

Clarifying Political Normativity: A Reply to Matt Sleat

Jonathan Leader Maynard, King's College London

Alex Worsnip, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Many recent realists in political theory have explicitly or implicitly advanced the idea of a 'distinctively political normativity': the contention that certain claims about what ought to be done in politics involve a distinctive kind of normativity that is not simply a species of moral normativity. Our recent paper 'Is there a distinctively political normativity?' (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018) sought to show that the most prominent identifiable arguments for this claim are unpersuasive.

A recent paper by Matt Sleat (2021) in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* presents a critique of our 2018 paper, contending that our whole argument is based on a "mischaracterisation of realism" (Sleat 2021: 5).¹ Yet Sleat appears to have largely misread our argument, with his suggestion that we have mischaracterised realism based on an inaccurate account of the position we actually ascribe to realists in our paper. In this response, we correct the two main confusions that seem to underpin Sleat's claims.

I. The heterogeneity of realism

First, Sleat claims that we have over-homogenised realism, since while "one strand of realist thought...*does* seek to carve out a distinctively nonmoral political normativity" (p.6), we wrongly identify realists *in toto* with that position – imposing "a false coherence around a single unifying argument which all realists are supposed to be signed up to" (p.11). Sleat recommends, by contrast, that we "ought to engage with particular realist arguments rather than force realism into a false unity around a commitment that very few actually hold" (p.2).

This is a profound misreading of our article. We never claim that realists are united around the notion of a distinctively political normativity – in fact, we affirm the exact opposite. In our introduction, we stress that "the term political realism encompasses a broad range of positive views and negative critiques" (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 757), and list many other aspects of realist thought, that we set aside for the purposes of our article, in a footnote (Leader Maynard and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent page references are all to this article.

Worsnip 2018: 757 n.4). We also emphasise that “our analysis is not a critique of the broader realist agenda, elements of which we agree with” (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 759). We then *re-emphasise*, in the conclusion, that:

“[A]s we emphasized at the outset, our concern in this article has not been to advocate a form of political theory that is abstract, utopian, or empirically disengaged, *nor to reject all of the claims associated with ‘realism’ in its broadest sense*. Instead, we have sought to *focus on one of the principal claims that realists have sought to make* in proposing an alternative approach to political theory: that political normativity is distinct from moral normativity” (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 785, emphasis added).

We could not have been clearer, in other words, that our analysis was “engage[d] with particular realist arguments,” as Sleat puts it, rather than interrogating realism as some unified whole. We fully agree with Sleat that claims about a distinctive political normativity represent just one strand of the “realist family” (Sleat 2021: 8). We are puzzled as to how Sleat has managed to invert our repeated statements to this effect in our paper.²

We do, however, see more realists as being part of that strand than Sleat suggests in his critique. This disagreement, however, has its roots in the second confusion: over what we take ‘a distinctively political normativity’ to refer to. Once it is clarified what this claim amounts to, it should become clear that a broader range of realists appear to endorse it than Sleat contends.

II. What is a distinctively political normativity?

Sleat suggests that, in our use of the language of a ‘distinctively political normativity’ that is ‘nonmoral’, we are claiming that realists seek a complete “demarcation of morality from politics” (p.2) or an entirely “nonmoral way of thinking about politics” (p.8). As Sleat shows, many realists reject such a stance. He illustrates this point with appeals to quotations from Mark Philp, Glen Newey and

² Sleat also asserts that we offer “surprisingly few references” to realist writings (counting only four sources) in our framing of the idea of a distinctively political normativity (p.3). But Sleat artificially restricts his count, here, to three pages of our article that discuss an issue (the precise way in which normativities are distinguished) on which we specifically note that realists have rarely elaborated. Readers of our whole paper will find extensive citations of realist texts that appear to advocate a distinctively political normativity.

Bernard Williams – each of whom still see some relevant role for morality to play in politics.

Again, this is a misunderstanding. We did not claim that realists – even those realists who advocate a distinctively political normativity – seek a complete “demarcation of morality from politics”. On the contrary, we acknowledged that such realists “may not affirm that it’s impossible to engage in moral theorizing about politics” (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 764). We did suggest that realists “often” (again, not always) see such moral theorizing as separate from “political theory proper.” But this is hardly an unreasonable claim, since Sleat himself has argued, with Enzo Rossi (2014: 696), that realist claims should result in those “who maintain the moralist approach...mov[ing] away from political theory and towards moral philosophy.” We concede that we should have more actively emphasised that many realists still see morality as relevant. Nevertheless, contra Sleat, none of our substantive analysis rested on an assumption that realists entirely exclude moral considerations from political thinking. This is not what we meant in talking of a “distinctively political normativity.”

Instead, we simply intended this phrase to denote the idea that there is some kind of *sui generis* normativity that applies in the political domain which is not itself “a kind of moral normativity” (Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 758-9), nor an instance of some other established kind of normativity (prudential, instrumental, epistemic, etc – we will come back to these other kinds of normativity at the end of this reply). This claim is true just if there are *some* normative political principles or reasons that are not moral (or prudential, instrumental, epistemic, etc.), and we intended this phrase to capture the oft-repeated realist sentiment that politics has its ‘own’ distinctive normative concerns. This idea – that some normative principles are ‘distinctively political’, rather than moral (or prudential, instrumental etc.) in kind – is, contra Sleat, fully compatible with the claim that moral principles *also* apply in the political domain, and hence that politics is not entirely divorced from moral considerations.

Perhaps the root of the confusion here is that Sleat sometimes seems to be assuming that ‘political normativity’ means something like: the *total set* of all normative principles and reasons that apply to politics – a set that could have both (distinctively) political and moral elements. Consequently, when we talk of a ‘distinctively political normativity’ that is ‘nonmoral’, Sleat may be thinking that we mean that the total set of normative principles and reasons that apply to politics excludes moral elements. This would be a comprehensible misunderstanding, but it rests on an unconventional way of individuating kinds of normativity, which

diverges from that which we were (explicitly) employing (see: Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 761-2). Normativities are usually individuated not merely by the domains in which they apply, but (to speak in a somewhat picturesque way) by the *kind of normative force* – the kind of ‘oughtness’ or ‘reason’ – that underlies them (see, e.g.: Darwall 2001).

To illustrate this, consider examples such as prudential normativity and instrumental normativity. There isn’t some ‘prudential domain of life’ or ‘instrumental domain of life’ to which prudential or instrumental principles exclusively apply. Instead, these terms describe different kinds of ought – different *kinds of normativity* – that could be relevant across different domains of life, including alongside each other. In the domain of corporate decision making, for example, we might think that both prudential and moral principles are relevant. Yet (on most views) prudential normativity remains a *nonmoral kind* of normativity. This does not mean that the domains in which prudential principles apply are ones to which moral principles fail to apply. Rather, it just means that prudential principles are not themselves a kind of moral principle. Similarly, consider the claim made by some philosophers that there are moral norms on belief: i.e., that some beliefs can be *morally* wrong. This claim obviously does not entail that there are not *also* epistemic norms on belief, involving a distinctively epistemic normativity that is not moral in character.

This is the standard sense of ‘kind of normativity’ that we relied on in our 2018 paper. If realists assert that *some* political principles are genuinely normative, yet do not depend on moral considerations for their normative force, or are not ‘reducible’ to moral principles, or similar, this entails that some kind of nonmoral normative force underlies such principles. This what we meant by a distinctively political normativity being ‘nonmoral’.

Whatever the exact source of the confusion, most of Sleat’s critique of us in his article consists in refuting a position we have not defended. Sleat continuously re-emphasises that (most) realists do not seek “full or complete autonomy from morality” (p.7). We simply agree with him on this point. But with the meaning of ‘distinctively political normativity’ clarified, it should be clear that this is compatible with many realists still affirming a distinctively political *kind of* normativity that is nonmoral. To see this, let us examine some of the realist thinkers that Sleat accuses us of having misinterpreted.

III. Do (many) realists assert a distinctively political normativity?

Let us begin with Sleat's invocation of Mark Philp. As Sleat correctly points out, Philp does not deny the relevance of ethics to political judgment, suggesting only a "substantial degree of autonomy" for politics. What Philp *does* claim, however, is that there are certain "standards that are intrinsic and internal to [politics]" that must be coupled with a "sense of the conditions under which those standards may come to have, or may lack, ethical weight" (Philp 2007: 2). It is true that there are two possible readings of this claim. One (perhaps Sleat's?) is that such 'intrinsic and internal' standards *remain moral in nature*, and that Philp is merely claiming that empirical political conditions effect the relevance, strength and implications of such standards. But if this is Philp's claim, then it loses meaningful distinctiveness from most 'moralist' (i.e. non-realist) political theory – since almost all moralists agree that empirical conditions of politics matter in this sense. Alternatively, Philp can be saying that politics *itself* generates these normative standards, which are not simply a subset of certain moral standards. This, then, is the assertion of a distinctively political normativity that we interrogated in our 2018 paper.

Sleat next turns to Glen Newey – likewise, explaining how Newey's aim is not to dismiss the relevance of morality to politics entirely, but to critique a kind of "Kantian reductivism," or presumption of the "sovereignty of morality," namely, the view that "moral considerations take precedence over others, and therefore the task of political philosophy is to attempt the project of political design guided by what theory takes to be its fundamental moral commitment or value" (Newey 2001: 106-7, cited on p.4 of Sleat). Once again, we agree that Newey is, indeed, not trying to completely separate morality from politics. Nevertheless, the aforementioned quotation does assert the existence of *some* nonmoral normative considerations in politics – otherwise, it would be meaningless to object to the idea that "moral considerations take precedence over *others*". Indeed, the opening to Newey's paper 'Two Dogmas of Liberalism' could scarcely be clearer that he *is* interested in the concept of political normativity and the way it is distinguished from, and not merely a subset of, moral normativity. Newey writes:

"This article examines political normativity and its limits. It does not deal at all with the scope, and only tangentially with the source, of that normativity. Its main focus is on *the type of normativity which is appropriate within politics*, and, by extension, which is the appropriate object of philosophical theorizing about politics... [I] *urge scepticism about attempts to reduce political normativity to morality*, in particular via the

philosophically cohesive but also morally very demanding moral theory of Kant, particularly the notion that *morality trumps reasons of all other kinds*" (2010: 449, emphasis added).

So we are aware of the nuance of Newey's position here. But he is, nevertheless, explicitly making an argument about political normativity, the inappropriateness of simply conceptualizing it as a subset of moral normativity, and the existence of 'reasons of...other kinds' whose normativity is not moral in nature.

Other realists have more broadly characterized this view of political normativity in similar ways.³ It's just not credible, then, for Sleat to claim that the notion of a distinctively political normativity represents a careless mischaracterisation of realism by its opponents, or a fringe concern of a few marginal 'radical realists' who seek to separate politics and morality entirely (as Sleat suggests on p.6). It is explicitly affirmed in a wide range of realist writings.

Indeed, some of Sleat's own claims seem to imply some kind of distinctively political normativity in the sense we identify. Sleat presents his preferred framing of realism as the view that, while "morality may have a role to play" in politics, "politics remains a distinct sphere of human activity, *with its own concerns, pressures, ends and constraints which cannot be reduced to ethics*" (Rossi and Sleat 2014: 690); or, alternatively that politics is normatively "distinct from" or "irreducible" to morality (p.7). Again, these claims appear to entail a nonmoral and distinctively political normativity in the sense clarified above. "Concerns, pressures, ends and constraints" are either normative or normatively significant concepts, and if they are 'politics' own', and 'cannot be reduced to ethics', then this implies that some other kind of normative force is involved, bound up with politics itself and nonmoral in nature.

Indeed, Sleat's claim that political normativity is "irreducible" to moral normativity simply makes no sense if political normativity is merely a *form of* moral normativity. Compare this, for example, with other controversies about reduction, such as that of the mental to the physical: if the mental is irreducible to the physical, then mental facts cannot just be (a kind of) physical fact. Thus, the claim that political normativity is not reducible to moral normativity, far from isolating a weaker and

³ For example, the realist Carlo Burrelli summarizes the realist position as follows: "Realists contend instead that politics is autonomous: the normative force emerges from within the political sphere, not from an external moral domain deductively applied to political questions" (Burrelli 2020: 3). We return to Bernard Williams' more complex position below.

more plausible alternative to the claim that there is a distinctive, nonmoral political normativity, actually *entails* the latter.⁴

IV. Realism without any claims about normativity?

We're not sure how much more evidence that the notion of a distinctively political and nonmoral normativity actually exists in writings by prominent realists could be reasonably demanded at this point. Nevertheless, it may be that Sleat's considered preference is to avoid making *any* claim about what kind of normativity is involved in politics. This version of realism would simply remain agnostic about this question, or perhaps actively affirm that it is of no importance. As we acknowledged in section I, it is certainly true that many realists are not fundamentally concerned with the idea of a distinctively political normativity, even if many others are. So perhaps Sleat is ultimately in the former camp and not the latter.

We have two responses at this point. First, even if Sleat wants to disassociate himself from the view that politics generates its own normative standards which are not themselves merely a subset of moral standards, this is nevertheless – as we have just shown – a view advanced by many realists. It is not a view we have invented and wrongly ascribed to them, and not, as Sleat claims, a symptom of some sort of shoddy scholarship on the part of realism's opponents.

Our second and more important response is that if realism is not really making any claim to derive normative standards from within politics itself that are not simply a subset of moral standards, then its distinctiveness as a position is reduced, and much realist rhetoric to be challenging 'dominant' approaches to political theory seems inflated. This was the core point of our 2018 paper – motivated, in part, by a concern that the image one gets of modern political theory from realist writings is often a rather inaccurate caricature. Contra Sleat, we did not argue that realists' arguments about politics' intrinsic standards or distinctive ends *must* be interpreted as affirming a genuinely distinctively political normativity. Our claim was that such realist arguments are in something of a *bind*: *either* they fail to identify a sense in which a distinctive political normativity exists, *or* they fall back into weaker positions about the distinctiveness of politics that most supposed targets of the realist critique (so-called 'moralists') would readily accept (see Leader Maynard & Worsnip 2018: 764).

⁴ Indeed, it is *logically stronger* than the latter: it can be that A and B are distinct and yet that A is reducible to B, but it cannot be that A is irreducible to B yet A and B are not distinct.

For example, realists might fall back on a much broader reading of the idea that *politics* (not political normativity) is irreducible to morality, by simply invoking the claim that politics involves particular empirical contexts, dynamics and facts that shape particular political prescriptions in distinctive ways. Again, we emphasise that almost all ‘moralists’ would accept such a claim. Even the especially bold moralist view, derided by realists, that political philosophy just involves taking general ethical principles and then applying them to the political arena, will concede that in order to perform this ‘application’, we have to know various empirical truths about politics (cf., e.g., Cohen 2003).

Alternatively, one might follow the common realist suggestion that their approach is really meant to be defined as a purely *methodological* position (Hall 2017; Jubb 2017, 2019). Indeed, one of us has explicitly recommended this framing of realism in print (Leader Maynard 2021). Sleet seems to be sketching this kind of view in Section 3 of his paper, where he emphasises that Bernard Williams’ real complaint is not with morality per se, but with the idea that ‘the basic relation of morality to politics’ is one in which

‘political theory formulates the principles, concepts, ideals, etc. that we then seek to express through political action (enactment) or sets down the moral conditions of co-existence under power that politics must recognise in practice (structural). We should reject this model because it is wrong to view those moral principles or conditions as independent of or prior to political practice. Rather we need to appreciate that they are historical developments whose existence, and our commitment to them, is deeply entwined with the politics that they seek to speak to.’ (pp.8-9).

Now, as an aside, we’d note that there’s a danger that this specific argument commits a kind of category error (see also: Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018: 767-773). Moralists don’t dispute the political or historical evolution of *beliefs about moral principles*. But their theories are not about such *moral beliefs*, but about the claims, principles, and values that such beliefs concern. In other words, moralists can readily accept that our beliefs about morality are historically situated and, in part, politically constructed. That might be a good reason for epistemic self-awareness on the part of philosophers about their own views, but it doesn’t directly ground or challenge the normative *content* of those views. What more ‘analytic’ moralists are interested in is that content, claiming that we need to theorise the claims, principles and values expressed in such content, and how they can be most

coherently conceptualised, defended, organised, and so on, in order to get clear on their rational defensibility.

Still, realists may simply be, as Williams clearly was, sceptical of the validity or value of such an analytic project (and we dispute little if any of the exegesis of Williams provided by Sleat in the final third of his paper). The point of realism can then be to seek an alternative way of going about political theorising, which continues to employ a moral form of normativity, but which places more emphasis on attention to the distinctive features of politics, and less emphasis on conceptually and logically organising our underlying moral values and principles. Perhaps this is Sleat's intended understanding of realism.

Yet how far this kind of realism actually differs in practice from the bulk of modern political theory remains murkier than realists often seem to think. Take Sleat's own depiction of the distinction between 'moralism' and 'realism':

“Where moralism assumes a ‘*basic* relationship’ between morality and political practice in which the political theorist conceives of themselves as developing the moral principles, values, concepts, etc. that politics is to then either enact or which will structure the limits of politics’ rightful exercise of power, realism seeks a more complex account of that relationship and, in doing so, gives appropriate space and weight to that which is distinctive about political practice in our theories” (p.10).

Maybe this seems perfectly clear to Sleat – but it does not to us. The whole distinction here hangs on what is meant by ‘a more complex account of that relationship’ and ‘giv[ing] appropriate space and weight to that which is distinctive about political practice.’ What exactly do these statements mean?

Again, we come back to the *bind* mentioned above. If such phrases are interpreted as saying that distinctive features of political practice have some kind of normative significance that is fundamentally missed by moral principles, values, concepts etc., then we are back with the claim of a distinctively political normativity. If, by contrast (and we think this is probably Sleat's meaning), the objection is more methodological – against a certain mechanical imposition of moral principles formulated without any attention to politics – then we accept that no notion of a distinctively political normativity need be involved (again, see also Leader Maynard 2021, which recommends that realism be framed in this way). But then the kind of

political theory that realists are rejecting contracts *dramatically* – since vast swathes of empirically-engaged political theory, feminist political theory, critical theory, practical ethics, applied public policy, and even analytic political theory, are fully on board with this kind of project and have been for decades. Realism starts to look like the rejection at most of a quite specific kind of analytic-idealist moralism in the mode of Cohen or Nozick or the early Rawls (although we're not fully convinced it correctly characterises even these positions). Perhaps more importantly, since the kind of normativity involved in this kind of realism *remains moral*, it doesn't even look like that more analytic approach is actually mistaken *per se*, since carefully conceptualising and organising our underlying moral values should surely remain *a worthwhile task* for this kind of realism. It's just not the only key task in political theory.

Either way, the point of our 2018 paper was not to deny or directly critique this interpretation of realism. Instead, we sought to show that realists face an important choice of direction, here, that reflects the bind just described. If realists do not wish to make claims that politics genuinely generates its own normative standards which are fundamentally unlike moral standards, then they are not really challenging the bulk of mainstream political theory today. Thus, many aggressive realist denunciations of 'mainstream' political philosophy come to look misplaced, and sceptical language surrounding 'morality' in much realist work really looks like it is just opposing a particular kind of highly detached moral theorising. Alternatively, realists may wish to defend the view that politics *can* genuinely generate normative standards independent of moral foundations (though again, this need not entail that morality is irrelevant). This maintains realism's more expansive challenge to the bulk of contemporary political theory and carves out a more distinctive strategy of normative reasoning. But then such a project should acknowledge and overcome the kinds of challenges that we made in our 2018 paper.⁵

V. Political normativity as another normativity?

There is one way of doing this, that we specifically set aside in our original paper: namely the claim that politics does not generate its own *sui generis kind* of normative principles, but that it does generate principles which are non-moral, because they are instrumental, functional and/or epistemic in nature (see Leader Maynard & Worsnip 2018: 765). Few if any realist writings clearly advanced this idea at the time that we wrote our original paper, but several scholars have recently

⁵ Another response to our 2018 paper can be found in Jubb 2019. We have not written a specific rejoinder to Jubb's claims, as we are happy leaving interested readers to examine our paper and Jubb's responses and reach their own conclusions.

done so (e.g. Rossi 2019; Burelli 2020; Burelli and Destri 2021), and it could be read back into certain earlier realist writings. Perhaps Philp or Newey, for example, do not want to suggest that politics genuinely generates *its own kind* of normative standards, but they do want to suggest that other normative concerns in politics – some sort of instrumental or functional concerns, perhaps – exist and should not be simply overridden by morality.

Since Sleat is clear that he is not advocating such a stance, we have largely set it aside in this reply, and engaging with this view properly would require more substantive analysis. For the moment we will only point out that few if any political theorists deny that such non-moral normative reasons *exist* in politics: clearly one can have an instrumental reason to do something politically, or an epistemic reason to hold or not hold a particular political belief (functional normativity is rather more contentious). So if merely asserting the *existence* of such reasons, this kind of realism is not staking out controversial ground. What we need is a more substantive account of why these reasons, rather than other (e.g. moral) reasons are the ones we should be listening to in politics – again, bearing in mind that a lot of ‘moralist’ political theorists might well argue that really compelling instrumental or functional demands in politics might well simply have a *moral* basis for being adhered to. But we accept that our arguments here, and either all or most of those in our 2018 paper, do not address the possibility of such a realist account. We may engage this position further in future work.

VI. Conclusion

With our clarifications of what ‘a distinctively political normativity’ means, anyone familiar with recent realist writings should recognise that the kind of realism we interrogate in our 2018 paper is not a “mischaracterisation” (p.5) or an “unnecessary distraction” (p.12) from what many realists have claimed. We would hope that, given these clarifications, Sleat will see this too. We fully recognise that most realists do not seek the complete exclusion of morality from politics, and we agree with him that they should not. Beyond that, we also agree with Sleat’s suggestion that setting up realism on *any* kind of claim about a distinctive political normativity, even correctly understood, is neither a necessary nor optimal way for realists to go (see Leader Maynard 2021). As such, however, most of Sleat’s criticisms just aren’t addressing the actual arguments we made in our original paper. To the degree that our position was unclear – and we think there is plenty of sincere mutual misunderstanding on both sides in the debate surrounding realism – we hope this reply clarifies matters.

Somewhat more positively, we make a plea for realists to acknowledge the kind of critical choice they have to make about the nature and scope of the realist critique of 'dominant' approaches to political theory outlined above. Realism does not have to be built on the claim that other approaches to political theory are wrong to see their normative claims as moral in nature. But if it is making the more methodological claim that independently formulated moral claims cannot simply be imposed on politics, and that distinctive features and realities of politics must be attended to, then it is stating a position already accepted by a major proportion of contemporary political theorists. Our aims in our 2018 paper, and here, have been to push realists to defend either of these positions – or some clearly articulated middle ground – more definitively.

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