**Political normativity and ethics: a roadmap**

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**1 Introduction**

In this essay, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the various stances in the contemporary debate on the sources of political normativity. Besides, we describe some consequences of this debate for several related areas of philosophical discussion. We believe this overview may help readers navigate and connect the numerous works within the expanding literature on political normativity, as well as the controversies between advocates of political realism and so-called political moralists, including the articles featured in Topoi's collection *Political Normativity and Ethics*.

**2 On main routes and secondary roads**

By what criteria do we determine what should and should not be done in politics? By what standards do we evaluate political principles, norms, actions, or institutions? These two questions constitute the two interconnected aspects of political normativity and its sources. In turn, political normativity cannot be separated from the broader concept of normativity, nor from the characterization of different contexts of practical deliberation, including the political one. Given the privileged role typically attributed to morality in such deliberation, it is unsurprising that the relationship between political normativity and ethics has been a central concern for many philosophers throughout history. The question can be framed as follows: should ethics provide the criteria (or at least some of the criteria) for determining political obligation, as well as for assessing the goodness or correctness of political principles, actions, institutions, and laws?

The issue of the relationship between ethics and political normativity can be traced back to philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle in ancient Western philosophy. We also find it in more recent authors like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant or Max Weber, and the contributions of contemporary philosophers such as Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Christine Korsgaard or Raymond Geuss are equally relevant. All of them, and many more, have undoubtedly influenced the present debate. However, the originator of the realism-moralism debate in the political philosophy of the 21st century is Bernard Williams. Moreover, Williams (2005) initiated the debate by defending a realist framework which, despite certain ambiguities in its formulation, has provided the ground for other realist proposals, even when many of them have developed or significantly modified Williams' initial contributions.

As for the close sources of the main alternative to political realism, usually labeled as “political moralism”, the answer is less unequivocal. If we stick to Williams’ characterization of political moralism, moralist philosophers would be the majority among moral and political philosophers of the past and present, including members of such broad and influential theories as deontologism, utilitarianism, or political constructivism. Accordingly, if we were to speak of the foundations, both distant and close, of political moralism, the list would inevitably be very long. However, since we are placing our focus around the possibility of an autonomous political normativity, we believe we can point to two main sources for the positions labeled “moralist”: on the one hand, constructivist authors such as Rawls, Habermas and Korsgaard; on the other, anti-constructivists such as G.A. Cohen.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The influence of all the aforementioned philosophers has contributed decisively to fuel the debate on the role of ethics in politics in the first decades of the 21st century and has shaped two main sides in that debate: on the one hand, those who point to ethics (moral principles, moral ends, etc.) as the fundamental source of political normativity; on the other hand, those who reject or, at least, downplay the importance of morality in the orientation of politics. As we have mentioned already, Williams (2005) labeled these responses, respectively, as “moralist” and “realist.” Certainly, the labels were devised and defined by a conspicuous representative of the realist camp, as Williams was, and many, especially among those labeled “moralists,” have questioned the fairness or accuracy of this classification (see Leader Maynard 2024). On the other hand, a few critics deny that this classification encompasses all possible metapolitical positions on this debate and defend third ways (Larmore 2013, Rodríguez-Alcázar 2017a, Bermejo-Luque 2024). However, the distinction between realists and moralists is still useful, insofar as most of the authors who have recently participated in the debate on the nature of political normativity are usually included in one of these two groups. Moreover, those who consider themselves neither realists nor moralists have felt compelled to explain how they differ from both. So, here too, we will take this classification as a reference.

**3 Bernard Williams and the realist route**

The most cited publication in recent debates about the sources of political normativity probably is *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, a posthumous book by Bernard Williams (2005). However, it would be difficult to understand Williams' proposal without referring, at least, to another well-known and influential book of his: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Williams 1985). Particularly relevant for our topic are Williams' critique of the “morality system” and his presentation of practical rationality as an “all things considered deliberation”. The morality system is characterized, according to Williams (1985, 196-197) by the conviction that “moral obligation is inescapable”, which implies that “the fact that a given agent would prefer not to be in this system or bound by its rules will not excuse him”. Another consequence of accepting the framework of the morality system is the reduction, typical of authors like Kant, of practical deliberation to moral deliberation.

As two of the articles included in this special issue (Testini 2024; Bermejo-Luque 2024) recall, in the face of this reductionist tendency, Williams (1985, 7) described practical deliberation as the attempt to answer the question “What should I do, all things considered?” This question, in turn, would acquire meaning, in each context, by reference to the more general question “How should one live” (Williams 1985, 5). With respect to the defining question of practical deliberation, other questions (such as “what should I do from an ethical point of view?” or “what should I do from a self-interested point of view?”) produce only “subdeliberations” that can be incorporated into practical deliberation as parts of it (Williams 1985, 6) but cannot replace it.

If, for Kant and other advocates of the “morality system”, practical rationality in general is ultimately reduced to moral rationality, a consequence would be that political deliberation would be subordinated to moral deliberation. So does Kant when he states that “politics can take no steps forward without first paying tribute to morality”, or that “all politics must bend its knee before right”, i.e., what is morally right (Kant 2006, 8: 380). Williams (2005) rejected this subordination and the consequent conversion of political philosophy into a chapter of moral philosophy. Against this temptation, he defended the autonomy of politics as a field with its own purposes and the existence of a space for reflection on the political, which cannot be considered a chapter of applied ethics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Undoubtedly, one of the main aims of Williams's project was to offer an image of practical deliberation closer to human reality. A first step towards this was the inclusion of desire as a legitimate ingredient of practical deliberation, rejecting the priority granted to duty by Kantian moralism. But not just any desire would be eligible, for Williams does not want the inclusion of the agent's desires in practical deliberation to lead to the renunciation of normativity: desire deserves to guide practical deliberation only “if the desire were not one that the agent merely happened to have, but was essential to the agent and had to be satisfied” (Williams 1985, 210).

In a further effort to bring his conception of practical deliberation closer to human reality, Williams (2005) sought to ground political philosophy in real politics, a motivation he shares with other realist political philosophers (see Geuss 2008 and 2016, Galston 2010, Sleat 2016, McQueen 2017, Bagg 2022). Yet, even in this second step, Williams remains committed to the normative force of political philosophy. Consequently, he turns to the concept of legitimacy, as is common among realists. However, in doing so, he prioritizes a particular strand of normativity (which Bermejo-Luque, 2024, calls “axiological”), primarily focused on establishing criteria for political goodness or correctness.[[3]](#footnote-3) These two Williamsian choices (namely, legitimacy and axiology) stand in contrast to the usual emphasis on justice as the central normative concept by moralists, together with their prioritization of political obligation (the “deontic” strand of political normativity, as Bermejo-Luque, 2024, calls it).

Williams's effort to align philosophical discourse with reality seems reasonable: after all, the normative conclusions of practical deliberation are typically intended to guide the actions of real individuals and social groups, not merely to determine what timeless rational agents or ideal societies would do in counterfactual scenarios. The aspiration for political philosophy to offer something useful in the real world and to account for its complexities is not unique to political realists; many advocates of political moralism share this goal (see, for instance, Leader Maynard and Worsnip 2018, 765 and 785; Leader Maynard 2024; Floyd 2017). However, the extent to which, and the ways in which, empirical information is relevant to grounding normative proposals in political philosophy are more contentious issues, with realists often accusing moralists of not meeting this demand adequately.

On the other hand, although some realists have pointed to anti-idealism and anti-utopianism as defining features of realism (see again Galston 2010 and McQueen 2017), others have argued that the defining feature of realism is not the methodological discussion that confronts, within liberalism, ideal and non-ideal theory (see Sleat 2016, Favara 2022). The distinctiveness of realism, therefore, would lie not at the methodological level but in its substantive conception of politics. Specifically, in would lie in the conviction (not shared with liberal authors such as Rawls 1996) that “politics takes place in conditions of ineradicable conflict and is hence a site of perpetual struggle for power and dominance” (Sleat 2016, 31). For his part, Rossi (2019) has rejected the association of realism with non-ideal theory, to claim realism's compatibility with utopian or politically radical projects. The way in which a normative political philosophy with a realist slant could support radical projects would consist in showing the epistemic flimsiness of legitimation stories that support existing structures and highlighting the epistemic guarantees of those proposals that defend alternative structures (Rossi 2019, 646). In this regard, Enzo Rossi’s contribution to this special issue (Rossi 2024) illustrates the differences between liberal realism and radical realism.

**4 Two moralist routes: the influence of Gerald Cohen and John Rawls**

While not losing grip on reality is often considered essential for political philosophy—and practical philosophy in general—we have already highlighted another key motivation for political philosophers: preserving the normative capacity of political philosophy. After all, there is a widely shared consensus among scholars in this field that the latter differs from political science, sociology, or history in that it aims to engage in debates about the goodness of political norms, behaviors, and institutions, as well as about what should be done in politics. At the very least, political philosophy aspires to discuss the criteria for political goodness and correctness, and for evaluating what ought to be done.

This motivation seems to be at odds with the commitment to reality (see Rossi 2016). In general, realist authors are attributed with a tendency to jeopardize, or even completely dispense with, the normative capacity of political philosophy to safeguard its anchoring in reality. This is the accusation that, for example, Larmore (2013, 279, n. 3) addresses to Raymond Geuss (2008), a leading representative of political realism. In contrast, Gerald Cohen, one of the most influential authors on contemporary political moralism, seemed willing to run the opposite risk: to be accused of forgetting the facts in exchange for keeping the normative capacity of his discourse intact. This endeavor to save a genuine normativity in moral and political discourse is found in his influential book *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cohen 2008), some of whose ideas are already announced in an earlier article, “Facts and principles” (Cohen 2003). In these works, Cohen argued that facts alone cannot ground normative principles. While facts and principles may be combined in the argumentative chain used to justify a normative principle, at the end of the chain there must be a fact-free principle that is not justified by facts. Many political moralists would agree with this claim, as well as with another key tenet in Cohen's writings: the emphasis on justice—understood both as a moral virtue and, in the words of Rawls (1971, 3), as “the first virtue of social institutions”—as the fundamental source of political normativity. This stands in contrast to the concept that many realists consider holding the fundamental normative force in politics: legitimacy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Later authors have derived an important consequence from Cohen's arguments: political principles cannot be derived from facts, political or otherwise, but from other normative principles. Now, there is not complete agreement as to the nature of those ultimate principles. The most common response, and the closest to the spirit of Cohen's argument, is that of non-constructivist political moralists, for whom political concepts are dependent on moral premises, where this dependence must be understood in a justificatory sense, and not in the sense of causation, temporal precedence, or conceptual or epistemological priority (Erman and Moller 2024). This ultimate grounding of politics in moral principles leads to the metaethical problem of the status of those moral principles and their exposure to the Moorean open question (Bermejo-Luque 2024). Moreover, in the case of those political philosophers who have appealed to an ultimate moral end as a criterion for determining political obligation, it is worth asking why one should accept that this criterion (be it justice, welfare, freedom or any other) constitutes the ultimate end, or the ultimate normative criterion, when the same moral philosophers disagree among themselves in establishing the priority among the moral ends of politics (Rodríguez-Alcázar 2017a).

However, not all authors who contend that political principles, institutions or behaviors need to be justified by principles that are not exclusively political defend that these principles are moral. Some have argued that these latter principles can be methodological or epistemological (as is the case of Ronzoni and Valentini 2008). Now, as Leader Maynard and Worsnip (2018) remind us, defending that political normativity can be derived from methodological principles does not necessarily make someone a realist or a moralist. Indeed, there are two versions of this idea: one is usually considered moralist and is represented by the constructivist tradition whose most prominent representative is John Rawls. But there is also a realist version of the project of grounding political normativity in epistemic or methodological principles, as we shall show.

Rawls’ (1993, 1999) political constructivism conflicts with Cohen’s (2003, 2008) claim that principles—whether political or otherwise—cannot be grounded in facts. Rawls (1993, 96; 1999, 305) defended the “conjecture” that certain facts provide valid reasons for political action, and that this is so because certain moral principles confer a positive normative status on those facts. These moral principles, in turn, can confer such status because they are validated by an appropriate construction procedure (see A. Williams 2022). For our purposes, there are three elements in this “conjecture” that are worth pointing out. In the first place, the moralist character of the proposal (which would back Williams 2005 in his characterization of Rawls as a political moralist): it is moral principles that turn certain facts into reasons capable of justifying political action. Secondly, the role given to facts in the justification of political proposals: against Cohen, certain facts appear endowed with the capacity to justify political action. It is true that Cohen could reply that these facts have normative capacity because they are combined, also in Rawls' conjecture, with certain moral principles. But here appears the third element of the conjecture, which distinguishes Rawls' moralist proposal from the moralist proposals based on Cohen: the claim that it is the process of construction that provides moral principles with normative charge.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thus, we would have two moralist paths. In both, the justification of political institutions or actions rests on moral principles. But while in one of them (the one inspired by Rawlsian constructivism) those moral principles are in turn justified by their process of construction (a process that, in combination with the principles, confers justificatory weight to certain facts), in the other (the one inspired by Cohen) we rely on some alternative metaethical conception (intuitionist or coherentist, for example) of moral principles and give less weight to those “normative facts” that appear in Rawls's conjecture. These two moralist roads, certainly, are opposed to those realist paths of political justification that reject or minimize the role of moral principles in the justification of political institutions, norms or actions.

It is worth mentioning at this point that certain forms of realism (Prinz & Rossi 2017; Rossi 2019) have resorted to a strategy of justification and critique of the political that maintains certain elements in common with Rawlsian constructivism (in particular, the conviction that it is correct to invoke facts to substantiate normative political theses), but with an important difference: they dispense with the mediation of moral principles, to make political normativity depend directly on the relevant facts and the appropriate methodology, to the point of understanding realism as “empirically informed critique of social and political phenomena” (Prinz & Rossi 2017, 348). The resulting variant of realism would thus dissociate itself from both traditions of critical philosophy that realist philosophers consider insufficiently sensitive to facts (as would be the case of G. Cohen) and from the excessive conservatism that radical realists (Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi 2024) attribute to liberal realism. For his part, Sommavilla (2024) places himself within the constructivist tradition. He shares with moralist political constructivism its focus on political obligation, contrary to realists’ predilection for the evaluative aspect of political normativity. However, as opposed to moralist constructivism, he defends a distinctively political kind of normativity.

Moralist political constructivism has received various criticisms from other moralist positions. For example, Erman & Möller (2024, n. 11) reject that foundational methodological principles play any role in the justification of substantive political principles: e.g., Rawls's original position is rigged just to mimic a set of reasonable moral values, such as impartiality. Thus, despite appearances, it would not be methodological principles, but moral principles that would ultimately justify political principles.

An alternative to constructivism, without leaving the moralist tradition, is the “role approach”, which Erman & Möller (2022) consider a promising, though yet underdeveloped, avenue. The starting point of this proposal is the explicit recognition that “political normativity is a moral kind” (Erman & Möller 2022, 7). However, citizens, institutions and other political actors may have different moral obligations depending on the role they play in different circumstances. These obligations may conflict with others. For example, an individual's obligations as a citizen may conflict with his or her general moral obligations as a person. In such circumstances, the priorities between obligations of one type and the other could not be established automatically but would have to be argued on a case-by-case basis. Surely, one could recognize in this proposal a new variant of the attempt (criticized by Williams 2005) to characterize political philosophy as a chapter of moral philosophy. However, the advocates of this approach would reject that they are turning political philosophy into an “applied ethics”, since there would not be a mechanical derivation of the normative conclusions of political philosophy from general moral principles (as would be proper to the “morality system”), but a trade-off between the various sources of moral obligation that are relevant for each agent, given their diverse roles in each context. Thus, this position, without abandoning the moralist framework, would have taken a step, called for by political realism, in the direction of recognizing a greater specificity to politics with respect to general morality. But, on the other hand, the proponents of this solution will have to explain, when they advance in their development, how they avoid one of the objections that political moralism has addressed to realists, namely: if political considerations can defeat, in certain contexts in which the roles of an individual come into conflict, general moral considerations, in what sense can we say that morality is justifiably prior to politics and from where does the normativity of the latter derive? Ultimately, the only difference of this kind of moralist solution with a realist position would consist in calling “moral normativity” what realists would call “practical normativity”, encountering the same problems in establishing priorities between “general morality” and “political morality” that realists who admit a role for ethics in politics encounter in determining in which cases and to what degree morality should condition politics.

**5 Returning to the realist route: obstacles and bypasses**

Although the criticisms directed from the moralist camp at Williams and other realist authors are often convincing, the lack of a problem-free moralist proposal provides grounds for realists to persevere in their path, seeking to strengthen the realist framework and protect it from the objections received. Despite the temptation of some advocates of realism such as Geuss (2008, 2016) to slim down the normative aspirations of political philosophy, most realists find it necessary to characterize and justify political normativity. It is true that, in line with Williams' criticisms of the “morality system,” some tended to set aside the idea of political obligation in favor of asking about the evaluation of political principles, institutions, and decisions (see Sleat 2016, McQueen 2017; Rossi 2024). But, at least in this aspect, Williams and other realists seek to safeguard the normative capacities of political philosophy. In the case of Williams (2005), the starting point was the identification of the “first political question” (FPQ), which for him is “the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions for cooperation.” (Williams 2005, 3). While for Williams answering FPQ was a necessary condition for a state to be considered legitimate, it was not a sufficient condition, as there could be “unacceptable” solutions to FPQ, i.e., unacceptable ways of ensuring order and security. Consequently, Williams (2005, 4-6) adds two complementary requirements, the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) and the Critical Theory Principle (CTP), which would prevent politics from becoming a mere calculation to satisfy FPQ. BLD specifies the conditions under which a given response to FPQ can be considered adequate, and it boils down to the condition that the state must be able to offer a justification of its power to each subject. CTP states that the acceptance by subjects of the justification of state power does not count as legitimation if it is achieved through the exercise of the coercive power it purports to justify.

Williams' proposal has met with various objections, both from the moralist camp and from other theoretical frameworks, including other defenders of political realism. Moralists’ main criticism is that if BLD can safeguard a genuine political normativity, then it must be a moral principle. Williams himself (2005, 5) anticipates this criticism by admitting that perhaps it can be considered a moral principle, but in that case, it would belong to a morality that is not “prior” to politics. Now, what does “prior” mean here? If Erman and Moller (2024) are right, “prior” should mean that it provides a justification for political principles, and Williams would be saying that it does not. But if it does not, then, from the perspective of moralist philosophers who accept Cohen's approach, political power would be left without ultimate justification. On the other hand, if all Williams means is that BLD is not temporally prior to political practice, while recognizing that it is justificatorily prior, then he would be admitting that politics is justified on the basis of a moral principle, the BLD, so that legitimacy would play the same normative role that justice plays in the proposals of moralist philosophers. Hence, Williams' proposal would be indistinguishable from theirs and would share the same problems.

One of these problems would be this: just as Williams criticizes moralists for the arbitrary choice of some moral end or criterion (liberty, welfare, justice, etc. ) as “the” end of politics or “the” criterion from which to establish political obligation, it seems equally arbitrary to postulate that order and security are the ultimate ends of politics (or the criterion by which to determine the goodness or correctness of political decisions, principles or institutions), and not merely a cluster of additional ends or criteria to add to the list of reasonable goals that different political communities may include, with different relative weight depending on the community and the time, in the list of their priorities (Rodríguez-Alcázar 2017a). This is a critique made, evidently, not from moralist assumptions but from a third way stance (in this case, the so-called “political minimalism”) that rejects the “substantialist” pretension, common to moralists and realists, of basing political normativity on some purpose that is not constitutive of the practice itself (Bermejo-Luque 2024).

An additional criticism of Williams' solution (and of all attempts to ground political normativity in the very definition of politics)[[6]](#footnote-6) is its inability to distinguish between politics and good politics: if politics is characterized as meeting the requirements of BLD and CTP (and, in general, is defined against any form of “sheer domination”), can we not reasonably criticize as bad political decisions some that we may nevertheless consider legitimately adopted by those in power? (see Erman & Möller 2022, 3; Bermejo-Luque 2024).

Seeking to avoid the problems faced by Williams, realist philosophers have attempted to make progress along different avenues. One is what Rossi (2019) calls “contextual realism.” Contextual realists claim that the legitimation of political principles depends on the interpretation of the goals of political institutions and practices that exist in society (Rossi 2019, 642). Sangiovanni (2008) distinguishes two types of praxis-dependence in the justification of first principles of justice: while for cultural conventionalists like Walzer (1983), culturally contingent values and meanings would determine the first principles of justice in each society, institutionalists like Sangiovanni (2008 and 2016) argue that the nature of shared political institutions, such as the modern state, provides the reasons to endorse certain principles of justice (Sangiovanni 2008, 138). Rossi (2012) argues for a similar position, but with a more unambiguously realist character by focusing on legitimacy rather than justice. However, a major challenge for both types of contextual realism is to explain how contingent values and institutions, which are supposed to be the source of political justification, are in turn politically justified (Rodríguez-Alcázar, Bermejo-Luque & Molina-Pérez 2021).

A second strategy to try to circumvent the criticisms received by Williams (2005) is the instrumentalist one. In this vein, Cross (2022) has argued that BLD and CTP can be justified as means to adequately respond to FPQ in the long run. Instrumentalism, however, has been criticized for not being able to show that politics is a normative domain of its own. Thus, Bermejo-Luque (2024) argues that this is so because instrumentalism “makes reasons to pursue the politically good dependent on reasons to pursue the things that the politically good delivers”, which ends up weakening the pretensions of establishing politics as a domain with a normativity of its own. For their part, Erman & Möller (2022, 4) have pointed out that the affirmation that order is the end of politics does not reflect an incontestable truth, but a normative thesis that will have to be confronted with others. This last criticism, directed at instrumentalism by defenders of political moralism, is however identical to that directed from other positions (Larmore 2013, Rodríguez-Alcázar 2017a, Bermejo Luque 2024) to the pretension of some philosophers of the moralist tradition (Kant, Strauss or the utilitarian tradition) to suppose that some moral end (freedom, virtue, well-being) is the primary end of politics.

In an attempt to avoid the problems of instrumentalism, Burelli (2022) has developed a “functionalist” conception of political value. According to it, the function of politics would be to “secure binding collective decisions” (Burelli 2022, 629), which would provide a partial criterion for political evaluation (Burelli 2023). This novel proposal has, however, already received some criticism. For example, Erman & Möller (2023) ask why we should submit to group norms or contribute to the production of binding collective decisions. In these circumstances, this political conception of political value would still lack (like other realist proposals, according to its critics) the capacity to provide political reasons for action (see Bermejo-Luque 2024). For his part, Leader Maynard (2024, section 4) points out that the criteria Burelli stipulates to characterize a function would be compatible, if applied to politics, with many forms of brutal political repression.

Another attempt to overcome the limitations of Williams' proposal regarding the grounding of political normativity consists in understanding such grounding in epistemic terms. Thus, Prinz and Rossi (2017, 357) propose to dispense with the “residual moralism” of William's CTP, retaining its causal or genealogical element, but motivating it with epistemic rather than moral considerations.[[7]](#footnote-7) One source for this project is Haslanger's (2012) reformulation of the social constructionist critique of ideology. Rossi combines the realist tradition of ideology critique with Cohen's (2008) rejection of feasibility constraints. Thus “realists can make prescriptions that do not take feasibility into account, but other constraints apply” Rossi (2019, 644). These limitations are summarized in the attention to the complexities of political dynamics and would allow to avoid, among other shortcomings that Rossi attributes to the various forms of political moralism, a problem that he finds in Cohen and to which we have already referred: the difficulty of explaining where the grounding of moral intuitions and judgments comes from.

Rossi's (2019) proposal has been criticized from the moralist camp, using the same type of criticism that Cohen already addressed to Rawls' constructivism: a normative political judgment cannot be derived solely from facts nor from epistemic norms, although both can participate in the inference: “practical, action-guiding norms (i.e., practical normativity)” are necessary (Erman & Möller 2022, 5), which for these authors is equivalent to saying: “moral norms, moral normativity are necessary”. This objection, however, has force only if one assumes that normativity cannot come out of politics itself, but must come from outside: either from moral or epistemic norms. Once epistemic norms have been ruled out, it is obvious to the political moralist that they must be moral. In a similar, moralist vein, Frega (2020) has criticized realists’ use of empirical studies of political behavior for assessing normative theories of democracy and has claimed that democracy is a practical postulate of political reason. Leader Maynard, for his part, criticizes Aytaç & Rossi's (2023, 8) assertion that the “epistemic critique” of political arguments is less subject to ideological distortion because “morality doesn't even try to be politically innocent, whereas epistemology does”. According to Leader Maynard (2024, section 4), it is precisely the fact that moral discourse does not hide its value-ladenness that makes it less misleading, as opposed to the claim of the defenders of the epistemic variant of realism to rely on value-free facts. A different objection to the attempt to reconstruct political normativity from ideology critique (Rodríguez- Alcázar, Bermejo-Luque and Molina Pérez 2021, 817) is that, while negative critique is important and the mention of relevant facts may rule out certain political options, in the positive construction of political projects the ideology critique leaves the scope of proposals too indeterminate. One would expect from a normative practice such as politics the (justified) proposal of projects and not only the critique of others' proposals.

**6 Third ways: the “filter view” and political minimalism**

The difficulties encountered by both moralism and realism on political normativity and its relation to morality have motivated some attempts to develop “third ways” based on different strategies. One such attempt is what Erman & Möller (2024) call the “filter view”, building on Sleat's (2022, 474) claim that moral principles should be “filtered through or aligned to the realities of politics” if they are to contribute to political normativity. While Larmore (2013, 279), another proponent of a version of this filter view, resists describing his own proposal within political realism or moralism, other philosophers to whom the filter view can be attributed, such as Sleat (2022) and Jubb (2015,) identify themselves as realists, although they tend to distance themselves from those versions of realism that want to make political normativity independent of morality (Sleat 2022, 466).[[8]](#footnote-8) Whether or not it is classified as realist, in any case, this is a proposal that combines elements traditionally attributed to both the moralist and realist traditions. The fundamental moralist element of this view is the recognition of the ineliminable role of moral elements in the justification of political proposals. As for the realist elements, they can be summarized in two. The first is the primacy of legitimacy over justice as the central theme of political philosophy (Larmore 2020, 15; Sleat 2022); the second, already mentioned, is the need to “filter” moral principles with relevant facts to form the basis of political normativity. Although these proposals try to avoid the problems of the most radical forms of realism, they continue to receive criticism from the moralist camp. Thus, Erman & Möller (2024) consider that, by prioritizing legitimacy over justice, Larmore (like other defenders of the “filter view” and most realists) risks overly restricting the scope of political philosophy. Moreover, this prioritization would not free the critics of moralism from having to accept a greater weight of morality than they want to acknowledge: admitting that a decision can be both legitimate and morally questionable would be compatible, according to Erman & Möller (2022, section 3), with holding that legitimacy is attributed on the basis of moral premises.

Another third way out of realism and moralism is political minimalism (Rodríguez-Alcázar 2017a; Bermejo-Luque 2024). Political minimalism is a constitutivist position. Its starting point is to characterize politics as a constitutively normative practice whose constitutive end is to provide good answers to the question “what shall we do?”, asked by or on behalf of a political community. The proposal is minimalist because it forgoes specifying a “substantive” end for politics, unlike many versions of both realism and moralism. Political minimalism inherits the Williamsian conception of practical deliberation as an all things considered deliberation but distinguishes two basic types of practical deliberation: that which answers the question “what shall I do?” and that which answers the question “what shall we do?” Both questions may include moral sub-deliberations, but neither is reducible to moral deliberation, nor does it take morality as the source of its justification. In this sense, political minimalism breaks more radically than the “filter view” the justificatory link of political normativity with moral principles. Nevertheless, it is not a type of realism, among other reasons because it does not commit itself to the thesis that conflict and struggle for power are consubstantial elements of politics, nor does it share the priority usually attributed by realists to political legitimacy (Bermejo-Luque 2024, section 7). Although it is a novel proposal for politics, constitutivism is a strategy with a certain tradition in other fields, such as argumentation theory (see Bermejo Luque 2011) or rationality theory (e.g. Korsgaard 2009), so the viability of this proposal is linked to the possibility of showing the fruitfulness of constitutivist strategies to account for different types of normativity.

**7 The impact of the debate in other areas and the contribution of the articles in this special issue**

As the above discussion makes clear, the question on the sources of political normativity opens a lively arena of debate and, although the discussion has been greatly nuanced since the publication in 2005 of Williams' posthumous book, disagreements remain on some crucial points. The moderate and radical defenders of moralism and realism, as well as the supporters of some of the third ways described above, continue to refine their criticisms of the opposing positions and reinforce their own, with occasional concessions to the other parties. This argumentative exchange provides certainly one of the most interesting debates within the field that we can call “metapolitics”, what would be an autonomous field of discussion that occupies a level of abstraction analogous to metaethics and that maintains with normative political philosophy and politics itself a relationship similar to that which metaethics maintains with moral philosophy and morality. As is well known, some authors (e.g., Dworkin 1996) have questioned the metaethics/normative ethics distinction, and even those who accept it usually admit the limits that the adoption of one given metaethical position often impose on normative ethics. Similarly, we are convinced that the metapolitical debate about the sources of political normativity has important consequences in other areas. Regarding the realist field, two books edited by Sagar and Sabl (2018) and Sleat (2018) collect numerous articles that draw the consequences of political realism for various fields. Among these fields, one is democratic theory (see Raekstad 2020), while Jubb (2015) has pointed out the consequences of realism when evaluating egalitarian political demands. For their part, Rodríguez-Alcázar (2017b), and Rodríguez-Alcázar, Bermejo-Luque & Molina Pérez (2021), have pointed out that a consequence of the rejection of political moralism in favor of a minimalist metapolitical position is the redefinition of debates traditionally attributed to applied ethics as political problems, while Bermejo-Luque & Rodríguez-Alcázar (forthcoming) show the consequences of political minimalism for the recovery of cosmopolitanism as a political ideology, after having been previously reformulated as a moral doctrine by authors such as Pogge (1992). This exploration of the external consequences of the metapolitical debate is also present in several articles of this special issue, namely those by Rossi (2024), Burelli & Destri (2024), Cibik (2024), Cunningham Matamoros (2024), and Bernstein & Gomila (2024).

We include in this special issue metapolitical contributions by authors representative of the main currents involved in the present debate. Among them, we find advocates of political moralism (Leader Maynard, Erman & Möller, Testini), of political realism (Enzo Rossi, Burelly & Destri), and of one of the third avenues mentioned: political minimalism (Bermejo Luque). We also include an author (Sommavilla) who defends an unusual stance, since he starts from a constructivist framework (usually associated with political moralism) to defend the existence of an autonomous political normativity, a thesis that could allow him to be included in the realist camp. Based more on the moral constructivism of authors such as Korsgaard (1996) and Street (2010) than on the political constructivism of Rawls or Habermas, Sommavilla argues for the existence of collective political obligations which, however, would only constitute “thin” obligations for individuals.

In his contribution to this special issue, Jonathan Leader Maynard notes that positive characterizations of political moralism are often lacking in the debate between political realists and moralists, so he proceeds to fill this gap by explaining what political moralism is and what it is not. He does so on the basis of the theses defended by the moralist philosophers themselves and by excluding from his portrait some features that, in his view, are unfairly attributed to political moralism by its opponents.

Eva Erman and Niklas Möller explore the role of moral norms in political theory as a basis for criticizing both the more radical variants of political realism that exclude morality as a source of political normativity and the more moderate “filter view,” which is sometimes presented as a third way between realism and moralism. While other moralist positions have developed from constructivist positions such as Rawls', the critical theses of Erman and Möller have as their main referent GA Cohen's arguments against the possibility of developing normative conclusions from facts, without resorting to moral premises.

The third metapolitical article identified with the convictions of political moralism is that of Francesco Testini. He rejects the Williamsian conception that understands political normativity to be based on all-things-considered judgments, since he considers that these judgments can be explained by the interplay of general moral principles and contextual facts, which is equivalent to admit that morality provides the foundation of political normativity.

Finally, in an article that represents a third way between political moralism and political realism, Lilian Bermejo-Luque takes Williams' conception of practical rationality in terms of an all things considered deliberation as the starting point to show, against moralist stances, that politics constitutes a normative domain of its own. However, she departs from the realist strategies of Williams and others to ground political normativity by means of the constitutivist strategy proper to political minimalism.

As for articles that illustrate the implications of the metapolitical debate in other areas, we begin with two that provide, at the same time, a defense of political realism, namely those by Rossi and Burelli & Destri.

Enzo Rossi's article is positioned between metapolitical analysis and normative political discussion. On the one hand, he defends a form of realism—radical realism—that grounds political normativity in epistemic normativity, under a reliabilist conception of knowledge, rather than in moral normativity. At the same time, however, this radical realism applies the strategy of ideology critique by tracing a genealogy of legitimizing narratives that helps diagnose the distribution of power in society. Thus, contrasting with the tendency of other realist authors to support politically conservative ideas or to advocate for non-moralist versions of liberalism, Rossi seeks to reinforce political stances that challenge the status quo. Specifically, he offers a middle path between relational and structural theories of power, aiming to address the limitations of ideology critique as understood by both Foucauldians and classical Marxists.

Carlo Burelli and Chiara Destri go one step further in applying metapolitical theses to a specific field—namely, public discourse. They criticize, from a political realist perspective (assumed as a starting point rather than argued), the issues caused by the adoption of moralistic attitudes within this field. After analyzing three types of moralism and their negative consequences, the authors propose a strategy for enhancing the quality of public discourse. This approach emphasizes the recognition of not only a plurality of values but also a plurality of spheres of values in public life. According to the authors, this inescapable plurality implies the inadequacy of morality in answering the question “What should we do?” and highlights the need to turn to political discussion to address it.

The three remaining articles deal with examples from quite different areas: while Cibik's article focus on climate change, the text by Cunningham Matamoros discusses immigration theories, and Bernstein & Gomila's center on truth in the media.

First, Cibik takes the moralism-realism debate into a practical context by asking about the importance of framing a problem in moral or political terms. Against the moralistic inclination to tightly link these frames, and against the tendency to frame and understand in moral terms many of the most urgent political problems, Cibik exemplifies through the case of the fight against climate change the need to keep the moral and political frames separate and to pay more attention to the conclusions provided by the political approach to certain problems.

Cunningham Matamoros, writing from a greater sympathy for political moralism, makes an internal critique of certain elements usually associated with moralist positions, like moral monism and moral overridingness. Taking the methodology of migration ethics as a case study, he argues for the recognition of prudential normativity and normative pluralism as a way to avoid what he calls “the toy theory problem” in migration ethics methodology.

Finally, Bernstein & Gomila adopt as their starting point an element in the philosophy of Williams (2005) that has not being referred to in other papers of this special issue: the question of truthfulness in politics, and Williams’ warning that the media often work against truthfulness. The authors focus on two phenomena that occur frequently in the new social media platforms: the rise of conspiracy theories and the moralization of politics. Both connect with two of Williams' concerns: conspiracy theories, on the one hand, epitomize the risk of self-deception. On the other hand, the moralization of politics, that would trigger sectarianism and hate for the “others”, relates with the caveats of Williams against the morality system and the insufficient recognition of the autonomy of politics, which are so present in the metapolitical discussions of this collection.

Undoubtedly, the metapolitical debate on the sources of political normativity is more vibrant than ever, with new developments likely in the coming years. We can also anticipate a redefinition of numerous theoretical and practical topics as a result of this debate’s findings. We hope that this special issue captures the dynamism of the discussion and the breadth of its implications. Additionally, we hope it contributes to fostering greater attention to political normativity in contemporary philosophy.

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1. Now, as we shall see, while Cohen's influence has notoriously served to ground anti-realist positions, constructivism has instead provided arguments both for moralist philosophers and for advocates of a political normativity not dependent on moral normativity, as Sommavilla (2024) illustrates. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Geuss (2008, 6-8) also makes this point [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rossi (2024) identifies the prioritization of this axiological (or “evaluative”) perspective as a defining feature of realism and justifies that the radical realism he advocates relinquishes the deontic (or “prescriptive”) perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One exception is Bagg (2022), who challenges the usual association between realism and legitimacy and advocates a practical approach in which political theory would compare the concrete possibilities for action of political actors. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In the case of another outstanding representative of political constructivism, Jürgen Habermas, the key is also in the procedure: in particular, his conception of political normativity is grounded on a theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1998). Regarding the moral grounding of politics, Habermas (2003) outlines a nuanced relationship between morality and ethics. On the one hand, the field of ethics encompasses individual and collective conceptions of the good—or, from a political perspective, the plural values and ways of life deemed worthy of being called 'good' based on reflective assessment (with this appeal to reflective assessment underscoring the constructivist nature of Habermas’s proposal). On the other hand, moral discourse addresses what is good for everyone from an impartial perspective. Consequently, in Habermas’s political philosophy, moral discourse is confined to matters of interpersonal justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This strategy is what Erman & Möller (2020) call “the conceptual approach”, which we can find, in addition to Williams (2005), in Rossi & Sleat (2014), Jubb & Rossi (2015) and Hall (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Geuss (2016) and Rossi (2019 and 2024) also argue for genealogy as a specific method of negative critique of ideologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In this regard, even the latest version of epistemologically-grounded radical realism advocated by Rossi (2024) can be seen as another form of “filter view”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)