Beyond Moralism: Realism and the Social Conditions of Political Judgement

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ABSTRACT

This article re-examines the contemporary debate between moralistic and realist approaches in political theory through a sociological lens. Rather than treating the controversy as a purely methodological disagreement about whether practical judgement should begin from moral principles or from political reality, it argues that the central issue concerns the social organisation of practical reason. Political judgement is formed under specific social conditions. It is construed within institutional roles and incentives, informational infrastructures, professional vocabularies, and relations of authority that privilege some descriptions of reality while marginalising others. On this basis, the article develops a classificatory scheme that orders contemporary realisms by how they understand "the real" to bear on the practical question "What is to be done?" It distinguishes *paralyzing realism*, in which the real chiefly disables agency and leaves theory largely non-directive; *neutral realism*, which treats the real primarily as feasibility constraint and tends to underestimate the socially mediated character of political facts; and *activist realism*, which treats the real as a contested field of interpretation and a resource for improving judgement from within practice. The article then illustrates what this activist orientation looks like in practice through John Dunn's account of democracy and the conditions of realistic political judgement. The article concludes that a non-metaphysical, non-foundational account of the theory–practice relation is most compatible with this activist orientation and provides the most plausible basis for reconnecting political theory and political practice without relying on an Archimedean standpoint.

Keywords: Political Realism, Moralism, Political Judgement.

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Moralizmin Ötesinde: Realizm ve Siyasal Yargının Toplumsal Koşulları

ÖZ

Bu makale, siyaset teorisindeki moralist ve realist yaklaşımlar arasındaki güncel tartışmayı sosyolojik bir mercekten yeniden ele almakta. Tartışmayı yalnızca "siyasal yargı ahlaki ilkelerden mi yoksa 'siyasal gerçeklik'ten mi başlamalı?" şeklindeki yöntemsel bir ihtilafa indirgemek yerine, asıl meselenin pratik aklın toplumsal örgütlenmesi olduğunu savunuyor. Siyasal yargı, belirli toplumsal koşullar altında, kurumsal roller ve teşvikler, enformasyon altyapıları, mesleki diller ve otorite ilişkileri içinde oluşur. Bu koşullar bazı gerçeklik tasvirlerini ayrıcalıklı kılarken diğerlerini marjinalleştirir. Bu çerçevede makale, "gerçek"(liğ)in" "Ne yapılmalı?" sorusuna nasıl etki ettiğini temel alarak çağdaş realizmler için bir sınıflandırma önermektedir. Buna göre *felç edici realizm* gerçekliği ağırlıklı olarak eylemliliği devre dışı bırakan bir sınır olarak kavrar. *Nötr realizm* gerçekliği çoğunlukla yapılabilirlik kısıtı olarak ele alır ve siyasal olguların toplumsal olarak aracılanmış karakterini yeterince hesaba katmaz. *Aktivist realizm* ise gerçekliği yorumların çatıştığı bir alan ve yargıyı pratik içinde geliştirmek için bir imkân olarak görür. Makale bu aktivist yönelimin pratikte nasıl işlediğini John Dunn'ın demokrasi tartışması ve realist siyasal yargının koşullarına ilişkin analizi üzerinden örneklendirmektedir. Makale,

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sonuç olarak metafizik olmayan ve temelci olmayan bir teori–pratik ilişkisi anlayışının aktivist realizmle daha uyumlu olduğunu ve Arşimetçi bir dayanak noktasına yaslanmadan teori ile pratiği yeniden ilişkilendirmek için daha ikna edici bir zemin sunduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to a broader inquiry into the practical value of political theorizing, specifically, how we should conceive the relationship between social and political theory and socio-political practice. It does so by engaging the recent debate between moralistic and realist approaches in contemporary political theory and by arguing that a non-metaphysical, non-foundational understanding of the theory–practice relation offers a more plausible account than both dominant principle-first paradigms in normative political philosophy and several prevalent forms of political realism.

In what follows, I use political moralism to refer to approaches that treat political theory as "applied morality," that is, approaches that make moral principles prior to political judgement (Williams, 2005). By political realism I refer to approaches that insist on the relative autonomy of distinctively political thought and argue that political theorising should begin from within political practice and its characteristic constraints, conflicts, and power relations, rather than from external moral ideals.

The moralism–realism controversy is often presented as a methodological disagreement about where practical judgement should begin. Should it start with moral principles or with a sober grasp of political reality? Yet this framing presupposes something that is itself sociologically consequential, namely, that political agents have relatively direct access to "reality," to feasibility constraints, and to action-guiding reasons. Once we take seriously the social conditions under which political judgement is formed, the debate appears less like a purely philosophical or methodological quarrel and more like a contest over the social organisation of practical reason. Political judgement does not emerge in a vacuum but is shaped by institutional roles and incentives, informational infrastructures, professional vocabularies, and relations of authority that privilege some descriptions of the situation while marginalising others. What counts as "realistic" is therefore rarely a neutral verdict delivered by reason alone. Rather it is an achievement made possible by administrative capacities, epistemic resources, and forms of social power. In this sense, both moralistic and realist claims can function as

modes of legitimation. While appeals to universal principles may stabilise identities and coalitions, appeals to "hard facts" and necessity may naturalise historically contingent arrangements by converting them into the language of inevitability. This perspective aligns with traditions in the Sociology of Knowledge that examine how descriptions of reality are produced, stabilised, and circulated through institutions and expert communities. Accordingly, the question is not only what the facts are, but how some claims come to count as facts for political purposes.

This raises a sociological puzzle that standard presentations of the debate tend to leave underexamined. If both moralism and realism purport to guide political action, what are the social mechanisms through which their judgements become credible, authoritative, and effective? Who is positioned to define the relevant "facts," to set the horizon of feasibility, and to frame which costs count as unavoidable? How do power relations shape the conditions under which political actors perceive reality, evaluate options, and attribute responsibility? Approaching realism through this lens does not replace normative inquiry. Instead, it relocates it within the social world that makes political judgement possible in the first place.

The article grew out of two related concerns. First, political theory increasingly speaks the language of "impact" while reflecting less on its own practical embedding and on how its dominant, principle-first styles of theorising relate to concrete political contexts. Second, many realist critiques of moralistic political philosophy, despite their oppositional rhetoric, often retain a thinned-down form of foundationalism and therefore fail to break decisively with the dominant paradigm of doing political theory. This raises the concern that some realist departures are more performative than substantive, offering an "illusion of dissent" while remaining tethered to the same constructive requirements they claim to reject (Finlayson, 2009). Without a shift toward the social organisation of judgement, these theories risk becoming merely a more cynical version of the moralism they oppose (Finlayson, 2015a). Against this background, the article's contribution is classificatory and diagnostic rather than exegetical. It develops a sociologically informed typology of contemporary realisms centred on how "the real" bears on political judgement in response to "What is to be done?" and argues that the most promising realist orientation is one that treats political reality as socially mediated and interpretively contested, thereby reconnecting theory and practice without relying on an Archimedean standpoint.

Research Context and Relevance: Differentiated Epistemic Orders

The recent revival of disputes about how to do political theory, often staged as a conflict between moralistic and realist approaches, should be situated within a longer background, that is within recurring attempts to secure an authoritative standpoint for practical judgement, and recurring doubts about whether any such standpoint is available. A useful way to frame this background is the modern tension between objectivism and relativism, a tension sometimes described as a central opposition of modern intellectual life. On the one hand are projects that seek a universal, ahistorical ground for knowledge and normative authority, while on the other hand are sceptical and historicist reactions that insist on contingency and the absence of any Archimedean point from which to judge social and political life (Bernstein, 1983).

Sociologically, however, this is not merely an abstract philosophical dilemma. It is also a problem about the social organisation of epistemic authority: who is entitled to speak with credibility about reality, rationality, and the limits of what can be done. In pre-modern settings dominated by a theocentric worldview, theory and practice could be linked through a relatively unified hierarchy of authority. Religious-ethical knowledge was not just one domain among others. It was also widely treated as a privileged access to "the real," supplying direction for practical life and offering an authoritative vocabulary for evaluating action (Collingwood, 1924; Geuss, 2005). Under such conditions, practical judgement could be narrated as obedience to a single, overarching source of meaning and value.

With secularisation and the decline of a unified theocentric order, that hierarchy fractured. Multiple domains such as philosophy, science, art, history, and later the social sciences, came to present themselves as autonomous sources of authoritative knowledge, each claiming superior access to reality and each contesting the claims of the others (Collingwood, 1924; Podoksik, 2003). This social differentiation of knowledge matters for political theory because it alters the conditions under which practical judgement can be formed and justified. When no single domain can convincingly occupy the top of a hierarchy, appeals to "foundations" become both more attractive (as a way of restoring unity and certainty) and more vulnerable (because rival domains can challenge the grounds of those appeals). The result is a familiar oscillation between confidence and scepticism or between efforts to secure determinate standards for political evaluation and doubts that any such standards can be established without remainder.

Seen in this light, the moralism–realism debate is one contemporary expression of a broader problem about the relationship between normative authority and political reality under conditions of differentiated, contested epistemic orders. Moralistic approaches, in the sense relevant here, typically treat politics as answerable to a prior moral standpoint, often in the form of universal principles capable of grounding evaluation and guidance. Realist approaches, by contrast, insist that the political cannot be understood as "applied morality" and that political theorising must attend more directly to the realities of political conflict, power, and institutional constraint (Williams, 2005). Importantly, the disagreement is not only about the content of principles or the right method of justification. It is also about how political judgement becomes possible at all once the social conditions of knowledge are taken seriously.

Sociologically, the moralism–realism debate, thus, turns on epistemic authority, that is the question of how political knowledge circulates, how some descriptions of "the real" become credible, and how power structures feasibility and responsibility. In such settings, both universal norms and "hard facts" can function as legitimation. This is also why political realism is internally heterogeneous. Once reality is treated as socially mediated and institutionally warranted, realist approaches diverge over what the real is and how it should bear on political judgement. The next section maps these internal divisions explicitly.

The Debate in Brief: Moralism and Realism(S)

In this section, I briefly introduce contemporary political realism in its heterogeneity, as one of the most recent, yet highly influential contributors to debates about how political theory should relate to political practice. Methodologically, I rely on existing surveys of the realist literature, supplementing and qualifying them where necessary.

A standard starting point is the oft-repeated contrast between realism and moralism. Models of political theory that "make the moral prior to the political" are "versions of political moralism" (Williams, 2005, p. 2). They represent political theory as "applied morality" (Williams, 2005, p. 2). Political moralism, in Geuss's formulation, refers to an "ethics-first" reading of the slogan "Politics is applied ethics" (Geuss, 2008, pp. 1, 9). Political realism, by contrast, "gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (Williams, 2005, p. 3). Crudely put, realists maintain that political theory should begin developing an understanding of politics not with an external specification of moral ideals intended to regulate political life, but from within political practice itself (Geuss, 2008; Newey, 2010; Rossi, 2012; Sangiovanni, 2008; Stears, 2007; Williams, 2005). Realists therefore urge political theory to bridge the

widening gap between political philosophy and the "real world" (Finlayson, 2015b, p. 111), and to avoid approaches that seek to "displace" (Honig, 1993) or "abolish" (Gray, 1995, p. 76) politics. This captures, at a minimum, the shared orientation that unites otherwise diverse realist positions.

Beyond this minimal agreement, the realist literature is internally plural (Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Sleat, 2016). The divide between realism and moralism is further substantiated and complicated by a range of substantive and methodological debates. Substantively, there are disputes about the degree of autonomy the political sphere does or can enjoy, ranging from strong claims of autonomy to views that retain significant ethical relations (Erman & Moller, 2013; Hurka, 2009; Philp, 2010, 2012; Sleat, 2013, 2014), and debates over what "autonomy of the political" should mean (Galston, 2010, pp. 390-393). Realism is also frequently positioned via neighbouring contrasts like ideal vs. non-ideal theory, utopianism vs. anti-utopianism, and in debates about feasibility constraints and desirability concerns (Freeden, 2012; Galston, 2010, pp. 394, 395; Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Jubb, 2012; Sleat, 2012, 2013, 2014b; Stemplowska, 2008; Swift, 2008; Valentini, 2012; Zuolo, 2013). Another recurring theme concerns the sentiments that accompany different styles of theorising, especially optimism and pessimism, and their implications for political agency (Dienstag, 2009; Finlayson, 2015a, 2015b; Geuss, 2005, pp. 219-233; Floyd & Stears, 2011, pp. 177-205).

A further cluster of debates centres on allegedly ineradicable features of politics that realist theories should take seriously like disagreement, conflict, power, legitimacy, and the limits of justice-centred ideals, often culminating in arguments for modus vivendi arrangements as the most attainable practical possibility (Bavister-Gould, 2013; Ceva & Rossi, 2012; Hall, 2013; Horton, 2010; Newey, 2010; Rossi, 2012; Sigwart, 2013; Sleat, 2010, 2011; Williams, 2005). Relatedly, realists disagree about how to conceive "the real" (factual, empirical, normative, affective) and how it bears on political theorising, whether as a set of feasibility constraints, as a domain of contestable interpretations, or as a field structured by power (Rossi, 2019). These disagreements connect to a core concern of realism, that is, the centrality of political understanding and political judgement to a theory that aims to be action-guiding (Bourke & Geuss, 2009; Dunn, 1990, 2000). Finally, there are methodological disputes over whether realism constitutes a coherent affirmative alternative, a substantive political position, or primarily a critical outlook, a set of methodological tools for diagnosing the political (Galston, 2010; Finlayson, 2015a, 2015b; Swift & White, 2008).

Among these debates, the relationship between ethics (or morality) and politics is arguably the most fundamental. Yet I wish to avoid framing this relationship in strictly dualistic terms, as if ethics and politics were two independent fields set against one another. Instead, I argue that the more radical strands of realism are driven by an interest in reinterpreting the nature of ethical thinking and its place in collective life in order to make political theory more relevant to how we live together (Hall & Sleat, 2017; Rossi, 2019). Sociologically, this is also a claim about political judgement. Much of politics appears as a stream of relatively ossified causal processes and institutional routines that are resistant to individual agency, yet politics is equally a realm of judgement and action capable of transforming the very conditions within which it unfolds. Human valuation, that is, what agents take to be permissible, possible, and desirable, therefore remains one of the most consequential determinants of political judgement and action.

Taken together, these debates show that political realism is best understood as a heterogeneous field rather than a single position. Given that political judgement is socially organised then different realisms can be distinguished by the kind of judgement they presuppose and by the role they assign to those mediating conditions. The next section therefore proposes a classificatory scheme that orders contemporary realisms by how they conceive the "real" in relation to political practice: whether reality primarily disables agency (paralyzing realism), disciplines aspiration through feasibility constraints (neutral realism), or serves as a contested resource for improving judgement from within practice (activist realism).

A Typology of Contemporary Realisms

Most political theorists agree that the key task of political theory is providing guidance to collective human action. The main question they quarrel over is: In what capacity and to what extent can political theory be politically informative and guide human actions within the political domain so that our individual and collective actions generate better outcomes? The revival of the divide between moralistic and realistic approaches to political theory in the last decade, I argued above, can most meaningfully be characterized on the basis of their disparate answers to this question. What is often left implicit, however, is that political judgement is not formed in a social vacuum but is produced under specific social conditions. Once this is acknowledged, "political realism" names less a single position than a family of approaches that disagree about what the "real" is and how it bears on political judgement in practice.

Moralism, in this reading, very broadly speaking, encompasses theoretical positions premised on the assumption that it is, in principle, possible to fashion ourselves, as human agents, and the world we live in, through a model of what ideally 'ought' to be the case. What 'ought' to be the case can be discovered by appeal to the supposedly autonomous field of ethics containing pure ethical precepts allegedly unsullied by the vagaries of historical reality. Observance of these pre-historical and pre-political ethical injunctions in conducting ourselves and in fashioning the institutions through which we must act in real, historical circumstances would ensure better outcomes in our collective political life.

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

A further clarification is important at the outset. Moralism and realism are often cast as opposites, with the former explicitly normative and the latter "fact-sensitive," hence arguably non-moralizing, and even non-normative. Still, realism rarely operates without any normative upshot. In practice, realist arguments also draw and contest the line between "what is" and "what ought to be," for instance, by specifying which constraints should count as decisive and which aspirations should remain politically viable. Therefore, even when it refrains from grounding critique in prior moral principles, realism typically introduces evaluative criteria implicitly, through claims about responsible judgement, feasible action, legitimacy, and the appropriate aims of political theorizing. The contrast, then, concerns less the presence of normativity than its mode and justification. Moralism appeals to ideal standards external to practice, whereas realism more often treats normative assessment as practice-immanent, emerging through historically situated conflicts, institutional constraints, and relations of power.

This reframing also helps to clarify what is often missed when the moralism–realism controversy is presented as just a methodological disagreement about where political theory should begin. The dispute has an ontological and epistemological dimension, since it turns on what kind of social reality is presupposed when political judgement is formed and defended as credible and action-guiding. The central claim of this article is that political judgement is not produced by an abstract faculty taking "facts" as given but is socially organised. It is formed within institutional roles and incentives, informational infrastructures, professional vocabularies, and relations of authority that privilege some descriptions of reality while marginalising others.

To capture these ontological–epistemological stakes analytically, I introduce two overlapping spectrums for mapping contemporary realist positions. The first is objective–subjective, concerning whether "the real" is treated primarily as an independently constraining set of facts and causal regularities, or as a socially mediated field of interpretation in which facts become politically salient through historically situated descriptions, indicators, and authoritative narratives. The second is structure–agency, concerning whether political possibility is located chiefly in durable constraints (institutions, power relations, routines, informational asymmetries) or in the revisability of judgement and the transformability of social conditions through collective action. Taken together, these spectrums provide a lens for analysing how different realisms understand constraint, feasibility, and political action.

With this ontological–epistemological lens in view, realism can be approached as a broad family of non-moralizing positions (Geuss, 2015, p. 12). In this section, I offer a classificatory scheme based on how different strands of realism conceptualize the relationship between political theory and political practice. For my analysis of how different strands of realism conceive of this relationship, I study what they take politics, political practice, and "the real" to be, and how they understand the real to bear on political theory or the practice of political theorizing. The combined question I use to classify contemporary realisms, then, is: "How does the real bear on different understandings of realist political theory, particularly in relation to the question of 'What is to be done?'" Three, I suggest, can be distinguished, analytically. These are paralyzing, neutral and activist realisms. Theorists belonging to all three types of realisms desire political theory to have some kind of impact on political practice. They disagree, however, in their assessments of its nature and extent.

Table 1 below summarizes the defining claims of each type and the characteristic way each understands the relation between political theory and political practice.

Table: 1. Types of Realism: Conceptions of "the Real" and Implications for Agency

Type of Realism	View of "The Real"	Impact on Agency
Paralyzing	A "closed horizon" or disabling limit	Disables/stifles agency
Neutral	A feasibility constraint or "hard facts"	Disciplines/limits aspiration
Activist	A contested field of interpretation	Resource for improving judgement

Figure: 1. A conceptual model of political realism(s) on two overlapping spectrums
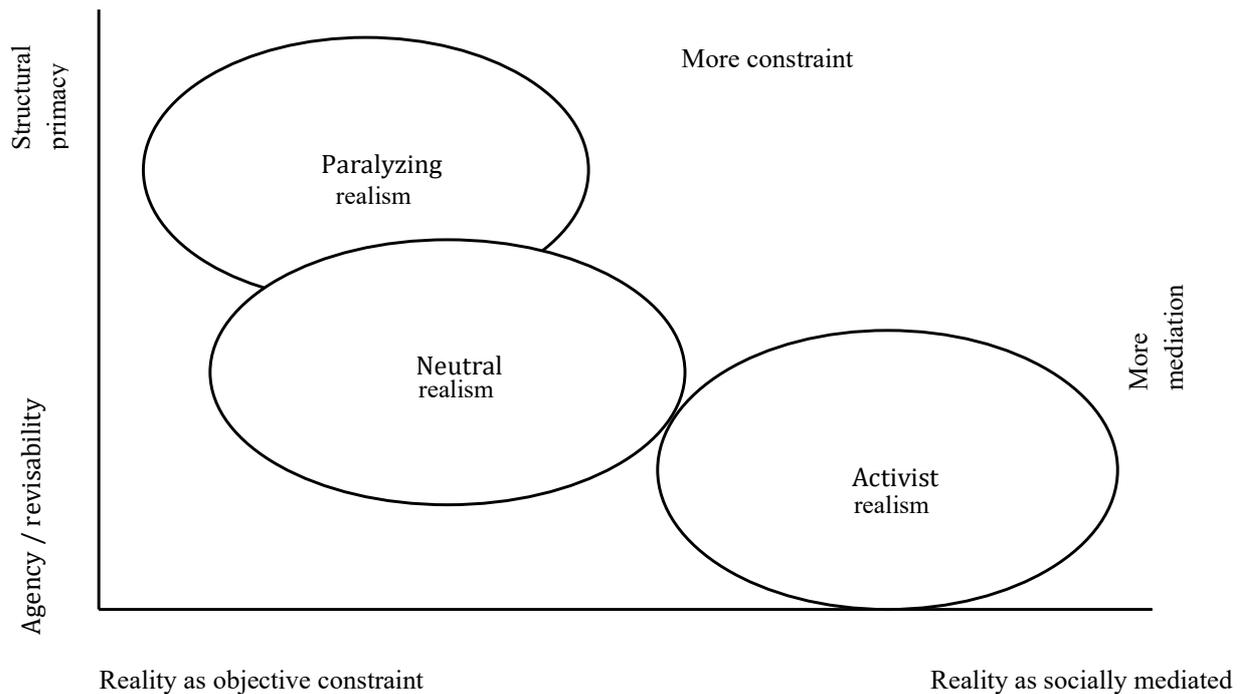
To help readers visualise the relationships between the three ideal types, Figure 1 maps them onto the two overlapping spectrums introduced above. It thereby makes explicit how disagreements about feasibility and constraint track deeper assumptions about social reality and political possibility. The three ideal types are shown as regions to indicate that these are heuristic clusters rather than point locations.

Paralyzing realism is the antithesis of activist realism and conceives the human world as largely impervious to individual agency. Its normativity is primarily cautionary. It urges restraint, scepticism toward reformist aspiration, and a priority on avoiding illusion and unintended harm. Paralyzing realists, usually, are pessimists and hold that people simply act the way they do for a variety of different reasons in a variety of different circumstances and nothing much can be done about it. More specifically, there is a denial that society could ever be improved in some substantial way. In some sense, then, this view is based on a denial of the possibility that people can be educated to form wiser political judgements that would enhance the outcomes of their collective actions, or, at least, a denial that political theory can be of any help to educate people to form better judgements. On this view, the obstacles are not only causal complexity or psychological limitations, but also the absence of robust social conditions for improved judgement. Entrenched institutional routines, informational asymmetries, and durable relations of power block learning, coordination, and effective agency. The "real" thus appears as a closed horizon rather than a field of contestable interpretations.

Neutral realism, recently presented as a subset of ideal and non-ideal theory debate, encompasses theoretical articulations that respond to the accusations that political theory is too detached from the real world (Farrelly, 2007; Finlayson, 2015b, pp. 121-135; Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Jubb, 2012; Robeyns, 2008; Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Sleat, 2014; Stemplowska 2008; Valentini, 2012). Accepting most of the major premises of principle-first normative political philosophy, this family of approaches aims to bring normative political theory closer to the real world by engaging in fact-sensitive normative theorising, that is, by improving ideal theory through incorporating real features of the world into the act of political theorizing itself (Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Sleat, 2014). Its normativity is expressed through standards of responsibility and practicability, that is, through what counts as a defensible proposal given constraints. Such theories, it is argued, are more likely to be practicable and politically relevant (i.e. capable of being implemented in practice), since they build upon descriptive accounts of the real that are free of philosophical or ideological presuppositions. Neutral realism tends to treat relevant facts as available for detached uptake, but in politics "facts" are rarely socially innocent, since what counts as relevant evidence, which indicators dominate, and whose descriptions become authoritative are mediated by institutions and power. This helps explain why neutrality can reproduce a status-quo bias even when its explicit intention is reform.

Activist realism, of all three, is perhaps the only one that takes the centrality of human agency in politics (both in its ethical and political aspect) and importance of history for political understanding seriously. Historical perspective is a fundamental prerequisite for understanding politics, because political understanding requires understanding agents, institutions and discourses all of which are located within a historical context and, hence, are historically and contextually variable (Bourke & Geuss, 2009, p. 4). Activist realism develops an understanding of politics from the perspective of those who participate in it, that is, from the perspective of political agents. It recognizes that what happens in politics, in the end, depends on the political judgements of real actors. Its normativity is judgement-centered and critical, evaluating institutions and vocabularies by how they enable or distort agents' capacity to form and revise action-guiding judgements. It therefore stresses that political reality does not constrain and enable action merely as brute causality. It is mediated through socially organised interpretations, public narratives, institutional roles, expert languages, and relations of authority that shape what agents take to be possible, permissible, and desirable. Political theory matters, on this view, insofar as it can improve judgement by exposing ideological distortions and clarifying the institutional conditions under which agents can see and act differently.

Payoff: What The Typology Clarifies

The point of distinguishing paralyzing, neutral, and activist realisms is not merely taxonomic. The typology brings into view what is often left implicit in the moralism–realism controversy, namely that the disputes about "where to begin" are also disputes about the social conditions under which political judgement becomes credible, authoritative, and action-guiding. Different realisms can thus be read as different accounts of how those conditions shape what political theory can reasonably do for practice. The issue is not whether political theory can offer "guidance" in the abstract, but what kinds of guidance are possible once the reality to which agents respond is mediated by power, institutions, and epistemic authority.

Paralyzing realism captures a recognisable experience of politics, namely an encounter with a world that appears stubbornly resistant to individual agency and to reflective reform. Its characteristic move is to treat the real as a disabling horizon. Read sociologically, the core claim is that the social conditions for better judgement are largely absent. Even if individuals could in principle deliberate better, they remain embedded in institutional routines, cognitive and informational constraints, and durable relations of power that reproduce familiar outcomes. The result is a picture in which political theory is at best diagnostic and cautionary. It can warn

against illusions, highlight limits, and temper aspiration, but it cannot reliably contribute to improving judgement in practice.

Neutral realism promises a more constructive relationship between theory and practice. It accepts that political theory should not ignore empirical realities and aims to make normative reflection more practicable by incorporating relevant facts, constraints, and feasibility considerations. Yet in politics, facts do not appear in an unmediated form. They are produced, selected, circulated, and authorised through institutions. What counts as a relevant indicator, which causal story becomes credible, and whose description of the situation becomes authoritative are not simply epistemic matters but are also matters of power. This is the sense in which neutrality can generate a status-quo bias even when it does not intend to.

This vulnerability becomes especially clear in technocratic governance. If neutral realism is read purely methodologically, one can assume that feasibility constraints are simply there to be registered. Read sociologically, however, the central question is how constraints become intelligible and binding as "hard facts" in the first place, through informational infrastructures and professional vocabularies that organise what can be said, measured, and justified as "realistic," stabilising some descriptions of the situation, while discrediting alternatives as naïve or irresponsible. Technocratic decision-making thus often operates under the mask of neutral realism, presenting politically loaded boundary-drawing choices about metrics, about risks and priorities, as if they were dictated by reality.

Concrete illustrations found across a variety of domains help clarify the mechanism. In education governance, for instance, standards, testing regimes, and accountability metrics can define what counts as "effectiveness" in advance, thereby narrowing debates about equity, curriculum, or funding by coding some options as "evidence-based" and others as unrealistic. In healthcare management, similarly, feasibility is often channelled through cost-effectiveness techniques, budgeting instruments, performance indicators, and managerial vocabularies that treat policy choices as technical necessities rather than contestable political judgements. The point is not to offer an empirical study, but to show how "feasibility constraints" can be produced and enforced through expert authority: professional vocabularies and infrastructures can make some descriptions of the real appear compulsory, thereby disciplining aspiration in advance.

This is where the ideological dimension enters. Neutral realism's aspiration to "take facts as they are" can unintentionally naturalise the social organisation of those facts. When the

production of indicators, the authority of expert languages, and the institutional conditions of credibility are treated as transparent channels to reality rather than as sites of power, neutrality becomes a political stance in practice, as it protects settled arrangements by redescribing contestable judgements as necessities. An account of realism that aims to reconnect theory and practice therefore needs, at minimum, to treat feasibility not only as a constraint but also as a socially mediated judgement that can be criticised, contested, and sometimes rebuilt.

Activist realism treats the "real" neither as a disabling horizon nor as a neutral set of constraints. Instead, it starts from the premise that political reality is mediated through socially organised interpretations. The real bears on action through public narratives, institutional roles, and authoritative vocabularies that shape what agents take to be possible, permissible, and desirable. From this perspective, the central contribution of political theory is not to provide foundations or recipes, but to help improve political judgement from within practice by exposing ideological distortions, destabilising naturalised descriptions of necessity, and clarifying institutional mechanisms that structure what agents can reasonably see and do. Activist realism therefore reconnects theory and practice without reviving foundational ambition. It shows, therefore, that political theory can be practically significant by working on the interpretive and institutional terrain on which judgement is formed.

Activist realism has affinities with a range of non-foundational approaches that treat political judgement as historically situated and practice-immanent rather than as the application of principles derived from an external standpoint like pragmatism, contextualist approaches, and genealogical critique. One especially relevant point of comparison is Critical Theory. Activist realism shares its suspicion toward depoliticization and its emphasis on how domination can operate through ostensibly neutral knowledge-claims, expert discourses, and technocratic boundary-drawing. The divergence, however, is that the activist orientation developed here is judgement-centred and does not depend on a comprehensive philosophical foundation, a philosophy of history, or a general theory of emancipation. In this respect it is also compatible with interpretivist anti-foundationalism (for example, Bevir's), though with a different emphasis (Bevir, 1999). Where interpretivism primarily clarifies political understanding by reconstructing meanings within traditions and dilemmas, activist realism foregrounds how institutionalised vocabularies and relations of epistemic authority shape what agents take to be feasible, and how critique can improve judgement from within practice under those conditions.

If activist realism is best understood as a non-foundational orientation aimed at improving political judgement from within practice, it should be tested on a political concept that is simultaneously evaluative, institutionally embedded, and prone to naturalisation. To illustrate this, I turn to democracy, and Democracy is an especially revealing site for this, and John Dunn's attempt to John Dunn's attempt to "break democracy's spell," as a concise way to show how realist critique can unsettle stabilised vocabularies of legitimacy while remaining attentive to historical constraint and the conditions of agency (Dunn, 2014).

Illustration: Dunn on democracy and the social conditions of realistic judgement

John Dunn is not usually presented as the emblematic figure of contemporary political realism, but he is often discussed alongside the "Cambridge realist" constellation insofar as his work insists on historically situated judgement, institutional constraint, and the limits of theory's ability to deliver action-guiding recipes (Runciman, 2012, p. 62; Galston, 2010; Rossi & Sleat, 2014). A useful illustration of an activist realist sensibility can be drawn from Dunn's attempt to "break democracy's spell", that is, the culturally stabilised tendency to treat democracy as a standing certificate of good government, rather than as a historically contingent form of rule whose achievements depend on demanding social and epistemic conditions (Dunn, 2014, pp. 6, 10).

One way Dunn makes this point is by separating different things that are often collapsed into one: democracy as a word, as an ideal, and as an institutional regime (Dunn, 2014, p. 6). When these levels slide into each other, the moral prestige of the ideal can end up doing legitimating work for the regime. In other words, the language of democracy can substitute for actual accountability. In that situation, what counts as realistic democratic judgement is shaped as much by reassurance and prestige as by institutional performance (Dunn, 1996).

At the same time, Dunn's "spell-breaking" is not an argument for resignation. It targets technocratic confidence, especially the hope that political guidance can travel smoothly from abstract models to practice, warning against the "brisk and wholly unwarranted slippage from the serenely hypothetical to the messily practical" (Dunn, 1996, p. 521). The practical implication is better captured as a reorientation of critique. Critique should focus on the institutional and informational conditions that make rulers publicly answerable, and on the civic capacities through which citizens can form less error-prone judgements under conditions of uncertainty and complexity (Dunn, 2014, p. 44; see also pp. 54-55). In this sense, Dunn's position fits an activist realist stance because it treats political reality as something that bears

on action through socially organised judgement and learning, rather than as a set of external constraints that either dictate policy or foreclose agency. This also explains his blunt formulation that political theory is often closer to "Cassandra than to John the Baptist" meaning that it is better at diagnosis and warning than at supplying recipes, because responsibility for judgement ultimately returns to agents operating within real institutional and epistemic limits (Dunn, 1996, p. 511).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the contemporary moralism–realism controversy is best understood not merely as a methodological disagreement about where political guidance should begin, but as a dispute about the social organisation of practical reason. Once political judgement is treated as socially produced, that is, as shaped by institutional roles and incentives, informational infrastructures, professional vocabularies, and relations of authority, it becomes clear why political realism is internally heterogeneous and why calls to take reality seriously can amount to very different practical stances. The typology proposed here of paralyzing, neutral, and activist realisms orders these stances by how they understand "the real" to bear on the practical question "What is to be done?" Paralyzing realism treats reality largely as a disabling horizon that renders political theory mostly cautionary. Neutral realism treats reality primarily as feasibility constraint and risks overlooking the socially mediated character of political facts. And activist realism treats reality as interpretively contested and therefore as a site on which political judgement can be improved from within practice.

Two broader implications follow. First, feasibility is never a purely technical matter. Because political facts and constraints are themselves socially produced authorised, arguments about what can be done are also arguments about epistemic authority, institutional power, and legitimation. Second, the practical ambition of political theory should be reformulated. A non-metaphysical, non-foundational conception of the theory–practice relation does not abandon critique but rather specifies critique's conditions. Political theory cannot responsibly promise external foundations or recipes, but it can still matter by clarifying how judgement is shaped, by exposing depoliticising vocabularies of necessity, and by identifying institutional and interpretive mechanisms that structure what agents can reasonably see and do.

The argument has proceeded analytically and does not attempt an author-by-author reconstruction of the realist canon. Future work could test and refine the typology by tracing how these orientations operate in specific political settings such as policy domains where expert

facts and feasibility claims play a prominent legitimating role, or in moments of crisis when the organisation of political knowledge and authority becomes unusually visible. Even without such extensions, the core claim stands. Realism is most compelling when it treats political reality as socially mediated and political judgement as contestable and improvable, thereby reconnecting political theory and political practice without recourse to an Archimedean standpoint.

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