

# Democracy and Ontology

## Agonism between Political Liberalism, Foucault and Psychoanalysis

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# 1

## *Introduction*

IN RECENT YEARS, the Netherlands has been confronted with various public debates and legal conflicts about orthodox Muslim citizens who refuse to shake hands with members of the other sex at political meetings, in the civil service, in schools and on the job market. As in many other Western European countries, the handshake is an important aspect of Dutch codes of civility. The shaking of hands establishes a feeling of mutual respect among strangers, colleagues and acquaintances alike, and many citizens consider the ritual essential to their civic identities. Not all citizens, however, want to participate in this greeting ritual. Some Dutch citizens regard it essential to their religious identities to refrain from physical contact with members of the other sex and would rather establish respectful relations with a nod of the head or a friendly smile. In the last decade, Dutch courts had to deliberate upon various disputes between employers—who considered the handshake crucial to job performance—and orthodox Muslim citizens who demanded an exemption from this dominant Dutch greeting ritual.

The conflict concerning the handshake—about which I will say more in chapter two—paves the way for numerous important questions. Some of these inquiries look for normative standards, that is, they focus on values or principles that designate how political life should be structured. Should civic conduct assume a principle of mutual respect? Does the value of mutual respect imply that we ought to respect each other's religious and cultural traditions? Which interests might trump respect for diversity? Such normative questions figure prominently on the agenda of many political philosophers. Current political thought offers a highly divergent supply of normative guidelines, varying from one or two meta-principles of justice to pluralistic accounts of moral capabilities and detailed case studies of issues that are topical in democratic regimes.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, political philosophy

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls are two prominent political thinkers who aim to settle political dispute by reference to, respectively, one and two principles of justice. R Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000); J Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter, *A Theory of Justice* will be referred to as *TOJ*. For pluralist accounts of moral capabilities or capacities and their application, see M Nussbaum,

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contributes to an ongoing argument about the normative aspects of political regimes that could be of help to anyone who seeks to form a judgement about political conflicts, such as the dispute over the handshake.

But there is more at stake in political disputes than normative issues. In this book I draw attention to an aspect of political conflicts that is sometimes overlooked when we become entangled with normative questions, that is, the so-called ‘ontological’ dimension of disputes. In political philosophy, the term ‘ontology’ is typically used for presuppositions about the fundamental conditions of political existence and the limits and possibilities that these constituent features open up.<sup>2</sup> For instance, an ontology might indicate that political communities are constituted by individuals that can rise above traditional customs. Or, it may narrate that political communities are essentially conditioned by corporeal social-historical structures, like bodily rituals, that individuals can never completely surmount.

Ontological presuppositions are not identical to normative assumptions: ontology offers a contestable interpretation of what the political world is made of rather than how it should be structured.<sup>3</sup> But ontological assumptions do have a significant impact upon normative inquiries: by indicating which factors of the political world we need to take into account, they structure the normative outlook or proposals that we tend to adopt.<sup>4</sup>

*Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000); B Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London, Palgrave, 2000). Joseph Carens argues for a contextual analysis of justice in J Carens, *Culture, Citizenship, and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Warren offers a helpful, concise division of the subject matter of political philosophy into ontological, epistemological and normative questions, noting that political philosophy is often mistakenly identified with normative theory, see M Warren, ‘What is Political Philosophy’ (1989) 22 *PS: Political Science and Politics* 606. See also J Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001) 160–66; W Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 1–40; B Jessop, ‘Political Ontology, Political Theory, Political Philosophy, and the Ironic Contingencies of Political Life’ in R Schmidinger and C Sedmak (eds), *Der Mensch—ein Zoon Politikon: Gemeinschaft, Öffentlichkeit, Macht* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005); D Mayhew, ‘Political Science and Political Philosophy: Ontological Not Normative’ (2000) 33 *PS: Political Science and Politics* 192; C Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995); S White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Neither are ontological claims identical to empirical claims about political life: ontology is part of the basic assumptions about the political world that helps to delineate the various domains of empirical research. For instance, when we want to study civic action, an ontological assumption about the role of the body in human identity-formation relations structures the choice to include or exclude bodily conduct in empirical research.

<sup>4</sup> Importantly, normative commitments also affect the ontological thesis that one adopts. I discuss this point in s II.

Consider, for instance, the Dutch conflict about the handshake. One ontological issue that this case opened up was the relation between bodily conduct and human identity-formation. In the media, a Dutch philosopher claimed that the insistence on particular forms of bodily expression, such as exchanging a handshake, was actually an effect of a lack of ideological beliefs:

[T]he country yearns for new *ideological orientation*, an answer to the question what The Netherlands is, what it wants to be and why. As long as these questions remain unanswered, fear and insecurity take over; newcomers cannot be received in a normal fashion (and characteristic traits are sought for in *trivialities* such as presents on birthdays, headscarves and *shaking hands*).<sup>5</sup>

Another commentator suggested that the refusal by an orthodox Muslim to give a handshake originated in a hidden desire: ‘We can also cast some doubts on his motives. Is he really motivated by a deeply felt religious belief, or is he motivated by a deeply felt desire to disrupt Dutch society?’.<sup>6</sup>

These two responses seem to imply that human beings are more fundamentally shaped by inner states of minds, like beliefs and desires, than by bodily acts. That is to say, they suggest that when we try to make sense of an attachment to particular forms of bodily conduct, such as the handshake, we should not so much look at the role of our bodies in constituting identities but focus on mental characteristics. In turn this ontology seems to affect the normative stance one defends. Take, for instance, the proposal by the first commentator to diminish fear in the Netherlands by developing new ideological beliefs about Dutch identity. The strengthening of ideological convictions appears as the natural starting-point for developing normative solutions when you assume that human beings are fundamentally shaped by (ideological) beliefs. But if you treat the physical body as an ontological feature of human identities, this prescription might be less evident: you could find it insufficient to look for solutions in terms of beliefs and aim for practices of civic conduct that take into account the fact that bodies fundamentally shape civic relations.

Addressing the question of whether the body is a fundamental or a rather trivial constituent of civic relations would implicate political philosophers in a difficult ontological investigation. What role do particular forms of bodily conduct play in the enactment of individual and collective identities? Does it make sense to reduce the adherence to bodily rituals to a mental trait? How do bodies and beliefs interact? In comparison to normative topics, however,

<sup>5</sup> G Buijs, ‘De Christelijke Traditie Wijst de Weg naar een Nieuw Samenlevingsideaal’ (2007) *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 January 15 (emphasis added, translation by the author).

<sup>6</sup> H Mees, ‘Moslimemancipatie’ (2007) *NRC Handelsblad*, 26 January 7 (translated by the author).

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such ontological questions receive relatively little attention in current political thought. In fact, in recent years, one of the most influential paradigms in contemporary political philosophy established the avoidance of ontological issues as a central tenet in its programme. Political liberalism, founded by the American philosopher John Rawls, argues that political philosophers should separate political thought from ontological themes.<sup>7</sup> According to Rawls, ontological issues, such as questions about the ‘nature of moral or political agents’ or the constituent features of ‘personal identity’, will distract us from important normative questions, such as the formulation of principles of justice, and will make it impossible to arrive at a consensus on justice in democratic regimes.<sup>8</sup> The strategy to avoid ontology is mirrored in the political liberalist view of democratic debate. In disputes about fundamental issues of justice, such as constitutional rights or a society’s basic policies on mutual respect, citizens should limit themselves to political arguments that their fellow citizens will consider uncontroversial, and refrain from introducing ontological arguments about, say, the constitutive role of the body in human identity-formation.

In contrast to political liberalism, this book aims to show the impact of controversial ontological presuppositions upon democratic theory and practice. I seek to show the need for developing an ontology of democracy, and I hope to bring out the need for a critique of ontology in democratic politics. I pursue these goals by critically engaging with political liberalism; the work of the French thinker Michel Foucault; psychoanalytic theory; various case studies such as the Dutch debate on the handshake, an American conflict over the regulation of religious freedom, and the struggles for emotional empowerment of two American social movement groups.

This introduction lays down some thoughts about the need for illuminating ontology in democratic theory and practice, and explains how I will try to evaluate these considerations in this study. I start by saying a bit about my usage of the terms that I bring together here: democracy and ontology. My short terminological exposition, which focuses mainly on current political philosophy, is not by any means intended as a comprehensive overview of the various ways in which these terms are employed by political philosophers, let alone within the philosophical tradition at large. Rather, I want to sketch some preliminary characteristics of these terms so as to get my discussion off the ground—a working definition, one might say, that will be elucidated in this introduction and the chapters that follow.

<sup>7</sup> J Rawls, *Political Liberalism: With a New Introduction and the ‘Reply to Habermas’* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996) 11. Hereafter *Political Liberalism* will be referred to as *PL*.

<sup>8</sup> As I explain in ch 2, Rawls uses the term ‘metaphysical’ for ontological questions about the nature of human freedom or identity.

## I. DEMOCRACY

In the last decades, political philosophers have increasingly affirmed understandings of democracy that express normative ideals.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the many conflicting normative interpretations of democracy in current political thought are difficult to pin down under one term and are best understood by looking at the ways in which they are used. Nonetheless, for this introductory purpose I will fix the various disagreements over the normative underpinnings of democracy as a dispute about the understanding of ‘public autonomy’—a value that I believe to be central to most democratic conceptions. The notion of public autonomy, defined in the most basic terms, suggests that individuals should have a voice in the formation of rules that govern them. In a democratic regime, people are not only subjected to the exercise of power but, to a greater or lesser extent, should also have possibilities to influence the way that power is exercised. In what follows I briefly mention four important interpretations of public autonomy in political philosophy and note how my own understanding of democracy relates to these accounts.

In the minimalist liberal understanding, the value of public autonomy is typically associated with the institutionalisation of individual rights.<sup>10</sup> Basically, citizens are said to be free in virtue of their capacity to pursue a variety of private interests (such as participation in the market or establishing a family) and exercise their rights in order to check whether political representatives adequately safeguard these interests. For instance, by participating in periodic elections, citizens can eject representatives who have abused their power to advance their own interests rather than those of the citizens.

Numerous contemporary political philosophers have argued that this minimalist understanding of public autonomy is inadequate to realise a democratic society. For instance, participatory democrats claim that the periodic exercise of rights is not sufficient to prevent the abuse of power by public officials. A democratic society can only sustain itself through a citizenry that has enough experience in keeping a critical watch on its political representatives by actively taking part in political activities. On this account, public autonomy implies that citizens should regularly participate

<sup>9</sup> That is to say, most contemporary political thinkers no longer aim for a normatively neutral conception of democracy but seek to make democracy intelligible by reference to some kind of moral or ethico-political aspiration. See A Gutmann, ‘Democracy’ in R Goodin and P Pettit (eds), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1993). Gutmann offers a concise overview of current democratic conceptions that has informed my own account here.

<sup>10</sup> Arguments for an interest-based, minimalist understanding of democracy can be found in R Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York, Basic Books, 1974); R Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989).

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in political initiatives, such as social movements, representative councils, discussion groups and so on. Furthermore, the claim is that through frequent participation the civic character of citizens will change for the better: democratic participation makes better citizens.<sup>11</sup> Deliberative democrats also consider widespread civic participation integral to public autonomy. They argue that processes of collective decision-making should include public processes of opinion- and will-formation in which citizens engage in arguments for their various positions. In this public dialogue, citizens do not take each other's interests for granted but critically challenge the various traditions that have shaped these interests. The goal of this process is to arrive at a democratic agreement in which the better arguments have been decisive; deliberative democrats oppose agreements that are the aggregate of various interests established prior to democratic deliberation.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, agonistic democrats affirm the need for an active citizenry as well as the importance of a vibrant democratic debate that challenges traditions. In opposition to deliberative democracy, however, agonists do not anticipate that democratic processes of opinion- and will-formation can lead to a rational consensus about rules. While democratic debates can enhance our insight into the various traditional backgrounds that shape the citizenry, such a critical learning process remains affected by arbitrary power relations. Moreover, many agonistic democrats are wary of conceptions of democracy that reduce democratic participation to public deliberation and argue that public autonomy should also include a set of virtues or habits that helps citizens to live with disagreement.<sup>13</sup>

In the course of this book it will become clear that my own understanding of democracy is closest to agonistic democracy. To be sure, I affirm the need for individual rights, a politically active citizenry, and public processes of deliberation. However, I will also argue that democratic regimes cannot transcend arbitrary power relations. In addition, I emphasise the

<sup>11</sup> See B Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984); C Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Key authors in the deliberative democratic paradigm include: J Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996); A Gutmann and D Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> For agonistic conceptions of democracy, see B van den Brink, 'Liberalism without Agreement: Political Autonomy and Agonistic Citizenship' in J Christman and J Anderson (eds) *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005); W Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999); B Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993); H Lindahl, 'The Opening: Alegality and Political Agonism' in A Schaap (ed), *Law and Agonist Politics* (Surrey, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009); C Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, Verso, 2000); D Owen, 'The Expressive Agon: On Political Agency in a Constitutional Democratic Polity' in Schaap (ed), *ibid*; J Tully, 'The Agonic Freedom of Citizens' (1999) 28 *Economy and Society* 161.

importance of habitual practices that help citizens to participate in and to recover from ongoing political disagreements. Given the fact that I will use the term ‘democracy’ in various registers, this book will treat democracy as a multi-layered concept, designating three interdependent and partly overlapping phenomena. First, democracy will be used to refer to institutions that enact collective decisions, such as law, the election process and local representative organs. Second, democracy will denote practices that enable the enactment and contestation of these collective decisions, such as the process of public opinion-formation and civic virtues. Third, democracy will refer to a set of ideas that justify and explain these two phenomena. These ideas include, among others, normative intuitions and theories, social theory, traditions of jurisprudence, as well as ontology.

Let us now take a closer look at ontology and address the issue of why it needs to be part of democracy.

## II. ONTOLOGY

‘Ontology’ literally means a theory of being; the etymological roots come from the Greek words for ‘being’ (*onta*) and ‘study’ or ‘theory’ (*logos*). In philosophy, ontology was originally used for investigations that reflect upon the fundamental categories of existence and their relations, such as the claim that all things in the universe have an essence that reason can grasp.<sup>14</sup> Kant is generally considered to be the thinker who has displaced such ontological questions, instigating a shift in Western philosophy away from ontological inquiries (into the essence of being) and toward epistemological questions (concerning the foundations of knowing or understanding being).<sup>15</sup> For instance, Kant’s inquiry into the criteria of knowledge famously challenged the idea that human beings can indeed say anything intelligible at all about the characteristics of being as such.

In twentieth century philosophy, the term ontology became primarily associated with the work of the analytic philosopher Willard van Orman Quine and the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger. Quine’s usage of ontology was embedded in a scientific worldview: he spoke of an ‘ontological commitment’ in order to refer to the entities that the acceptance of a scientific theory commits us to.<sup>16</sup> Political philosophers who work in the analytic

<sup>14</sup> The term ontology (in Latin, *ontologia*) was created by seventeenth century scholastics. It was sometimes used in the same sense as metaphysics but also seen as one branch of metaphysical inquiry (the others were cosmology and psychology). See D Borchert (ed), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2nd edn, vol 7 (Detroit, Macmillan Reference USA, 2006) 21–28.

<sup>15</sup> O Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 163; Borchert, *ibid* 28.

<sup>16</sup> W Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1969) 26–68.

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tradition sometimes appeal to Quine's understanding of ontology; for example, Rawls refers to Quine when speaking of general statements about 'what there is'.<sup>17</sup> Heidegger's usage of ontology, in contrast, was closely related to a radical critique of scientific belief-systems. In Heidegger's account, the scientific point of view takes the idea of being for granted without really demonstrating an understanding of what being means. Heidegger considers this neglect of attention towards being itself as problematic because it relegates from view the fact that the scientist's attempt to arrive at knowledge-claims *about* the world is fundamentally dependent upon his existence *in* the world. Since Heidegger has influenced the various political thinkers whose ideas this book draws upon, I will say a bit more about the function of ontology in Heidegger's work. After that I shall sketch how Heidegger's interrogations of being (the *Seinsfrage*) have recently been appropriated by thinkers who have argued for the cultivation of ontology in the context of political thought; I will then outline my own approach.

In his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger investigates being through an interpretation of the ontological features of human beings. One such feature that Heidegger brings out is that human beings are fundamentally situated or 'thrown' in the world (*Geworfenheit*).<sup>18</sup> That is to say, human beings are, in some sense, always handed over to and concerned with the world, such as by making something, or by taking care of something, discussing or questioning the world, and so on.<sup>19</sup> The things in the world that human beings encounter are bound up with these involvements: we understand and relate to things in light of the worldly practices that we are immersed in.<sup>20</sup>

The scientific point of view seems to contradict this ontological predicament. When the scientist tries to obtain knowledge about the world, he attempts to withdraw from the world. That is, the scientist works with the assumption that the world is no longer entangled with his own particular projects but is present for neutral observation. Heidegger challenges this view by bringing to our attention the possibility that the scientific outlook remains fundamentally conditioned by being thrown into the world.<sup>21</sup> When the scientist tries to arrive at objective knowledge he needs to control the worldly conditions that affect our understanding: he develops specific procedures and experiments so as to ensure that his claims will not be affected by particular biases, he strips things of their everyday meaning with the usage of specialised technical languages, and so on.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that the

<sup>17</sup> Rawls, *PL* (n 7) 379.

<sup>18</sup> M Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993) 135.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 52–59.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 66–72.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 59–62.

<sup>22</sup> *cf* Taylor (n 2) 1–19.

scientist does not just passively observe the world but that he continues to engage himself with it.<sup>23</sup> The scientific outlook, then, is after all not fundamentally different from being situated in the world, but rather, is indeed derivative of this circumstance.

To a greater or lesser extent, Heidegger's move to displace scientific understandings by means of an ontological inquiry has been influential upon various French and Anglo-Saxon political philosophers who have recently come to emphasise that democratic theory needs to elaborate an ontology. This current of thought, that has been dubbed 'weak ontology' or 'post-foundationalism', can be discerned in the work of contemporary thinkers such as Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Ernesto Laclau, Claude Lefort, Oliver Marchart, Chantal Mouffe, Charles Taylor and Stephen White.<sup>24</sup>

One of the central claims in this recent ontological turn is that ontological presuppositions are an intrinsic aspect of political thought. Even when the theorist does not explicitly articulate the ontological background of his argument, political analyses, interpretations and judgements will to some extent invoke ontological claims. As the French political philosopher Claude Lefort puts it: 'The elaboration attested to by any political society ... involves an investigation into the world, into Being as such'.<sup>25</sup>

The accentuation of the ontological dimension of political thought was initially prompted by a Heideggerian concern, that is, it was part of a challenge to the predominance of scientific understandings in political thought. For instance, Lefort underscored the investigation into being in order to dispute the idea that political scientists can make value-neutral claims.<sup>26</sup> On Lefort's account, an ontological inquiry reveals that society and the individuals that inhabit it are constituted by a symbolic system, a structure that gives form to society by making value-laden distinctions between true and false, legitimate and illegitimate, and so on. This ontology suggests that the scientist is always conditioned by values, even when he tries to escape a propensity to judge and aspires to value-neutral observations.<sup>27</sup> In the

<sup>23</sup> Consider, for instance, the system of blind peer review that many scientific journals adopt to arrive at objective evaluations about articles. A peer review procedure implicates scientists in an ongoing engagement with the world: the development of protocols, the ongoing testing of whether these protocols have been observed, the establishment of networks with other scientists who can serve as referees, and so on.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of the re-emergence of ontology in the Anglo-American political theory, see White (n 2). For an overview of this development in French post-War political theory, see Marchart (n 15).

<sup>25</sup> C Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988) 219.

<sup>26</sup> I should note that, for Lefort, 'being' is not a direct reference to Heidegger but to Merleau-Ponty who was Lefort's main source of inspiration. Several commentators, though, have noted parallels between Lefort's thinking and Heidegger. See, eg: Marchart (n 15).

<sup>27</sup> Claude Lefort clarified the need for an ontological inquiry with the distinction between 'politics' (*la politique*) and 'the political' (*le politique*). 'Politics', for Lefort, refers to the institutional or functional domain that a society delineates in opposition to law, the social,

Anglo-American context, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor also turned to ontology to dispute the prevalence of scientific methodologies in political thought. Drawing on Heidegger, among others, Taylor challenged the idea that subjects can separate themselves from the social world, and brought to the fore the idea that human beings are fundamentally shaped by historically-situated linguistic ways of life.<sup>28</sup> Taylor also argued for the need for an ontological thesis in debates on justice. For example, by calling attention to the dependence of human beings on a historical way of life, Taylor tried to lend strength to his argument that states need to support historical communities.<sup>29</sup>

This brings me to the second feature of the recent ontological turn: that the illumination of ontological assumptions can enrich our understanding of the normative conditions and social effects of democracy. Ontology specifies a range of possibilities that normative reflection can intelligibly pursue. As Taylor puts it:

[T]he ontological [view] help[s] to define the options it is meaningful to support by advocacy. Your ontological proposition, if true, can show that your neighbor's favorite social order is an impossibility or carries a price he or she did not count on.<sup>30</sup>

For example, when your ontology considers a plurality of conflicting bodily habits constitutive of social practices, you will most likely consider it senseless to aspire to a democratic regime which remains unaffected by conflicts about forms of bodily conduct.

I should stress, however, that the linkage between ontology and normativity should not be mistaken for the assertion that ontological claims are a more privileged entry-point for thinking about democracy than normative claims. Ontology offers an important *supplement* to normative assumptions but is not a *substitute* for ethico-political values. For a start, ontological assumptions need to be connected to substantive normative intuitions in order to arrive at satisfactory judgements. For instance, when I assume that conflicting bodily habits are an ontological feature of social life, this thesis is not attempting to clarify, let alone prescribe, how citizens should respond to

economics, religion, etc. Lefort allocates this viewpoint to the social (ie political) scientist: it is the task of empirical research to delineate particular facts and to discern (causal) relations between these facts. The 'political' on the other hand concerns an inquiry into the constitutive principles of a society that allows articulations of politics (vis-a-vis, for instance, civil society, religion or law) to emerge. Interpretations of the political, according to Lefort, are the task for political philosophers and are similar to what I qualify as an ontological interpretation. Marchart (n 15) 35–59 offers an instructive genealogy of the distinction between politics and the political.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor (n 2).

<sup>29</sup> See ch 2 s IV.A.i.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor (n 2) 183.

a particular bodily custom, such as an unfamiliar greeting ritual. We need to invoke normative ideas to form such an opinion, such as the aim to respect cultural differences, or the goal to enact a pluralist or, for that matter, a homogeneous culture.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, ontological investigations do not proceed from a normatively neutral position, but will to some extent express the values of one's social-historical context. For example, the attribution of the body with an ontological status will be more likely in a religious culture that specifies multiple norms for bodily conduct (such as Catholicism, Islam or Judaism) than in a religious practice which prescribes very few bodily rituals (such as Protestantism).

Ontology also helps to illuminate the unintended effects of democratic aspirations. Each normative vision needs to encounter the fact that it generates social consequences that it deems undesirable. For instance, an ideal of active citizenship might in practice turn out to be so demanding and exhausting that many citizens will turn their back on civic engagement. Reflections about democratic politics become more intelligible when democratic theory sheds light on such counterproductive effects. An ontological investigation can contribute to this diagnosis by indicating which factors of social life we need to take into account when scrutinising the consequences of democratic politics.

Third, the recent ontological turn, to a greater or lesser extent, acknowledges that ontological accounts are contestable, and generally affirms a plurality of possible ontological interpretations. That is to say, it distances itself from perspectives that consider ontological grounds immune to revision as well as those approaches which claim that the various ontological positions can be reduced to one ultimate ground. In his overview of the re-emergence of ontology in Anglo-American political theory, Stephen White explains this point by distinguishing 'strong' from 'weak' ontologies:

Strong ontologies are those ontologies that claim to show us 'the way the world is' ... this foundation's validity is unchanging and of universal reach. ... Weak ontologies respond ... to the idea that all fundamental conceptualisations of self, other, and world are contestable.<sup>32</sup>

Oliver Marchart makes a similar point in his account of ontological investigations in French post-War political theory: '[W]hat is still accepted by post-foundationalism is the necessity of some grounds. What becomes problematic as a result is not the existence of foundations (in the plural) but their ontological status—which is seen now as necessarily contingent'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Obviously, there is no necessary link between ontological investigations and democratic aims: ontological inquiries might be appropriated for democratic purposes but can also be put to work for dictatorial or totalitarian projects.

<sup>32</sup> White (n 2) 8.

<sup>33</sup> Marchart (n 15) 14.

Finally, the fourth characteristic of the ontological turn that I should mention pertains to the content of ontology. Political thinkers who have contributed to this train of thought typically agree with Heidegger that human beings are, in one way or another, fundamentally thrown or situated in the world. Among others, they draw attention to the way in which the human self is fundamentally conditioned by history, language and intersubjective relations, and thereby seek to displace overly individualist and rationalist conceptions of the human being.

In short, what emerges from the recent ontological turn is that ethico-political arguments gain strength when supported by a contestable ontology. While ontology cannot discharge the theorist from developing normative claims, political thinkers should not limit their focus to normative theory either. By actively cultivating ontological claims political theory offers a better incentive for the understanding of political disputes than it does when treating ontology as a latent or irrelevant set of background assumptions.

### III. POLITICAL LIBERALISM, FOUCAULT AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

This book seeks to contribute to the renewed interest in ontology in current political thought through a critical engagement with political liberalism, the work of Michel Foucault, and psychoanalysis. Political liberalism offers an excellent starting-point from which to evaluate the claims and concerns raised by the ontological turn. If the political liberalist arguments about the separation of ontology from democratic theory and practice can be maintained, the case for illuminating ontological issues becomes much less plausible. For this reason, I believe that the political liberalist arguments for separating ontology and democracy warrant much more critical scrutiny than they have received thus far.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Several critiques of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls' initial account of justice, focused on ontological issues—eg, Honig (n 13) 126–61; Taylor (n 2); M Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982). The debate about *Political Liberalism*, however, focused mainly on normative issues, such as the question of whether political liberalism amounts to a perfectionist or comprehensive ethical doctrine. In a five volume collection of influential articles about Rawls in H Richardson and P Weithman (eds), *The Philosophy of Rawls: A Collection of Essays, Volume 1–5* (New York, Garland, 1999) only one article critically interrogates the adequacy of a 'non-metaphysical' conception of justice: J Hampton, 'Should Political Philosophy Be Done Without Metaphysics?' in H Richardson, vol 5, *ibid*, 177. Connolly and Honig, do challenge the plausibility of a 'non-metaphysical' conception of justice in their critical readings of Rawls (Connolly (n 2) 3–4; Honig (n 13) 196–99). But they do not discuss how much the strategy of avoidance is at odds with commitments that are central to political liberalism itself, namely, the need for providing orientation on the normative possibilities of democratic regimes and the ongoing democratic politicisation of political philosophy (I discuss these two political liberalist commitments below and in ch 2). I believe that the case against political liberalism becomes more persuasive when we can show that the separation between ontology and democracy runs counter to important political liberalist commitments.

At the centre of my challenge to political liberalism will be the staging of an encounter between Rawls and Foucault. Like many recent French philosophers, Foucault has been influenced by Heidegger and, in a very general sense, one might say too that Foucault considers human beings to be fundamentally thrown into the world.<sup>35</sup> Foucault, however, sketched a very different picture of worldly background conditions than Heidegger did: he approached being as an ongoing power struggle, a ‘warlike clash between forces’ that enacts various hierarchical norms.<sup>36</sup> By critically exposing the exclusionary effects that power relations enact, Foucault aspired to an ongoing transformation of these worldly constituents of human thought and action. For example, Foucault has become well-known for his challenge to the social contract tradition, unmasking the universal normative theories central to this tradition as partisan competitors in the quest for power.

Now, clearly, Foucault’s project is in many respects radically opposed to that of Rawls which attempts to strengthen the social contract tradition with a systematic theory of justice.<sup>37</sup> However, the gap between Foucault and Rawls is not so wide as to make no sense in critically comparing these two thinkers. In fact, I will highlight an important point of convergence between Foucault and Rawls which allows for a productive engagement between these two thinkers that has not so far been articulated by authors working in the Rawlsian and Foucaultian traditions: both Rawls and Foucault believe that political philosophical ideas need to be subjected to an ongoing vibrant process of democratic contestation.<sup>38</sup>

The first benefit of this comparative approach is that it helps to bring into view the contentious ontological claims that political liberalism draws upon. Foucault’s critique of the social contract tradition strengthens my case that political liberalism is not ontologically impartial. Second, Foucault’s project helps me show that ontological accounts need not, as Rawls suggests,

<sup>35</sup> Foucault mentioned his indebtedness to Heidegger in his final interview: ‘My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger.’ (M Foucault, ‘Final Interview’ (1985) 5 *Raritan* 1). Hubert Dreyfus offers a succinct comparison of Heidegger and Foucault. (HL Dreyfus, ‘Being and Power: Heidegger and Foucault’ (1996) 4 *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*).

<sup>36</sup> M Foucault, in M Bertani and A Fontana (eds), ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York, Picador, 2003) 16.

<sup>37</sup> For Foucault, philosophy consists of various attempts (‘essays’) to problematise self-evident truth claims—the results of which could and should not be united into one normative systematic scheme of thought (M Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2* (London, Penguin Books, 1992) 9).

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, J Moss, ‘Foucault, Rawls and Public Reason’ in J Moss (ed), *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy* (London, SAGE Publications, 1998). Moss does not note that Rawls and Foucault share a commitment to the democratic contestation of political philosophy. See ch 3, n 114 for my critique on Moss’ account of Rawls.

lead to a stifling of democratic debates. By fleshing out the ontology that informs Foucault's project, I will demonstrate that ontological accounts can stimulate processes of democratic politicisation, and go on to argue that Foucault's ontology of freedom offers a much needed corrective to Rawls' account of freedom. Third, this undertaking contributes towards evaluating the merits of politicising ontological claims. In opposition to political liberalism, Foucault includes ontological frameworks in his practice of critique and opens up space for democratic debates that include a critical interrogation of ontology.

Finally, the last tradition of thought that this book seeks critical assistance from is psychoanalytic theory. By means of a critical investigation of the work of Sigmund Freud and Donald Winnicott, I develop an ontology of the affective consequences of losing a democratic contest: feelings of embarrassment, failure, anger and sadness when one is unsuccessful in implementing an ideal or dissenting practice. With this ontology, I hope to strengthen my ontology of democratic politics and try to repair a lacuna in current democratic thought: that most democratic thinkers who are committed to a vibrant democratic process, including Rawls and Foucault, have too little to say about the affective burdens of democratic politics.

### A. An Ontology of Democracy

One of my disagreements with Rawls concerns the question of whether ontology can offer fruitful insights into democratic politics.

Rawls' definition of democracy has increasingly moved towards a deliberative democratic understanding of public autonomy, emphasising, among other things, that democratic regimes need to be sustained by vibrant civic debates on justice. Political philosophers can contribute to such ongoing debates by developing conceptual frameworks that offer citizens orientation within the various normative possibilities—or 'possible ends'—of a democratic regime.<sup>39</sup>

On Rawls' account, political philosophy can pursue this task without articulating an account of the ontological conditions of democratic politics. For sure, Rawls affirms that most citizens see an intrinsic connection between ideas of democratic justice and contestable ontological worldviews. He argues, however, that the political theorist is able to transcend these circumstances when formulating a theory of democratic justice: political liberalism claims to offer a normative framework that is ontologically so

<sup>39</sup> J Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001) 2.

latent and impartial that it can serve as a relatively unproblematic grid or 'coat-rack' for a plurality of ontological positions. In fact, Rawls believes that a political-theoretical illumination of ontology will only distract attention from much needed democratic debates on normative issues.

In the course of this book I will try to unsettle these claims. For instance, in chapter two, I will show that Rawls' conception of individual autonomy is premised upon a deeply controversial ontology of human agency. That is to say, it articulates freedom in terms of individualist characteristics and disregards the situatedness of the self in practices, such as language, tradition and bodily discipline. I also emphasise that this contentious ontological commitment has a significant impact upon Rawls' normative framework: that political liberalism cannot provide adequate orientation for citizens who—unlike Rawls—understand freedom in more situated terms. I will defend this claim, among other things, by returning to the discussion about the handshake that I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

In the remaining part of the book I turn to the work of Michel Foucault and psychoanalytic theory to develop a contrasting alternative ontology of individual freedom. I will show that Foucault's thesis about the ubiquity of power reveals that power relations are essentially two-faced. On the one hand, they endow the human body with capacities for thinking and action and thereby offer crucial conditions for public autonomy or civic empowerment. But, on the other hand, power works by issuing exclusionary effects, by barring certain possibilities of reflection and types of behaviour. Power produces these effects by means of various intersubjective forms, such as language and practices of bodily discipline. We shall see that Foucault's ontology of power offers an important challenge to several political liberalist aspirations. For instance, Foucault's account disputes the ideal of a normative consensus. Rawls wagers that participants in democratic debates can freely consent to a particular proposal and thereby arrive at a consensus that is unaffected by social hierarchies. For Foucault, participants can only agree with a particular proposal because they are subjected to hierarchies that, to a greater or lesser extent, escape consciousness. But Foucault's ontology does not only temper democratic ambitions. Indeed, I go on to show that Foucault's theory of power can provide an impetus to democratic life by helping us see new possibilities for democratic empowerment. For instance, one of the promising insights of Foucault's later work is that the subjection to certain kinds of power relations can strengthen the capacity to contest oppression. By submitting ourselves to social forms that offer possibilities for resisting and experimenting with power, we can become more capable of contesting domination. This aspect of freedom—empowerment of the democratic subject through the subjection to power—is often missed in liberal individualism, including political liberalism.

To investigate the affective parameters of democratic politics, I turn to the psychoanalytic ontologies of Freud and Winnicott. In order to persist in

democratic struggles, citizens need to be resilient enough to face the emotional pain of political disappointment. The psychoanalytic tradition offers crucial insights into some of the obstacles to democratic resilience. Like Foucault, psychoanalytic ontologies assume a situated notion of the human being. But psychoanalytic conceptions of man typically look at the influence of socially constituted (partly) unconscious desires and feelings on thought and action, an aspect of subjectivity that neither Foucault nor Rawls address much. For example, psychoanalytic theory helps us see that the fear of authority often thwarts attempts to critically confront either norms or people invested with power. That is to say, we may aspire to be watchdogs of authority and make an effort to learn the necessary critical skills, but when the possibility actually arises to contest power relations many of us are not always courageous enough to do so. Furthermore, when we do make an effort to challenge power, we could be confronted with the painful fact of losing a contest, that is, that our critiques are unsuccessful or are met with ridicule. Such experiences could become so overwhelming that they eventually undermine civic motivation to participate in democratic struggles.

At the same time, I will try to show that a diagnosis of this affective dimension of democratic politics may help us develop new approaches to stimulate democratic participation. For instance, psychoanalytic ontologies teach us that we should not devote all our intellectual and political energies to ethical initiatives that increase the critical skills of citizens, but that we should also look for ways to empower citizens emotionally. Winnicott's insights about creative agency, in particular, will offer crucial help in conceptualising democratic forms of emotional empowerment.

In short then, throughout this book I hope to establish that ontological illumination does important theoretical work in orienting citizens towards the normative possibilities and social effects of democratic regimes. *Pace* Rawls, I find that ontology does have an effect on our ethico-political deliberations and I argue that political philosophers should include ontology as a crucial element in their democratic theory.

## **B. The Democratic Politicisation of Ontology**

This book does not only aim to show that ontology might illuminate important aspects of democratic politics, it also hopes to bring out the need to subject ontology to a critique by democratic politics. My argument picks up on an important development in recent political thought that I will characterise as the 'democratic politicisation of political philosophy'. In what follows I offer a brief account of this tendency and explain why that ontology needs to be part of an ongoing process of democratic contestation. I will also outline some of the implications of a democratic politicisation of ontology for the task of political philosophy and democratic practice.

In recent years, political philosophers have increasingly come to question the authority of political philosophy in democratic regimes. Instead of assuming that political philosophers have exceptional insight into the conditions of democratic politics, political philosophy has put more and more emphasis on the fact that no political philosopher, as trained or talented as he might be, can adequately represent the plurality of interests and perspectives that constitute a democratic polity. For this reason, political philosophy needs to be submitted to an ongoing process of democratic politicisation: political philosophers should challenge their claims to expertise by confronting their concepts with the various struggles and plurality of concerns raised by the citizenry.

The democratic politicisation of political philosophy can be discerned in several competing modes of political thought, including political liberalism (such as the later Rawls), deliberative democracy and agonic democracy.<sup>40</sup> In chapters two and three, we shall look more closely at the distinct and conflicting ways in which Rawls and Foucault have articulated the democratic politicisation of political philosophy. At this point, I simply want to address some of the more general implications of this tendency for the self-understanding of political philosophy and its relation to democratic practice.

When the political philosopher presents his theory to others, one might say that he adopts an educational role in relation to his fellow citizens: he tries to teach his public an account of the conditions of the democratic association and hopes that they will adopt this perspective when reflecting and deciding upon the values or principles that need to be implemented.<sup>41</sup> In this

<sup>40</sup> The democratic politicisation of political philosophy was a central topic in the ongoing exchange between Jürgen Habermas and Rawls. According to Habermas, Rawls' justificatory procedures arrogate too much reasoning potential to the individual: 'Rawls views the substantive parts of his study ... not as contribution of a participant in argumentation of a process of discursive will formation ... but as the outcome of a "theory of justice", which he as an expert is qualified to construct'. (J Habermas, 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification' in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990) 66); cf J Habermas, 'Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason' in C Cronin and P De Greiff (eds), *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1998). In ch 2, we shall see that the later Rawls mitigated his reliance on individual reason. For an interesting contribution to the democratic politicisation of political philosophy from a political liberal perspective, see A Laden, 'Taking the Distinction between Persons Seriously' (2004) 1 *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 277. The comprehensive liberal Wibren van der Burg presents an 'open and dialogical model' for moral theory (W van der Burg, 'Dynamic Ethics' (2003) 37 *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 13). For an agonic democratic contribution, see J Tully, 'Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity' (2002) 30 *Political Theory* 533.

<sup>41</sup> See H Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984) 108: 'The political theorist is not merely an observer, but also a teacher, a bridge builder offering a new vision of the familiar world and trying to make it accessible to people through and despite of their old ways of seeing.' In ch 2, we shall see that Rawls also attributes political philosophy with an educational task.

capacity as educator, the political philosopher situates himself in a position of authority with respect to other citizens: he assumes that he has a particular insight or expertise that has not yet been sufficiently understood or acted upon by his fellow citizens when they participate in democratic politics. Seen in this light, the political philosopher suggests that he is in some sense ‘ahead’ of democratic politics: he believes himself to be entitled to give guidance to the various institutions and civic practices in democratic regimes and to be able to criticise the mainstream opinions in these practices.

The democratic politicisation of political philosophy has led to a significant revision of this educational task, moving away from depicting political philosophers as ‘ahead of’ democratic politics towards imagining political philosophers as ‘taking part in’ democratic politics. To be sure, political philosophers continue to use their particular skills and insights to improve the understandings of the conditions of a democratic association and thereby hope to offer guidance to democratic politics. But this educational ambition is no longer seen as a solitary enterprise but understood as a contestatory collective practice in which the political philosopher is seen as presenting an opinion that has to compete with others. James Tully offers an eloquent formulation of this ongoing democratic challenge to political-philosophical articulations in his defence of political philosophy as a ‘critical activity’:

The experiments of the participants in negotiating, implementing, and reviewing concrete changes in practice provide a pragmatic, concrete test of the studies and their limitations. By studying the unanticipated blockages, difficulties, and new problems that arise in the cycle of practices of freedom—of negotiation, implementation, and review—political philosophers can detect the limitations and faults of their own account, make improvements, and exercise again, on the basis of new problems, this permanent critical ethos of testing the practices in which we are governed.<sup>42</sup>

It is important to stress that while this confrontation between theory and practice can encourage political philosophers to diminish the exclusionary effects in their account, such critical interventions cannot entirely displace the limitations of a political-philosophical point of view. To keep up with the multiple struggles in democratic practice, the democratic politicisation of political philosophy considers it vital that democratic politics is nourished by a plurality of competing political-philosophical notions. This implies that the ineradicable disagreement within political philosophy is no longer regarded as a problem that the political philosopher can or needs to surmount, but rather that this ongoing conflict is seen as an essential and positive feature of democratic politics.

<sup>42</sup> Tully (n 40) 551.

Up to now, the democratisation of political philosophy has focused mainly on the need to subject normative theory to democratic contestation. In the course of this book, however, I will show that the democratic politicisation of political philosophy needs to apply to ontology as well. That is to say, the ontological conditions of democratic politics need to be conditioned by an ongoing democratic process of contestation, just as is now increasingly argued for in the context of normative theory.

In chapters three and four I turn to Foucault on behalf of a democratic politicisation of ontology. What appeals to me in Foucault's work is his treatment of ontology as an inherently political construction. For Foucault, ontologies are constituted by power struggles: they are stamped by a conflict between forces that try to effect influence in the social world, and therefore political philosophers who defend particular ontological claims cannot transcend these conflicts. In turn, ontology gives rise to new power relations and thereby contributes to patterns of subordination: by singling out some features of the social and political world and some capacities of agents as more fundamental than others, ontologies help us decide what will or will not constitute a legitimate or good democratic action and thereby contributes to a particular stratification of this world. Foucault, then, will help us see that ontology is never ahead *of* politics but that it instead takes part *in* a political struggle.

We shall also see that Foucault develops an important methodology that stimulates the democratic politicisation of ontology. His practice of critique—the 'critical ontology of ourselves'—underscores the need for a historical investigation of the ontological regimes that constitute subjectivity.<sup>43</sup> The political philosopher, revealing the social-historical contingencies and exclusions in an ontological account, presents his critique to the democratic public and thereby seeks to disturb ontological regimes that are taken for granted.

I should emphasise, however, that while my understanding of the democratic politicisation of ontology draws much upon Foucault it is not identical to his approach. For Foucault, the democratic politicisation of ontology often seems to imply that political theorists should give up their ambition to develop an ontology of democratic politics altogether. In my account, the cultivation of an ontology remains an important part of political thinking and might even help to displace hegemonic ontological accounts. For example, the confrontation between Rawls' (implicit) ontology of autonomy

<sup>43</sup> Foucault also refers to this practice as a 'historical ontology of ourselves' (M Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in P Rabinow (ed), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York, The New Press 1997) 315, 319).

and Foucault's ontology of freedom is crucial in my attempt to sketch an alternative to the influential political liberalist ontology. What implications for the task of political philosophy follow therefore from my understanding of the democratic politicisation of ontology?

A first, much needed step, is that political philosophers make ontological commitments explicit. In this way, political philosophers and other citizens who turn to political philosophy to develop democratically efficacious actions can include ontological considerations in their reflections on democratic politics, and evaluate the relevance of these ontological accounts by confronting them with their own struggles.

My second suggestion is that political philosophers strengthen their own ontological proposals by taking a close look at the concrete struggles in democratic politics. Such a confrontation presents the political philosopher with very different struggles from those that have shaped his own ontology and might thereby help to expose the blind spots in his account. Throughout this book I offer several examples of the way in which a confrontation between concrete democratic struggles and ontology can help to interrogate and ameliorate the ontological assumptions of political philosophers. I have already mentioned that I will criticise Rawls' (implicit) ontology by means of a case study on Dutch democratic codes of civility. In chapter four, I stage another confrontation between actual struggles and ontology when I investigate the political liberalist thinker John Tomasi, who sets out to develop an impartial ontology of tradition and its relation to law. One of the strategies that I mobilise to question Tomasi's account is that of confronting his ontology with the actual struggles of American citizens with regard to the implementation of religious freedom.

A third strategy is to submit ontologies to the historical critiques as developed by Foucault. In chapters three and six, I try to show the relevance of this approach by turning to the historical critiques that Foucault himself has made of the social contract tradition and psychoanalysis. In chapter four, I conduct my own application of Foucault's historical methodology in the context of individual rights, by showing the effect of social-historical power relations on the conceptualisation of the essential features of religious freedom.

A fourth strategy aimed at stimulating the democratic politicisation of ontology is to stage a critical comparison between competing ontological accounts. When political philosophers include in their account of democracy a critical confrontation between various conflicting ontologies, such a comparison could help make the public mindful of the fact that democratic politics cannot draw on one ontology alone, but that it takes its cue from a variety of contentious ontological accounts. The confrontation with various, conflicting ontologies in a democratic theory can also help to make implicit ontological convictions more explicit. This in turn can contribute

to the evaluation and revision of the various answers that are currently available.<sup>44</sup>

Fifth, the critical interrogation of ontology can benefit by explicitly confronting ontology with normative purposes. As noted earlier, I assume that ontological investigations are normative-laden: they are influenced by the values that the political philosopher either tacitly or explicitly adopts. By fleshing out these normative commitments and by reading ontological accounts through a normative lens, we can become attentive to potential flaws or weak spots in an ontological regime. For example, in chapter three I criticise Foucault's initial ontology of the body and power by holding it up to his own normative perspective that strives for pluralism and a critically concerted experiment with inherited identities. This confrontation between ontological and normative premises helps us to see how Foucault initially underestimated the need for an ontology of critical agency and self-discipline. I pursue a similar strategy in chapter six where I critically confront Freud's ontology of mourning with my normative commitment to agonistic freedom.

And finally, the sixth contribution to the democratic politicisation of ontology is the development of a democratic ethics of discussion. In chapter three, I draw upon and augment Foucaultian ethics to make democratic debates more hospitable to a critique of ontology than Rawls' account of public reason, which seeks to displace such critiques from fundamental democratic discussions.

#### IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

These considerations of ontology and democracy suggest a very different task for political theory than the one construed by political liberalism. Rather than avoiding an engagement with ontology, the theorist seeks to illuminate ontological assumptions, to submit them to a critique and, if necessary, to cultivate an alternative that is more suited to democratic politics.

Having introduced my approach to democracy and ontology, and the two most prominent thinkers that this thesis discusses, let me now sum up the central questions that the following chapters will investigate. Since these questions cut across the next chapters, the final section of this introduction will offer a sketch of the chronology of the book so that the reader can get a sense of how the argument will unfold over its course.

<sup>44</sup> As we shall see in ch 2, Rawls makes this point in the context of moral theory but fails to see that it might also apply to ontology.

My first question is: how plausible is the political liberalist attempt to separate contentious ontological claims from an account of democracy? I address this question by looking at two political liberalist thinkers: John Rawls and John Tomasi (chapters two and four). Whereas my critical reading of Rawls will focus on the normative ideals of political liberalism, my critique of Tomasi will focus on the social consequences of political liberalism. I will argue that the separation between, on the one hand, normative and social theorising about democracy and, on the other hand, contentious ontology, is inconsistent because political liberals mobilise various controversial ontological claims that have profound disorienting effects.

My second question follows from the answer to the first question: which ontological conditions should we take into account when we seek to nourish democratic politics? I will illuminate my ontology through a critical reconstruction of Foucault's account of social-historical power/knowledge relations, the body and agonic freedom (chapters three and four), and by means of a psychoanalytic account of the affective underpinnings of agonic freedom (chapter six). With this ontology of agonic democratic politics, I want to show that the illumination of ontological themes helps us to see social effects, as well as normative possibilities, of democratic politics that remain invisible in the political liberalist view.

The third and final question that I raise is methodological: which practice of critique—the democratic politicisation of ontology or the political liberalist strategy of avoidance—is more plausible in light of the commitment to a democratic politicisation of political philosophy as well as the orienting task of political philosophy? The potential of a critical interrogation of ontology will be addressed most explicitly in chapter three where I compare Foucault's contribution to the democratic politicisation of ontology—his model of critique and his ethics of discussion—with Rawls' reflective equilibrium and public reason. The other chapters continuously mobilise the various strategies of the democratic politicisation of ontology where I work towards a critique of, and an alternative to, political liberalism. For example, by making explicit Rawls' latent ontological premises and by confronting these with a competing ontological account (as developed by Taylor and Foucault) as well as a case study on democratic codes of civility, I try to bring into view the disorienting effects of political liberalism. And to strengthen my own ontological alternative, I submit Foucault's own ontology to a democratic politicisation by confronting it with the psychoanalytic ontology of affect. This will help to remedy Foucault's relative lack of attention to the emotional challenge of democratic politics and thereby increase the orienting strength of my ontology of democratic agency. In turn, Foucault's methodology of critique and his ontology of power are crucial to repairing some flaws in the psychoanalytic approaches that I draw upon. By implementing the democratic politicisation of ontology and critically comparing it with political liberalist strategies of critique, I will show that the critical

interrogation of ontology is more conducive to the need for orientation and democratic contestation of political philosophy than the political liberalist strategy of avoidance.

## V. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter two starts my critical analysis of political liberalism by looking at the work of John Rawls. I flesh out Rawls' commitment to a democratic politicisation of political philosophy, a tendency in Rawls' later work to which many of his readers have attended all too little.

To challenge Rawls' strategy of avoidance, I critically investigate his ideal of individual autonomy and the principle of mutual respect, and show that these conceptions are based upon contentious ontological premises that hamper the orientation towards democratic politics. I also critically interrogate public reason (the political liberalist criterion for fundamental democratic debates) and show that the restrictions within public reason upon critical usage of ontological arguments work against Rawls' commitment to a democratic politicisation of political philosophy. My analysis of Rawls paves the way for my discussion of Foucault who does aim to include a critique of ontology in democratic debates.

Chapter three is the central chapter of this book, because here I turn to Foucault to introduce the basic tenets of the ontology of democratic politics that I defend as an alternative to the political liberalist conception of freedom. In addition, this chapter introduces Foucault's critical methodology ('a historical ontology of ourselves') and his ethics of discussion ('game of reciprocal elucidation') that offer help in politicising ontological claims. As in my interpretation of Rawls, I highlight in Foucault's work a commitment to a democratic politicisation of political philosophy. For Foucault, however, critiques of ontology are an integral feature of democratic debates. I will illustrate the usefulness of the Foucaultian critique by confronting Foucault's critique of the social contract tradition with Rawls' conception of freedom. Moreover, I critically reconstruct Foucault's ontology of power, body and agonic freedom and show that this normative-laden ontology opens up an agonic alternative for the political liberalist understanding of democracy.

Chapter four enlists both Foucault's practice of critique and his ontology of power and freedom by addressing a concern which is much more central to political liberalism than to Foucault: the institutionalisation of state law. I develop an argument that is structured analogously to that of chapter two: I show the partiality of the ontology that informs political liberalism—in this case: Tomasi's political liberalist analysis of individual rights—and reveal how this account's terms hamper the orientation of citizens (within legal regimes). Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' offers critical assistance

here: this framework applies the methodology of a historical ontology of ourselves to statehood and thereby helps us to investigate the relation between ontological regimes and state action, such as law.

A short transit (chapter five) asks to what extent my perspective of agonistic democracy allows for concerted actions with political liberalism. I argue that my perspective is philosophically incompatible with political liberalism and does not allow for an overlapping consensus but that it does not preclude an *instable* coalition with political liberals. I conclude by formulating a drawback to my agonistic perspective: the participation in democratic struggles confronts citizens with various painful emotions that could eventually jeopardise the willingness of citizens to engage in agonistic democracy. This problem of the democratic 'burn-out' provides the stepping-stone for the last chapter where I turn to psychoanalysis to strengthen my ontology of democratic politics.

Chapter six presents the final step in developing my alternative ontology of agonistic freedom. Here I present an ontology of democratic resilience by means of a critical engagement with the psychoanalytic thinkers Sigmund Freud and Donald Winnicott. I introduce three capacities that empower disempowered citizens who suffer from political disappointments: a capacity to mourn, a capacity for dissent and a capacity to invent new techniques for interaction.

In concluding chapter seven, I sum up my main findings and suggest some directions for future research.