focus. Secondly, Williams avoids discussing issues of concrete application of his normative conclusions; rather, he points out that concrete circumstances require a further analysis into the context and the possibilities at stake. So, his reflections are meant to have a general relevance and are conducted abstracting from the contingencies characterising the singular contexts. Hence, the theoretical structure deliberately makes schematic and tractable some aspects

of a much bigger problem – namely, political normativity – and it does so for epistemic and heuristic purposes, to which now I turn.

As we have seen, Williams' intent is to clarify what does it mean, for us, to be actually free under political institutions. In this sense, Williams' analysis is meant to be an inquiry into political desirability. Indeed, Williams does not deal with utopian fantasies, nor with singular applications of the value of liberty. Rather, he defines in general what does it mean for us to be fully free within political contexts. Complaints about liberty which eschew the conditions of validity he identifies are simply not complaints about liberty; hence, there are no better arrangements with respect to liberty than the one he outlines. It is worth quoting another passage which emphasises the point I am making: "a practice is not a limitation of liberty if it is necessary for there to be any state at all. But it is also not a loss of liberty if it is necessary for the functioning of society as we can reasonably imagine it working and still being 'our' society" (Williams 2009, 200). Williams, therefore, is providing us with some tools to understand what a political arrangement which perfectly safeguard liberty would consist in.

Now, we come to the crucial aspect of the present analysis. How is this knowledge supposed to be employed in practical reasoning? I have formerly argued that the knowledge of full desirability plays several crucial functions in normative political theory. I have explained that being aware of what the ideal does entail might play a role in choosing what kind of objectives it would be wise to pursue in the face of uncertain outcomes. Furthermore, the ideal might foster the pursuit of political actions aimed at creating circumstances more favourable to the achievement of the political desirable. However, discussing Williams' essay, some other functions have emerged. By employing some suitably specified simplifications which make the theoretical problems more tractable, ideal reasoning allows to reach a better understanding of our evaluative commitments. In this way, ideal theorising proves to play a fundamental heuristic and practical function, since it allows us to interpret more clearly the normative elements at play in concrete circumstances. And finally, as Williams points out and as I previously emphasised, ideals are fundamental to get a proper sense of the *costs* of political actions, which is essential to act consciously and responsibly. As Williams underlines, a cost in liberty "is still what it is" and must be recognised as such, even if the wisest political strategy might demand to ignore that cost.

Someone at this point might wonder whether I am mixing up benchmark and target arguments – thereby replicating their shortcomings – by listing these possible functions of ideals among the ones relevant for realist normative thinking. The answer is negative, though. Indeed, there is something else that ought to be specified. Since the ideal is a simplified, partial, and abstract, study into political normativity which has a specific epistemic function, it ought precisely to be managed as being a structure of this kind. This means that the ideal does not, and cannot, set by itself what ought to be done. Practical reasoning requires to balance theoretical considerations and the observation of reality. The ideal brings to the table only a piece of information that needs to be balanced with all the others at our disposal. This means that the ideal is not the sole normative authority: it is, though fundamental, a piece of a puzzle. However, it is not simply that the ideal informs, though partially, the non-ideal: the ideal too can be revised and reformed in light of our appraisal of reality. Recall, indeed, that political realism endorses a bottom-up methodology; therefore, as soon as some features of reality change or come to be better understood, our ideals might change too (Williams 2005, 93). Hence, the ideal and the non-ideal work together to inform each other and to reach sensible and sound answers to our practical questions. As Geuss efficaciously points out: practical reasoning is a *craft*, there is no systematic way to conduct it (2008, 15). This is the most important contribution that the notion of model brings into this theoretical context. In fact, one of the ways to explain the role of models in normative political theory, as I just did, it is to confront this concept with one close to it: the concept of theory. By theory I intend a system of laws which, deductively, is able to explain the phenomena belonging to a certain part of the world[93]. Interpreted in this way, while models represent a limited study, which ought to contribute to a larger theoretical endeavour, theories are more ambitious. By employing the concept in an analogous manner, one of the core methodological thesis of political realists consists in claiming that normative reasoning ought not to take the form of theories; namely, of systems of laws which are able, deductively, to tell us what ought to be done in specific circumstances (Geuss 2010, 31-42 and 2016, 28-18; Williams 2006, Ch. 16; 2011, Ch. 10). Therefore, explaining ideals as models we are able to honour this core realist insight, and to explain how realists could theorise normatively avoiding "theories";

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[93] For an introduction about the relationship between theories and models and their diverse interpretations, see Morrison 2016.

namely, avoiding normative "systems".

After all, all the critiques realism would move against the target and benchmark approaches seem to all come from a similar unease: they are all meant to stress the inadequacy of seeking systematisations of political normativity, which end up by focusing solely on theory, while ignoring reality. Interpreting ideals as models, though, gives us a chance to explain and save the role of ideal theory in realist thought. Now, as a final step, we have to clarify what is the relationship between realist political ideals and feasibility.

4. Conclusion: Feasibility constraints on realist ideals

Up to this point I tried to show that political realism ought to be conceived as a complex approach to normative political theory which requires both ideal and non-ideal theorising. I also explained that realism is able to do maintain both levels of theorising by conceiving political ideals as models. Therefore, we are now also in the position to get a better understanding of the relationship between feasibility and political realism.

At the beginning of this paper, indeed, I explained that much contemporary literature around political realism has struggled to demonstrate that normative political theory cannot be reduced to a mere non-ideal theorising, i.e. to a set of techniques that would tell us what ought to be done here and now. Realist proposals – it has been argued – far from being primarily interested in what can be concretely achieved, can even "demand the impossible" or turn out to be "utopias". So, according to the recent literature, there are (at least some) levels of realist thought that are unconcerned by action guidance. As I argued, however, this was an obscure thesis both because it was remained unspecified how levels of theorising unconcerned by considerations of implementation were supposed to be relevant for guiding concrete action, and because it was largely unclear what "impossible" or "utopias" meant in that context. Hence, I claimed, if we want to make better sense of the idea that realist political theory might demand the impossible, we ought first to explain how levels of theorising unconcerned by what can be done here and now can prove to be relevant for assessing political action in concrete circumstances. Without such a preliminary inquiry into the structure of realist thought, I pointed out, any comment about the relationship between realist normative theory and feasibility constraints would have been baseless. In order to affirm

that realism can reflect on unfeasible states of affairs we need first to show how, and why, that kind of reasoning is relevant in realist political thinking: an issue that – given the discussion conducted so far – proves to be far more challenging than usually recognised.

Now that I have clarified the scenario and argued that realist normative thought can, and must, include a reflection around political ideals (namely, around perfect, and possibly unfeasible, political states of affairs) which conclusions can be drawn with respect to the feasibility constraints that apply to political realism? How should the idea that realism can demand the impossible be understood? Since, in the analysis developed so far, I tried to define the role and structure of realist ideals, the discussion conducted already contains some elements to provide a cogent answer. Let me collect and put in order what has been said so far with respect to the relationship between realism and feasibility, then.

Discussing the interpretation of ideals as useless theoretical constructs, I argued that realist inquiries into political desirability ought to bracket probability assessments, and should be conducted by taking into account the limit of practical possibilities. I motivated this claim by explaining that the knowledge of possibly perfect political arrangements would play some fundamental functions in realist theorising. In particular, exploring the limits of practical possibilities allows to get a realistic sense of the costs incurred by choosing some course of action over others; moreover, it allows to orient concrete practical action, by providing some tools to decide which probability thresholds ought to be taken as relevant.

Still, claiming that realist ideals ought to be constructed by taking into account the limits of practical possibility does not tell us the whole of the story. Should we conclude that realism can pick any world as desirable within the set practically possible worlds? A similar conclusion would let many perplexed. Remember, however, that political realism endorses a bottom-up approach for the construction of political normativity. I have said something about the bottom-up methodology at the beginning of this paper, and we had the chance to see one of its possible applications while discussing the Williams' analysis of liberty as a political value. Such a methodological choice has a crucial impact on the set of the possible worlds that realism would be able to define as desirable. In fact, realist ideals need to give us a sense of how our practical world ought to look like

if the purposes of actual practices were fully met. Realism starts from the actual beliefs and practices that characterise a specific context and tries to understand what it would mean to fully satisfy the evaluative commitments that we happen to hold. Desirability is therefore constrained by some features of the context in which the ideal is supposed to be applied: political ideals will have to portray a reality which successfully instantiates our evaluative commitments and their priorities. Hence, how much distance between the actual and the possible realism can admit? Certainly, as said, such theoretical endeavour will have to abide by the limits of practical possibility and, within these limits, realism ought to pick the alternatives which satisfy the bottom-up procedure mentioned. So, there is something more to be said. A great deal to establish the distance between the actual and the possible realism could admit depends on which arrangements would prove to be able to instantiate the relevant evaluative commitments. This is a question which is highly speculative nature and which involves asking to what extent a practice could be varied, and still be perceived by its participants to be a practice which defends the relevant evaluative commitments. Williams explains this requirement saying that normative relevant possibilities ought to "practically intelligible":

> Resentment about the loss of liberty, like resentment about anything else, implies the thought of an alternative world in which that loss does not occur, and just because liberty is a political value, the distance of that possible world from the actual world must be measured in terms of political consideration of relevance and practical intelligibility. (Williams 2005, 92)

What practical intelligibility would entail is an issue that certainly cannot be clarified here, but pointing at the importance of this requirement helps us to get a sense of the distance between the possible and the actual realist political ideals would admit, and this is enough for our purposes.

How to make sense, then, of the claim that political realism might "demand the impossible"? The phrase is inherently ambiguous, because "possibility" might be intended in different ways. Indeed, in a first a sense, the claim is certainly false: realism is crucially interested in understanding the boundaries of practical possibility and interpreting political action given those boundaries. However, this is an implausible reading of that claim. In a second sense, though, that claim points at something true: realist political ideals might demand the pursuit of "improbable" states of affairs. Since

I explained the structure of realist ideal theorising as a theoretical endeavour that brackets assessments of probability, realist political theory might actually demand the "improbable". So, that claim ought to be correctly understood: interpreted as a thesis about highly improbable states of affairs, it grasps something true.

Moreover, it should be kept in mind that, as the former analysis has showed, realist normative thinking is a complex, multi-layered, reasoning in which both ideal and non-ideal theorising play a fundamental role in establishing what ought to be done. Hence, as said, what it might be appropriate to do in concrete circumstances might severely depart from what the ideal would demand. In non-ideal circumstances, a series of additional considerations linked to the risks entailed by the different courses of action must enter into play. One of the merits of realism is to reminds us that political decisions ought to be taken responsibly; therefore, on the non-ideal level, the improbability of success of a certain goal might push us to revise our objectives. Then, the claim that realism might "demand the impossible", ought to be interpreted very carefully and ought not distract us from a full appreciation of the complexity of realist normative thought. So, in a specific sense and in particular circumstances, political realism might indeed "demand the impossible". But, as argued, such claim must be handled cautiously.

What about utopias, though? Indeed, I also recalled that political realism has been defined as a form of possibly utopian political thinking. However, taking about "utopias" does not necessarily coincide with talking about the "impossible". "Utopia" can be used in a quite specific and different sense, so let me clarify this further issue. Utopias might indicate fully articulated images of a perfect political world[94]. For this reason, the use of the word "utopia" in realist normative thinking might be misleading[95]. In fact, as we have seen, realist ideals are not thought as fixed images of a perfect world, but – being models – they are always open to possible revisions in light of the new information acquired in concrete circumstances. As I understand it, realist normative thinking is suspicious about defining once and for all what would be desirable to do politically; therefore, the word "utopia" might be an unfortunate one to employ in this

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[94] Thomas More's *Utopia* (2002) is exemplary in this sense.

[95] Geuss is well aware of this fact and he specifies that its own use of the concept of utopia does not mean to indicate a fully specified image of how politics ought to be organised (2016, 45). He is rather talking about impossibilities. In any case, I am suggesting that *utopia* and *utopianism* are conceptual tools that should be employed carefully in realist thought.

context[96].

Finally, an entirely different question arises, instead, with respect to which interpretation ought to be assigned to the limits of political possibility; that is, to which criteria ought to define the boundary between the practically possible and the practically impossible. To appropriately answer such a question, it would be required to delve into the substantive meaning of practical possibility[97]. This an issue that I have not clarified, and that I could not resolve here. However, since my objective was to provide a first study into the relationship between feasibility and political realism – namely, to argue for a better understanding of both the relationship between ideal and non-ideal in realist theorising and the feasibility thresholds that ought to interest political realists – delving into this further controversial issue would bring me beyond my immediate purposes.

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[96] By this I do not mean to say that political realism cannot make a good use of utopias. Indeed, as it has been often suggested, utopian thinking might exercise a fundamental role in criticising our political beliefs and evaluative commitments by pushing us to see our political world from a different perspective (Geuss 2016, 4). Hence, utopias might play a crucial role in realist thought; however, not a directly prescriptive one.

[97] For specific studies on this methodological problem see Estlund 2011, Jensen 2009, Lawford-Smith 2013a and 2013b, Wiens 2016. Hawthorn 1991 offers a detailed study into the use of counterfactuals in social sciences.

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