"To anyone who is unable to endure the fate of the age like a man, we must say that he should return to the welcoming and merciful embrace of the old churches.” That was the stark choice Max Weber offered his young auditors late in 1917, as he spoke against “professorial prophecy” and other category mistakes. Raymond Geuss’s *Philosophy and Real Politics* is a bracing polemic in this Weberian spirit. Its target is what Geuss calls the “ethics-first” approach to political philosophy, exemplified centrally by neo-Kantianism, and preeminently by the work of John Rawls. Adherents of this view, Geuss says, suppose “that one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act”—preferably with as little reference to specific historical situations as possible—“and then in a second step...apply that theory to the action of political agents” (8). Against this, Geuss defends what he calls “realist” political philosophy or theory (Geuss uses these terms interchangeably, and I will follow his usage here), whose “patrons” include not only Weber but also Nietzsche and Lenin (32). This form of political thought is devoted to the study of “historically instantiated forms of collective human action,” with particular attention to the configurations and distributions of power these involve; the concrete alternatives available to actors at particular times; and the modes of legitimation through which people evaluate political phenomena (22). Yes, evaluate: Geuss’s brand of realism is notable because it does not
deny the political relevance or efficacy of norms, even of morality. Geuss objects only to
the distorting inflation of the pre-philosophical practice of moral evaluation into a
putatively all-encompassing *theory* of politics. “Individuals or groups can cultivate their
ethical intuitions and exercise their capacities for moral approval or disapproval *ad
libitum,*” he allows, “as long as they do not confuse that with attaining any understanding
whatever of the world in which they live, or think that their (clarified) moral intuitions
have some special standing as completely adequate guides to political action” (99). Nor
is Geuss’s brand of realism meant to be deradicalizing: one of Geuss’s objections to
ethics-first political philosophy, as it turns out, is that its inattention to the historical
character of real politics has ideological effects, distracting political theorists from the
structures of power that ought to command their attention.

The purpose of this polemic, as Geuss puts it, is not to “change the minds of
people who already have firmly fixed settled opinions on how political philosophy ‘must’
be done.” Instead, writing for those who share his dissatisfaction with the ethics-first
approach, or whose views of the point of political theory are “unformed or unsettled,”
Geuss aspires to sketch “a viable way of thinking about politics that is orthogonal to the
mainstream of contemporary analytic political philosophy” (18). The two long chapters
that make up the bulk of the book pursue this aim in two different ways: the first is
constructive; the second, critical. Geuss begins by elaborating his own account of the
nature of politics, and draws from this a catalogue of the “tasks of political theory” (37).
To say that we are political creatures, for Geuss, means that “we are bound to each other
by various relations of power, and we try to act in a concerted way under pressure of time
and resources, and in such a way as to give some kind of account to ourselves and others
about why we are acting in the way we are” (37). Against this background, political theory or philosophy can do (and has done) many things. It can help us “understand how the organised forms of acting together in a given society actually work” (37–38); it can aid us in the evaluation (and not only the moral evaluation) of political acts and arrangements; it can help us achieve a sense of “orientation” in relation to “some larger imaginative structure” that gives sense or significance to our political activity (40–42); it can help political actors reconceive their situation, and the nature of the problems they confront, by inventing “new thought-instrument[s] or conceptual tool[s]” (43); and it can engage in the exposure and criticism of “ideological illusion,” by which Geuss means the distorted presentation of “particular” beliefs and as though they were “universal” (52–53). (Geuss allows that political philosophy can also itself be ideological, either deliberately or inadvertently, if it diverts attention away from the “power relations” in which political issues are inevitably embedded; but this, he seems to suggest, is “reputable” task for political theory [54–55].) And, of course, since “politics is historically located,” performing any of these tasks well will demand at least some attention to the “specific cultural and historical and circumstances” in which political action is undertaken (13, 15).

Geuss’s account of the point of political theory is refreshing and inspiring. Refreshing, because it allows political theory several tasks instead of assigning it only one; because it confounds the division of labor between “is” and “ought” that has helped define relations between political theory and political science since World War II, too often with the acquiescence of political theorists; because it likewise refuses the division of labor within political theory between (to borrow the census categories of the American
Political Science Association) “normative” and “historical” approaches; and because it makes it seem puzzling rather than obviously sensible that historically minded political theorists should so commonly confine themselves to intellectual history. And inspiring, because it names, renders legible, and helps to legitimate some modes of inquiry that often fall between the cracks of the field’s better-recognized rubrics. Geuss’s characterization of “conceptual innovation” is especially compelling in this respect: such innovation, he insists, involves more than merely the “pragmatic invention of tools” for a theoretical purpose given in advance—say, to help people judge between two possible courses of action (49); instead, it involves the application of the theoretical imagination to situations in which people are “at a loss what to do” not because they are unsure which option is better, but “because they are confused about what is wrong or what the problem precisely is” (43). I do not think I will be the only reader who will take pleasure in finding some of his or her own inchoate aspirations reflected, and made eloquent, in these pages.

In the second part of the book, Geuss develops his critique of “ethics-first” political theory in greatest detail, exploring what he calls “failures of realism” in the work of Rawls and Robert Nozick (the former of whom receives the bulk of Geuss’s attention). In each case, Geuss begins by exposing the historically contingent, indeed parochial character of some foundational concept that Nozick (“rights”) or Rawls (“justice”) treats ahistorically; in the latter case this initial argument opens out into a wider attack on Rawls’s appeals to “intuition,” which for Geuss have the effect of falsely universalizing the historically specific views of Rawls’s implied audience of postwar American liberals. This, being the book’s most polemical part, is also likely to be the most controversial, and
while I have no particular interest in defending Rawls (indeed I am broadly sympathetic to the claim that Rawls’s thought fares poorly as a theory of “real politics” in Geuss’s sense), some aspects of Geuss’s argument strike me as, at least, overstated, including especially the suggestion that Rawls’s main argumentative strategy is to appeal to the intuitions of his readers, which overlooks the fact that Rawls’s defense of justice as fairness depends crucially on the limits he places on the role of intuitionism in moral argument.

But there is a larger issue here, for Geuss himself says that he is less interested, in this text, in “the details of Rawls’s view” than in the “particular style of theorising about politics” he represents (70)—a style whose importance Geuss hopes to deflate, and perhaps even to rule out of court entirely. (In a longer treatment of Rawls, Geuss has written that for those with his sort of views about politics, “Rawls is not a major moral and political theorist, whose work self-evidently deserves and repays the most careful scrutiny”; and in the present book he writes that “in real politics, theories like that of Rawls are nonstarters, except, as course, as potential ideological interventions”—and recall that ideological intervention, as opposed to ideology-critique, appeared to be outside the family of “respectable” tasks for political philosophy.) It seems to me, however, that a different strategy might serve Geuss, and those who find themselves sympathetic to his line of criticism, better than the gatekeeping approach on view here. For if A Theory of Justice is indeed “an attempt to reconcile Americans to an idealised version of their own social order at the end of the twentieth century” (89), it is at least an extraordinarily explicit, systematic, and detailed attempt—a wonderfully rich vein of source material, one would think, for anyone who wished to launch a more radical
critique of that order by identifying and sharpening its symptomatic tensions and contradictions. (I think here of Marx’s attitude toward the classical political economists.) Rather than “repudiate” Rawls (94), in other words, why not give him the “most careful scrutiny,” only without assuming that such scrutiny must be oriented toward answering the same questions (or the same genre of questions) that Rawls himself asked?

Indeed, this approach would, I think, be most consistent with the appealing picture of the tasks of political theory that Geuss develops in the first part of Philosophy and Real Politics, not least because it would provide an occasion to set a book like A Theory of Justice into the specific historical contexts, intellectual and otherwise, to which it belongs but to which it does not draw attention. It might also help Geuss bridge an important gap in his own distinctive brand of “realism.” It is by no means obvious that political realism, and in particular its focus on the concrete choices among limited alternatives made by agents with finite resources, will necessarily harmonize well with the critique of ideology, which, for Geuss, paradigmatically involves showing how the dominant frame in which a particular problem is being debated obscures the “underlying issue” in that case. (Geuss uses this phrase in the course of explaining why moral outrage at the “unjust pricing” of pharmaceuticals and medical care could be considered ideological: because it draws attention away from the deeper problem in this domain, which lies in the “very existence of a free market for drugs and medical services” [54].) Yet a realist focus on the limited choices facing concrete political agents could just as easily narrow as widen the political imagination in such cases, licensing the dismissal of more radical diagnoses like Geuss’s on the grounds that they aren’t responsive to the concrete decisions that actors must make here and now. This collapsing of the space for
serious challenges to major social and political institutions is arguably one role the language of “realism” played in American politics in the years following World War II.

And this, in the end, is why a theorist like Geuss might profit in a surprising way from the mediating work performed by bodies of political theory like that of Rawls. Everyday practices of moral approval and disapproval tend to be closely tied to particular cases. For this reason, even when a particular case is controversial, the terms of that controversy will often be limited in scope; they may be more likely to obscure than to highlight certain background assumptions that are common to many or all of the disputants, but which might seem highly questionable—indeed ideological—in the longer and broader view Geuss wishes us to take. In elaborating a systematic moral theory, however, a theorist like Rawls supposes himself to be bringing the implicit structure of our ordinary moral judgments into the foreground (and also refining those judgments in the process), which means that his work already begins to transcend the limits of the discourse around this or that particular issue, and to broach larger, structural and systematic themes. To be sure, the systematic themes that concern Rawls are not the ones that concern Geuss; but you do not need to think that Rawls’s theory is valid, or coherent, or that it provides an adequate political vocabulary, in order to exploit the movement that it traces from the specific towards the general, and to use its systematicity—symptomatically, diagnostically—to help disclose political possibilities that might seem “unrealistic,” in the pejorative sense, if broached in the context of a relatively narrow dispute about a single political issue. Put differently, the Weberian choice that Geuss demands of us, between non-theoretical moral evaluation and
theoretical understanding, may be too stark for Geuss himself, if he wishes to join realism to radicalism.

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