

# Beyond Realism and Moralism: a Defense of Political Minimalism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

What is the relationship between morals and politics? What is the relationship between moral philosophy and political philosophy? Defenders of political moralism postulate moral aims or constraints for politics, and hence they see political philosophy as a chapter of moral philosophy. Contrastingly, advocates of political realism describe politics as an independent endeavor aiming at providing order and security, and conceive political philosophy as an autonomous discipline. I claim that political moralism and political realism share the mistake of assuming that politics has substantial, permanent goals or constraints. After criticizing political substantialism, I explain the main ingredients of my alternative, political minimalism: (1) the idea that politics, understood as collective instrumental rationality, aims at providing adequate means for the accomplishment of people's goals, whatever these are; and (2) the conception of the relationship between morality and politics as one of 'reciprocal containment'. Finally, I address some foreseeable criticisms to political minimalism.

**Keywords:** moral philosophy, political minimalism, political moralism, political philosophy, political realism, political substantialism.

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## **Moralism and Realism**

Bernard Williams (2005, 1) distinguished between two models of political theory: the *enactment* model and the *structural* model.<sup>2</sup> According to the former, whose paradigmatic instance would be utilitarianism, political theory intends to guide political action by proposing principles, concepts, ideals, and values. In turn, Rawls' theory of justice would be Williams' paradigm for the structural model. Theories under this model, in a more modest vein, would not purport to guide politics, but still would impose certain moral constraints to what political actors can rightfully do.

Williams exempts us from choosing between these two models by pointing out that they share crucial flaws and must be placed, together, on the wrong side of the truly relevant distinction, i.e., the distinction between *moralist* and *realist* views of politics. For Williams, practitioners of the enactment and the structural models would share, in spite of all their differences, a moralistic conception of politics and, consequently, a vision of political philosophy as a sort of applied ethics.

Williams (2005, 3) uses the term 'political moralism' to refer to those 'views that make the moral prior to the political,' and confronts them with those stances that accept the existence and legitimacy of a distinctively, more autonomous, political thought. The latter are gathered together under the label 'political realism.' Geuss (2008, 1-7) and Larmore (2013) formulate this dichotomy as two different metaphilosophical approaches to the relationship between moral philosophy and political philosophy. According to political moralism, political philosophy would be that chapter of moral philosophy that focuses on those moral principles that have to do with the shape social life should ideally have. Larmore's example is justice, regarded as a moral ideal. On this point he echoes Rawls (1971,

3), who stated: 'Justice is the first virtue of social institutions.' Nevertheless, political moralists with diverse convictions may uphold other candidates, like freedom or happiness.

Political realists do not begin by asking what ought to be ideally or rationally desired or valued, but what are the real motivations of people and how real institutions work at a given time (see Geuss 2008, 9). As a consequence, in Larmore (2013, 277) words, political realism 'sees political philosophy as an autonomous discipline, setting out not from the truths of morality, but instead from those basic features of the human condition that make up the reality of political life.' Among these basic features, Larmore (2013, 277-280) stresses one trait that is of acute importance for realists: the ubiquitous disagreement among people on their conceptions of the right and the good. Since these conceptions obviously include *moral* conceptions of the right and the good, it follows from Williams' and Larmore's characterization that, for the realist, one of the tasks for political philosophy is to reflect on the plurality of moralities that coexist in many societies (conspicuously in contemporary societies) and on how to handle this diversity (see Galston 2010, 400).

Political moralism and political realism don't need to be symmetrical views, though: while political moralists contend that morality is prior to politics, not every realist would straightforwardly state that politics is always prior to morality. Williams (2005, 8), for instance, would not subscribe to the symmetrical version of political realism, as far as he admits that 'there can be local applications of moral ideas in politics, and these may take, on a limited scale, an enactment or a structural form.' Unfortunately, he is not very explicit on the conditions under which these local applications would be acceptable for political realists. My alternative is to describe the situation as a sort of 'reciprocal containment' of morality and politics.<sup>3</sup> This reciprocal containment is one of the main ingredients of *political minimalism*. I explain at once what it means.

## **The Reciprocal Containment of Morality and Politics**

Politics encompasses morality as far as political actors have to reckon on the plurality of moral codes that typically coexist in complex societies. According to political realists, politicians should not feel committed, when acting as such, to obey any particular moral code. Instead, they should take people's moral codes, and their outcomes, into account as social facts, as many other facts have to be taken into account whenever politicians strive to achieve political goals. As Geuss (2008, 11) admits, 'even illusions can have effects.' Hence, political philosophers ought to take into account people's ideals and moral stances, but only insofar as these have influence on their behavior (Geuss 2008, 9).

As a consequence of these claims by Geuss and other realists, in political contexts political requirements would be prior to moral considerations; also to those moral considerations stemming from that subfield of philosophical or academic reflection on moral issues for which the term 'ethics' is sometimes reserved. So far, political minimalism agrees with political realism.

On the other hand, a political minimalist would admit that morality 'contains' politics in a sense, since anybody may evaluate political actions from his or her own moral stance, as we often do. Now, it is important to note that when doing so one does not see oneself just evaluating politics from one of the many moral codes that happen to coexist in our society: we produce moral statements that we think are true, and prescriptions that we take to be correct. When morality contains politics, we arrive at one of those situations in which morality becomes ethics. When, conversely, morality is encompassed by politics the situation is very different; morality is then just the addition of the many moralities that people in fact hold: those moralities that are dispassionately described by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists.

We have, then, stated the platitude that politics is prior to morality from the political point of view, and the platitude that morality is prior to politics from the moral point of view. Such platitudes, though, are often forgotten in the debates between political realists and political moralists. Now let us have a look at the history of political moralism and political realism to search for some more mistakes.

### **Lessons from History: (1) Political Moralism**

Recall Bernard Williams' definition of the political moralist as someone who makes morals prior to politics. Given this definition, Kant would be, for many, the paradigm of a modern political moralist. Not in vain he famously stated: 'All politics must bend its knee before the right' (Kant 1970, 124). This means that, according to Kant (1970, 121), political maxims must be derived from the pure concept of the duty of right, whose principle is provided *a priori* through pure reason, instead of starting from the ideas of prosperity and happiness. Although people might be inclined to believe that it is the duty of the sovereign to look after the happiness of the subjects, this could not be the case, Kant (2006, 52) argues, because each subject, and also the sovereign, can hold a different conception of happiness. In other words, there is no universally valid principle concerning happiness that might be taken as a law, and any government willing to impose its own conception of happiness on its subjects deserves the title of 'despotic' (Kant 2006, 55–56).

The sovereign should let the subjects pursue happiness according to each one's idea of it. In fact, the sovereign should promote the freedom of each individual to choose his or her conception of happiness. Contrary to happiness, freedom is a universally valid goal, and so an adequate aim for politics. This is how, for Kant, morality provides politics its main aim, and this is freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Kant's layout for political philosophy seems solid, but there is something really tricky at its very foundations. To see the trick, we need to look at three different contexts in which Kant talks of freedom. The first, close to traditional metaphysical debates on free will, is the discussion of what Kant (1996, 473-478) calls 'freedom in the transcendental sense', addressed in the Third Antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 444–A 451). The second context arises whenever transcendental freedom is linked to moral agency through the claim that a rational being is autonomous. This means that a rational being is free as far as a law, of which such a being is the author, binds him or her. For this capacity for self-legislation makes a rational being a suitable member in a possible realm of ends and hence free in regard to natural laws (Kant 2002, 53-54; Ak 4:435–Ak 4:436). Freedom in this context is close to Isaiah Berlin's (1969, 130) concept of *positive* liberty: one is free, according to Kant, not because one does what one pleases, but because one obeys a rational law, being the rational criterion for moral laws the categorical imperative. Morality is thus conceived as a realm of non-instrumental rationality and (positive) freedom. It is before moral norms so understood that all politics must bend its knee, as I quoted above.

But there is still a third context in which Kant (2006, 45) talks of freedom, namely, when he refers to *political* freedom, understood as follows:

No one can force me to be happy in his way (according to how he conceives the welfare of other human beings), rather each may pursue happiness in the way that he sees fit, as long as he does not infringe on the freedom of others to pursue a similar end, which can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a possible general law (that is, with the same right of another).

This concept of freedom is close to Berlin's (1969, 122) notion of *negative* freedom.

The trick is that *negative* freedom is justified as the main political goal because *positive* freedom deserves unconditional respect. It does not make sense to say that the state should promote positive freedom because such kind of freedom is not, for Kant, an attribute of persons as empirical beings, but as rational beings, and rational beings will continue to be free in the transcendental sense no matter the circumstances. On the other hand, the state can indeed protect and constrain individual actions in pursuit of each one's conception of happiness, but this pursuit is an exercise of instrumental rationality, and it is not clear at all why this aim, rather than happiness or some other, should be taken as the main goal of politics. Kant (2003, 23), true, could try to justify this move by means of his distinction between the *matter* of choice ('that is, (...) the end each has in mind with the object he wants') and its *form* ('insofar as choice is regarded merely as free, and whether the action of one can be united with the freedom of the other in accordance with a universal law'). This distinction allows him, indeed, to say that although what the state protects is the right of each subject to live according to his or her conception of happiness, it is not any particular conception of happiness, but freedom, that is being protected. But one may ask why is the form of freedom so valuable, if we are not talking of positive freedom, but of negative freedom.

Kant is right when he acknowledges the existence of many different conceptions of individual happiness, and grants their legitimacy. But he is missing two additional ingredients of what I take to be the right recipe. One is the recognition that there is not only a plurality of ways for understanding happiness, but also a plurality of political aims, among which happiness is only one instance. The second is the conception of politics as an art of instrumental rationality, as the art of reconciling the diverse political aims that people pursue (happiness, justice, freedom, and so on) and the diverse ways of understanding each of them. I shall come back to this recipe later. Anyway, this solution is precluded to Kant,

because he chooses to subordinate politics to morality after forgetting that political freedom is the negative, conflicting freedom of flesh and blood people, and not the positive freedom of the rational moral being.

## **Lessons from History: (2) Political Realism**

Let us now turn our eyes to Hobbes. There seems to be little to say about Hobbes that has not been said already, but of the many well-known facts about him a few are worth recalling for the purposes of this essay. Let us begin with this: *Leviathan*, Hobbes' most influential book, was completed in Paris by 1650, some eight years after the English Civil War had broken out. Although some of the theses defended by Hobbes in this book had been advanced in his previous treatise *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640), it is also true that while writing this older book Hobbes was impressed by the internal divisions and discontent he found in England when he went back home in 1637, after one of his stays in France. Moreover, Hobbes devoted one full book to tell the story of the English civil war,<sup>5</sup> witnessed the Thirty Years War (which started on the Continent when Hobbes was 30 years old), and claimed in his *Autobiography* that he was born prematurely when his mother heard of the impending invasion of the Spanish *Armada*.<sup>6</sup> Those were risky times indeed: no wonder political order and security were Hobbes' priorities. These were also the priorities for Machiavelli, another inspirer of political realism, who had witnessed, more or less one century before Hobbes, the consequences of war and political instability in Italy, and who wished, as much as Hobbes, to live in a unified state ruled by a strong sovereign.<sup>7</sup>

I am not claiming, of course, that Hobbes and Machiavelli's ideas were completely determined by the political context: other enlightened minds with similar social origins witnessed the same events without drawing the same conclusions. But it is timely to recall these facts in order to discuss one of the favored arguments for political realism: the



argument of political order as a 'necessary condition' for political life. Williams (2005, 3) advances this argument as follows:

I identify the 'first' political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions for cooperation. It is 'first' because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others.

One can agree that a certain degree of order and stability is a necessary condition for political life, and that enjoying security might be a universal wish for all human beings. But now imagine Hobbes' England (or, for that matter, Machiavelli's Italy) as a country where most people were afflicted by enduring famines caused not by civil wars but instead by the greed and insensitivity of a powerful, absolute sovereign backed by a merciless upper class. Imagine further that Hobbes was the son of extremely poor and illiterate parents, and that only because of an unlikely combination of the sheerest coincidences he happened to receive a satisfactory education and barely managed to survive out of his intellectual skills. One could expect the emergence of something quite similar to class-awareness in this *Dickensian Hobbes*, and suspect that the described circumstances might have affected Hobbes' description of the state of nature, his conception of the social contract and his expectations concerning Leviathan. Perhaps, if history had been similar to my fictional story, political realists nowadays would be proposing social justice as the defining aim of politics. After all, not dying of starvation seems to be another reasonable candidate to the post of a necessary condition for political life.

And there are still more candidates. Why not freedom? In support of this bid, we can fancy a wealthy Hobbes living in a crimeless Gulf country in which respect for civil rights would be absent. We can imagine him imprisoned and tortured after charges of atheism, we

can see him watching how his books burn in a bonfire, and so on. Would this *Hobbes of Arabia* not be inclined to agree with Kant that preserving individual freedom is the main goal of the state?

Order and security, justice, freedom, well-being: all of them look like reasonable aims for politics. But it is doubtful that any of them should be seen as *the* defining goal. It seems rather that one fundamental part of politics consists in debating what goals ought to be on the list at a given moment, as well as their relative priority and the precise meaning each society ought to assign to each of them.

Geuss (2008, 22) partially agrees. After defending the realist view that the main purpose of politics is to organize human action 'so as to limit and control forms of disorder' that people 'might find excessive or intolerable', he adds: 'This is a historically specific study if only because the concepts of 'order' and 'intolerable disorder' are themselves variable magnitudes.'

But the problem is not just one of magnitude. It is also a matter of quality and definition. For instance: what does 'intolerable disorder' mean? Some may feel content with defining the concept in terms of physical violence and riots. Goethe (1960, 517), for instance, dared to write: 'I prefer committing an injustice to putting up with disorder.' It is also instructive to remember that the Latin verb meaning 'bring peace to' or 'pacify' (*pacare*) can be translated also as 'subdue.'

Something close to this conception of *Pax Romana* was indeed what Hobbes had in mind when he talked of peace and order in his *Leviathan*, and this is the conception echoed in Goethe's motto and inherited by political realists from Weber to Williams.<sup>8</sup> But it is a disputed conception. In recent times some have contended that the mere absence of physical violence is not synonymous with peace,<sup>9</sup> and others have complained that a conception of security restricted to the defense of the state from external aggression, and the internal

enforcement of law and order, would be too narrow. Among the latter are those (Sen 2000, UNDP 1994) who have championed the concept of 'human security.' This concept intends to encompass all factors that make people safer: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security (UNDP 1994, 24-25). Indeed, someone advocating for such a concept of security might turn the realists' concern for order into the proposal of something like a worldly welfare state, and still take this as the basic political goal.

So political realists are making the same fundamental mistake as political moralists: all of them select one outstanding value (typically justice, freedom or happiness for moralists; order, in the case of realists) and advance it as the *substance* of politics. Realists rightly point out that, when doing so, moralists do not come to terms with the complexity of (contemporary) societies, where different moral goals coexist. Realists then ask *why* freedom should prevail over well-being, or *vice versa*, if both options are presumably represented in society. But realists fail to justify satisfactorily the prevalence of order and security over, say, justice, and they also lack satisfactory arguments for interpreting order and security precisely in Hobbesian terms.

Both moralists and realists postulate a substantial goal for politics. Yet, do we need to do so? Obviously, the answer to this question depends on our definition of politics. So this is what we need.

### **Definitions and Legitimacy**

Certain political philosophers refuse to define politics. See, for instance, Williams (2005, 12) and Geuss (2008, 23). Nevertheless, both draw a number of conclusions of their loose characterizations of the political. It is true that both use the label 'political theory' to refer to their own work, and it is true enough that political *science* may not need a

demarcation criterion. As a descriptive and explanatory science, political science has facts as its main input, and hence does not need to discuss how the concept of 'politics' ought to be properly understood: it is enough to register carefully how it is, in fact, understood by different people at different times and places. Even the normative question of the legitimacy can be reduced, for political science, to the descriptive question of whether or not a particular institution is seen, as a matter of fact, as legitimate by the relevant actors. But if we wish to practice political *philosophy* (or we want to prevent the reduction of political theory to political science) we certainly need a definition of politics, and a clear demarcation from other endeavors. The search for a demarcation criterion may sound as old-fashioned in political philosophy as in the philosophy of science, but we certainly need it in order to justify any conception of political legitimacy.

As we have seen, the problem of demarcation does not worry Geuss, whose conception of political theory does not retain the purposes traditionally attributed to political philosophy; but it does pose a problem for Williams, who intends to include the discussion on political legitimacy in his proposal, and takes the idea of legitimacy as a normative concept. At least, 'normative for us as applied to our own society' (Williams 2005, 14). Now I will show that Williams' conception of legitimacy does not work because he lacks a satisfactory concept of the political.

For Williams (2005, 4), a state is legitimate if it meets what he calls the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD), and BLD is met when a state is able to provide an 'acceptable' solution to the 'first political question,' i.e., the securing of order. His proposal would not be moralistic because BLD is not a moral, but a distinctively political requirement:

It may be asked whether BLD is itself a moral principle. If it is, it does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics (...) (Williams 2005, 5)

But how can Williams know that BLD is 'inherent in there being such a thing as politics', if he does not provide us with a precise definition of politics? Indeed, he provides a vague portrayal based on his idea of the 'first political question', but, as I said earlier, neither Hobbes nor Williams explain persuasively why the problem of order is the first question to be solved by politics, or why order and security have to be understood precisely in Hobbesian terms.

Williams pays still another price for lacking a satisfactory definition of politics. He predicates BLD solely of the state, and hence does not conceive politics outside the state.<sup>10</sup> But restricting the scope of the political to the span of the state cannot be given for granted: it is indeed conceivable the existence of political activity (*pace* Hobbes) in societies without a state. To what sort of literature belong the writings of, say, Kropotkin, when he calls for a society without state and describes the workings of such society? What sort of activity would the inhabitants of a hypothetical, communist society perform when meeting in an assembly? What are the members of a pre-state society doing while planning to attack a nearby tribe? Would that be an instance of cooking? Sports, perhaps? If we can conceive of politics without the state, this means that states cannot be part of a definition of politics, however vague. The concept of state comes into the stage only as *one* of the possible answers to *one* of the political questions.

Legitimacy, normatively understood, is the central question for political philosophy, but political realists either shy away from it (Geuss), or provide a wanting account (Hobbes, Williams). As for political moralists, nobody could charge them with neglecting the

normative side of political philosophy, but they fail to justify why political activity should obey moral norms, and why politics ought to be defined in terms of precisely a certain moral goal among the many that are valued by people in contemporary societies. We have already discussed this problem in the case of Kant's choice of freedom as the main goal (or constraint) of politics. Habermas (1996, 32) shares with Kant the goal and the objections when he writes: 'coercible laws must prove their legitimacy as laws of freedom in the process —and by the kind of process— of lawmaking.'

A further problem shared by political moralists and political realists concerns the source of their particular characterization of a given goal for politics. The question is not simply whether or not politics must have moral purposes and what these would be. Besides, there is the question of how to understand each proposed goal. In this respect, it is enlightening to look at Larmore's (2013, 297 ff.) criticism of Cohen (2008) on the sources of a correct understanding of justice. While political realists refuse to start with ethical principles their political proposals and prefer to look first to real political institutions and practices, Cohen (2008, 274 ff.) insists that no normative conclusion can be derived from facts alone. In the particular case of justice, he writes: 'we do not learn what justice fundamentally is by focusing on what it is permissible to coerce' (Cohen, 2008, 148). Political philosophy, then, should ascertain what justice is by non-empirical means, and then discuss the applications of the concept, instead of trying to discover it, inductively, from the facts. Larmore (2013, 298–304) replies that the nature of justice is dependent on certain features of the human condition, among which the pervasiveness of reasonable disagreement is especially relevant, and recalls that principles and, in general, reasons are often fact-dependent.

Nevertheless, Larmore shares with Cohen the conviction that political realism deprives political philosophy of its normative force. For this reason, he develops an

intermediate position between realism and moralism. Larmore's proposal avoids realists' criticisms to political moralism by acknowledging the possibility that reasonable people may propose a plurality of irreconcilable solutions to political problems. Besides, as we have seen, he grants that political philosophy must pay attention to empirical facts concerning human nature and human societies. On the other hand, he satisfies the moralists' concern with normativity by means of his acceptance that justice, and not order, is the real source of legitimacy in politics: only a just order, would deserve to be regarded as legitimate by political philosophy (see Larmore 2013, 291).

Unfortunately, Larmore does not explain persuasively why justice ought to be included in the definition of politics. His main argument is that otherwise the normative force of political philosophy, and hence a genuine concern with legitimacy, would be lost. At first sight it would seem that he is accepting Kant's assumption that the sole source of genuine normativity lies in the realm of morality, but Larmore dodges the problems of moralism by pointing out that he is not talking of *justice as a purely moral ideal*, but of *political justice* (Larmore 2013, 292-294). Political justice, although anchored in moral considerations, lays out the conditions that make political life possible, and so marks off politics as a relatively autonomous realm.

A political realist would object that this solution is still too moralistic. My objection is different: why does (moral or political) justice, rather than freedom, equality, well-being or security, provide the substantial *goal* (in the vocabulary of the 'enactment model'), or the substantial *constraint* (as the 'structural model' would see it) for politics?

The need of a substantial element in the definition makes sense if (i) one wants to preserve normativity in political philosophy, and (ii) one grants that genuine normativity is categorical, not hypothetical. My own proposal sympathizes with (i) but rejects (ii). It begins with the statement that politics is an instance of instrumental rationality and that political

philosophy is a fully normative enterprise although it deals only with hypothetical imperatives.

### **Political Minimalism: Politics as Collective Instrumental Rationality**

A group of visitors arriving to a city may start asking something very vague like ‘what shall we do?’ This question may be difficult to answer. Typically, they have neither the same interests, nor the same needs, nor exactly the same beliefs, including moral beliefs, but they find some advantage in sticking together, so they need to coordinate their actions. They are involved in a collective exercise of instrumental rationality, and such exercises are never easy. From time to time, to make things even worse, a moral question arises. The group, for instance, meets a beggar or finds a brothel, and someone asks: ‘what should we do?’ The group then needs to agree on a procedure for facing such situations. If the group is very homogeneous regarding moral opinions (for instance, if the group is a small group of nuns) they might see the answer given by any of them to one of those questions as tantamount to a collective decision. But the bigger and the less homogeneous the group is, the likelihood increases that they need to set up a different procedure. For instance, the group might leave (certain) moral questions entirely to individuals or decide what to do by majority vote. In any case, a group that settles a procedure for dealing with the internal diversity of moral codes has discovered that, from the political point of view, morality is encompassed by politics.

I propose to view a political community like a big enough group (bigger, say, than an extended family, but not necessarily much more) that needs to answer from time to time the question ‘what shall we do?’ And politics would be the exercise of collective instrumental rationality that such groups need to implement from time to time. According to this view, the essence of politics is not provided by a fixed (moral or non-moral) aim or constraint. Instead,



it consists in the search for adequate means to satisfy those goals pursued in fact by the members of the political community. Politics intends to answer the general question ‘what shall we do?’ in a manner that would be, ideally, acceptable for all, although in reality it nearly never will.

I am replacing, then, the dichotomy *political moralism/political realism* for another, in which one pole (‘political substantialism’) would encompass both moralism and realism as far as both postulate one (although not the same) substantial goal for politics. The other pole can be called ‘political minimalism’ because it does not intend to fix the ultimate goal(s) of politics and let the specification of such goals in the hands of the people. It leaves the scope of possible political proposals very open, and hence it is, in principle, compatible with most of them. For a political minimalist, the range of acceptable political proposals will be reduced not as a result of philosophical speculation but as a result of empirical argument. The crucial question is: what political ideologies, general projects, or particular decisions are more likely to realize, in every context, the goals of the people? Political minimalism reserves, then, a more limited, though still tough, set of tasks for political philosophers than other schools (mainly metaphilosophical tasks, like the one undertaken in the present essay).

Contrastingly, it assigns a heavy burden to economists, political scientists, engineers, and other bearers of scientific and technical knowledge. Political scientists and politicians will face also a hard work designing efficient ways to find out what people really want and figuring out how to make people’s set of goals internally coherent and feasible.

Besides, political minimalism does not need to suppose that the legitimacy of political institutions is provided by a founding principle (e.g. utility) or by a founding situation (e.g., a contract, either explicit, tacit or hypothetical). Politics is rather something we meet *in media res*, a bundle of practices and institutions that we try to understand and transform for the better.

Once I have sketched my proposal, I am sure that many objections come quickly to the mind of the reader. I will now try to answer those that I can foresee, an exercise that will make my stance clearer, I hope.

## **Objections and Rejoinders**

*1. Where does your definition come from? Is it not as arbitrary to define politics as you do as it is to define it with reference to a certain political goal?*

My definition is a hypothesis. It intends to be compatible with the intuitions most of us share about politics, and this aim is easier to accomplish if the characterization of the political remains minimal. As any hypothesis, it is open to revision if persuasive counterexamples are found. The method of adjustment between intuition and definition has to be, I assume, a holistic method close to the method of 'reflective equilibrium' devised by J. Rawls.

On the other hand, I would not say that the definitions (or loose characterizations, depending on the case) provided by political moralists and political realists are arbitrary; but they fail to accommodate certain facts (like the ubiquity of moral disagreement, in the case of political moralists) and intuitions (like the possibility of politics without a state, in the case of political realists). My proposal is advanced as a hypothesis that helps to make better sense of this activity called 'politics.'

*2. Why not include the state in the definition of politics? Do you seriously believe that politics is possible outside the state?*

It depends on what you understand by 'possible.' If you mean 'conceivable,' it certainly is. Many anarchists and communists firmly believe it is possible. Besides,

anthropologists and historians provide many examples of activities that seem natural to call 'political' but take place in societies without a state. If you mean 'feasible in the present world,' it may be sound to argue that political life is nowadays impossible outside the states, but this is an empirical question not to be settled by conceptual analysis. Political minimalism, as such, does not entail a commitment either to the unavoidability of states or to their desirability. In case there is evidence that political communities can survive both as states or as stateless societies, the political minimalist will ask which of these two options is more likely to help people to attain their goals.

*3. Does political minimalism entail an option for 'radical' democracy?*

No. Political minimalism only demands the choice of those decision-making procedures and structural arrangements that presumably will facilitate the realization of people's aims. Many would argue that this purpose will be more easily attained by some variety of what we know as 'democracy,' and some may add that some form of participatory, direct or 'radical' democracy performs better in this respect than representative democracy. But, again, these are empirical debates in regard to which political minimalism itself remains neutral.

*4. Is political minimalism tantamount to populism?*

No. You may be afraid that political minimalism can justify too easily the implementation of decisions that can be 'popular' at a given moment, like harassing the Jews, expelling the foreigners, castrating the rapers or expropriating the rich. But when political minimalism ask governments and parliaments to take into account people's aims, it is not demanding that governments and parliaments try to satisfy every goal that every individual cherishes at every moment. The purpose is to promote an internally coherent, relatively long-

lasting set of aims accepted by most people in a political community. It is always difficult to have a fair picture of such a set, hard to establish the hierarchy of the political goals included in it, and even harder to agree on the measures that are most appropriate in order to promote those goals. But such difficult tasks are well beyond the responsibilities of a metaphilosophical stance like political minimalism. What a defender of political minimalism can say is that members of a government or parliament should not always feel, e.g., compelled to expel the foreigners simply because a majority in the political society wish this at a particular moment, as far as those public servants can argue that such demand is inconsistent with a stronger wish for economic prosperity, for example.

Nevertheless, it is true that political minimalism has no resources to distinguish between values and desires, or between noble and nasty political ends. This means that, in spite of the above provisos, the internally coherent set of aims of a political community may command actions that are unacceptable for those who have to implement them, or for the philosopher. Still, it follows from political minimalism that civil servants must devise adequate means to achieve that set of aims, even if they reject it for moral or other reasons. For remember that political minimalism, like political realism, proclaims the supremacy of politics over morals from the political point of view. Nevertheless, political minimalism also grants the priority of ethics over politics from the moral point of view. So a civil servant who believes that his or her principles are incompatible with the political aims of his or her fellow citizens perhaps should resign. And then, as one citizen among many, he or she might try to change the mind of the others, perhaps with the help of the philosopher.

*5. But people also argue on ultimate ends, don't they?*

Yes, they do. People discuss constantly, for instance, whether freedom should be limited for the sake of social justice, or vice versa, and to what degree. People also discuss

what ought to be understood by freedom, justice, well-being, and so on. Political *ideologies* typically favor certain aims over others and propose means to achieve the favored aims. Defenders of ideologies not only try to improve the internal coherence of their proposals by giving a hierarchical order to the aims they pursue and comparing the effectiveness of the strategies to achieve them. Sometimes people confront the merits of rival ideologies. Since, in fact, people in contemporary societies hold different views on political goals, ideological debate is unavoidable and necessary.

Politicians, political scientists, and philosophers also participate in the debate, with the same right as any other citizen. And they can sensibly claim that they bring to the discussion more experience, information or conceptual accuracy than the average person.

Discussions on ends are useful. Not just because the internal coherence of the set of goals pursued by a political community can increase, and the hierarchy among them may become more explicit; also because empirical information concerning, for instance, the feasibility of the goals can improve the quality of the set.

A political minimalist doesn't deny all this, but insists that the task of politicians and public servants is not to impose some political goals on people (perhaps under the influence of moral philosophers), but to find the means for realizing the set of goals chosen by the people.

#### *6. Is political minimalism leaving any room for political philosophy?*

I have claimed above that political philosophy has to be a normative endeavor, if it strives to have something to add to political science and other social sciences. But some would fear that this normative vocation is in danger if political philosophy does not prescribe the goals of politics. Isn't this restriction tantamount to relativism?

No. Political minimalism is not a relativistic stance, neither regarding politics nor regarding political philosophy.

First of all, politics is a normative activity as far as it searches adequate means for people's ends. There is no room for relativism here: (i) Political actors may be right or wrong concerning the aims of the people, but there is a truth on this matter waiting to be discovered, be it ever discovered or not. (ii) Besides, political actors can be right or wrong when choosing the means for those ends, because there are strategies more adequate than others. Although Kantians may long for categorical rationality, hypothetical rationality also provides unequivocal normative judgements and prescriptions once the ends are settled.

Indeed, a political minimalist can agree with a political realist in acknowledging that there can be more than one suitable way to achieve an aim. This is why I have not talked of 'the best means' but of 'adequate means' for people's aims. But, again, this does not amount to relativism or to relinquishing the normative concept of rationality. True, it calls for a not very stringent characterization of rational political actors. In particular, it does not require that the political actor chooses a strategy that 'maximizes' the likelihood of attaining a goal, but simply one of the strategies that will likely promote that goal.<sup>11</sup>

Second, political philosophy is normative because it provides a criterion to tell good politics from bad politics: good politics provides good means for the ends favored by people, while bad politics fails to do so, either because political actors don't care about people's goals or because they choose ineffective means. This is not, maybe, a normative task of much glamor, but it is certainly a normative task, so political philosophy is still a normative discipline.

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<sup>2</sup> Williams 2005 does not distinguish between political theory and political philosophy. This is common among political realists: see, for instance, Geuss 2008, 16. To prevent ambiguities, I will avoid the term ‘political theory’ and will talk instead of ‘political philosophy,’ as opposed to ‘political science.’ The former would be mainly normative, and the latter rather descriptive and explanatory.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term from Quine (1969, 83), who talks analogously of a ‘reciprocal containment’ of epistemology and ontology.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely, although freedom would be the outstanding goal of politics, Kant (2006, 45) admits that there are two more grounding *a priori* principles: *equality* and *independence*. On the other hand, although I summarize Kant’s political philosophy using the terminology of goals, sometimes it is more adequate to talk of moral *constraints*. In other words, Kant often looks closer to the *structural* than to the *enactment* model.

<sup>5</sup> *Behemoth*, also known as *The Long Parliament*.

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes, who described himself as a fearful person, stated: ‘my mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear.’ Quoted by Gert (2010, 1).

<sup>7</sup> For a reading of Machiavelli as a ‘mild’ political realist, see Skinner 1978.

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<sup>8</sup> Weber 1921 defines politics not in terms of its goals, but of its means. In particular, he characterizes a political association by its capacity to impose its rules by force, and defines the state as that political association who monopolizes the legitimate use of force. But, as Larmore (2013, 285) rightly points out, this is equivalent to saying that the primary political goal is ‘creating and maintaining social order, through coercion if necessary.’

<sup>9</sup> Galtung 1969, for instance, coined the term ‘structural violence’ to refer to an ‘avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs’, caused by a social structure or institution.

<sup>10</sup> He writes: ‘(...) if such a demand [BLD] genuinely exists, is implicit in the very idea of a legitimate state, and so is inherent in any politics’ (Williams 2005, 8).

<sup>11</sup> The natural conception of rationality and the political actor for political minimalism are hence those of a ‘bounded rationality’ and a ‘satisfactionist’ agent, as defined by Simon 1983.