Chapter One

INTRODUCTION:
THE WEAK ONTOLOGICAL TURN

A CURIOUS COMMONALITY is emerging across a wide variety of contributions in contemporary political theory. Increasingly there is a turn to ontology. This shift might initially seem a little puzzling. For one thing, *ontology* traditionally referred to a fairly restricted field of philosophical reflection concerned with analyzing "being" that was relatively remote from moral-political concerns. What explains the extraordinary expansion of interest? This expansion becomes doubly perplexing when one recalls that ontology was also traditionally closely connected—sometimes even identified—with metaphysics, an activity now regarded by many with deep suspicion.[1]

In trying to understand the recent ontological turn, several contributing factors need to be separated. One is the shift in the meaning of ontology that emerged in the last century in analytic philosophy and philosophy of science. For most English-speaking philosophers, ontology came to refer increasingly to the question of what entities are presupposed by our scientific theories. In affirming a theory, one also takes on a commitment to the existence of certain entities.[2] Ontology in this general sense seems to have been increasingly appropriated in recent years in the social sciences. Thus, one frequently hears reference made to the ontology implicit in some social scientific theory or research tradition.[3]

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[1] See the essays on ontology in Hans Burkhardt and Barry Smith, eds., *The Handbook of Metaphysics and Ontology*, vol. 2 (Munich: Philosphia Verlag, 1991). Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Ontology," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 542–43.

[2] W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); and Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), chap. 3.

[3] The notion of ontology likely found its way into the discourse of political science through the methodological discussions of the late 1970s and 1980s. Crucial essays in this regard are J. Donald Moon, "The Logic of Political Inquiry: A Synthesis of Opposed Perspectives," in *Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby, vol. 1 (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975); Brian Fay and J. Donald Moon, "What Would an Adequate Philosophy of Social Science Look Like?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (1977): 209–27; and Terence Ball, "Is There Progress in Political Science?" in *Idioms of Inquiry: Critique and Renewal in Political Science,* ed. T. Ball (New York: SUNY Press, 1987). The first two essays employed the Lakatosian language of "research programs"; the basic conceptualization of entities within a program was called the "hard core." Ball's essay, under the influence of Larry Laudan's work, explicitly refers to the "ontology" of a "research tradition."

One might think of such usage as a kind of ontological turn in the social sciences, but that is not what I have in mind.

The ontological turn I am referring to emerges with the growing realization that we live in "late modern" times. The sense of living in *late* modernity implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West. The recent ontological shift might then be characterized generally as the result of a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those "entities" presupposed by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world.

One of the entities most thrown into question has been our conception of the human subject. At issue is the assertive, disengaged self who generates distance from its background (tradition, embodiment) and foreground (external nature, other subjects) in the name of an accelerating mastery of them. This Teflon subject has had a leading role on the modern stage. Such subjectivity has been affirmed primarily at the individual level in Western democracies, although within Marxism it had a career at the collective level as well. In both cases, the relevant entity is envisioned as powering itself through natural and social obstacles; it dreams ultimately of frictionless motion. This modern ontology of the Teflon subject has, of course, not usually been thematized in quite such stark terms. But the lack of explicit thematization has been at least partially a measure of modernity's self-confidence. It is precisely the waning of this self-confidence that engenders such a widespread recourse to ontological reflection. Accordingly, the current turn might now be seen as an attempt to think ourselves, and being in general, in ways that depart from the dominant—but now more problematic—ontological investments of modernity.

Ontological commitments in this sense are thus entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively. When these aspects of the current turn are brought into the foreground, it quickly becomes apparent how crucial Heidegger is to the story. He brought ontological reflection into a series of entanglements that are central to current thinking. For Heidegger, in *Being and Time,* the analysis of being *(Sein)* cannot be an exclusively cognitive matter, as it was traditionally, and still is, for much of analytic philosophy. It has to be done through an existential analysis of human being *(Dasein)*. Ontological reflection thus becomes inextricably entangled with distinctive characteristics of human being, such as mortality and "mood" *(Stimmung)*.[4] Further, in his later work, Heidegger gave ontological investigation a historical dimension, insofar as he turned

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

against the dominant, modern way of understanding human being or subjectivity and indicted the whole tradition of Western metaphysics that, in his view, had sought cognitive frameworks within which to "grasp" being conclusively.[5]

Many who have never read a word of Heidegger have been subjected to his influence through recent French philosophy. His entanglement of ontology with the themes just mentioned has been appropriated and modified in various ways by familiar poststructuralist or postmodern thinkers, such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard.[6] They have helped bring ontological reflection to the forefront of our thought, even though they are in general quite leery of any sustained affirmation of a particular ontology.

However one assesses the role of French philosophy in this regard, it is important to recognize that this stream of thought is only one of several that participate in the current ontological turn. I will be arguing that one finds similar countermodern, ontological themes in various locations across the contemporary intellectual landscape: in communitarianism, in political theory influenced by theology, in feminism, in post-Marxism, and even in some versions of liberalism itself, which is normally seen as being deeply committed to the dominant, modern ontology.[7] In each of these initiatives, ontological concerns emerge in the form of deep reconceptualizations of human being in relation to its world. More specifically, human being is presented as in some way "stickier" than in prevailing modern conceptualizations. Answers vary, of course, as to the character of this stickiness and as to that to which the subject is most prominently stuck. It is important to emphasize this diversity in the ontological turn. When the shift is overidentified with postmodernism, the whole topic is made to appear too dependent upon what is only one manifestation of it; moreover, within that particular current, thinkers have often failed to attend sufficiently to a range of problems related to

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[5] See, for example, "What Is Metaphysics?," "Letter on Humanism," and "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

[6] See my discussion of this theme in *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Michael Dillon, "Another Justice," *Political Theory* 27, no. 2 (1999): 155–75.

[7] The following chapters survey work that falls into a number of these categories. A sense of ontological concerns in areas not covered, such as post-Marxism and negative theology, can be gotten from, respectively, Romand Coles's analysis of the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity: Neo-Nietzschean Reflections on the Ethics and Politics of Coalition," *American Political Science Review* 90 (June 1996): 375–88; and Aryeh Botwinick, "Maimonides and Hobbes," paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1993.

articulating and affirming the very reconceptualizations toward which they gesture.[8]

One might make the case for an ontological turn simply by pointing to evidence of the increasingly frequent use of the term *ontology* in the way I have just elucidated. I am going to push a bit beyond this, however, and argue something stronger and more systematic. Even though one must start by emphasizing the diversity within the ontological turn, one can nevertheless isolate a number of distinctive, common characteristics, in terms of which it is plausible to talk about the emergence of new rules for the game of reflecting upon the most basic conceptualizations of self, other, and world, as well as for how such reflections in turn structure ethical-political thought. There seem to me to be at least four rough characteristics shared by the most perceptive participants in this broad ontological shift. I want to sketch these now in a relatively abstract, introductory fashion. A fuller appreciation of what such characteristics amount to will emerge as they are displayed in the work of the theorists I examine in the various substantive chapters.

1.1. Fundamental *and* Contestable

The first commonality emerges around the question: how is one to understand the epistemological status of such contemporary efforts at *fundamental* conceptualization of human being? Here I want to begin by drawing a distinction between two ideal types of ontology: strong and weak. The late modern ontologies in which I am interested typically exhibit at least some of the characteristics I refer to as "weak," whereas premodern and modern ones have more typically exhibited the characteristics I refer to as "strong."

Strong are those ontologies that claim to show us "the way the world is," or how God's being stands to human being, or what human nature is. It is by reference to this external ground that ethical and political life gain their sense of what is right; moreover, this foundation's validity is unchanging and of universal reach. For strong ontologies, the whole question of passages from ontological truths to moral-political ones is relatively clear. Some proponents do not, of course, assume that political

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[8] The overidentification of the ontological drift with postmodernism occludes what may be a useful critical perspective on the latter. In this regard, it can be argued that there is an unconscious tendency in at least some postmodern thinkers to reproduce in a new guise the problem of frictionless subjectivity within their own stance. By this I mean that the affirmed mode of individual agency becomes one of continuous critical motion, incessantly and disruptively unmasking the ways in which the modern subject engenders, marginalizes, and disciplines the others of its background and foreground. The potential, ironic danger here is that the former image of subjectivity comes to look uncomfortably like the latter. Cf. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism,* 64–65.

principles or decisions can be strictly derived from their ontology; for example, there may be substantial discretionary space for the exercise of judgment. However, in contrast to weak ontologies, strong ones carry an underlying assumption of certainty that guides the whole problem of moving from the ontological level to the moral-political. But this very certainty—both about how things are and how political life should reflect it—allows such ontologies to provide what seem today (at least to some of us) to be answers to our late modern problems that demand too much initial forgetfulness of contingency and indeterminacy. Although terminology is extremely variable here, this last point could be stated thus, that strong ontologies involve too much "metaphysics." Since World War II, there have been a number of prominent proponents of different forms of strong ontology in political theory. Such thinkers as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, as well as adherents to the natural law tradition, have drawn on classical Greek or Christian models in order to contest the dominant modern ontology. Contemporary philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre have developed novel ways of carrying some of these sorts of arguments forward.[9] But the recent ontological turn that is the primary focus of my attention has taken place largely outside of this immediate sphere of influence. My term *weak ontology* is intended to highlight what is distinctive about this new phenomenon.[10] The thinking I am interested in resists strong ontology, on the one hand, and the strategy of much of liberal thought, on the other. The latter has generally ignored or suppressed ontological reflection, sometimes tacitly affirming the Teflon

[9] Although MacIntyre manifests an admirable willingness to engage alternative perspectives in a sustained and sensitive fashion, and seems to claim that we cannot get beyond the fact of a variety of philosophical traditions, there is behind his reflections a core of absolute certainty when he contrasts his own Catholic tradition with others. He implies that the latter are responsible for, or in complicity with, the "new dark ages"; *After Virtue,* 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 245. The deployment of this sort of ultimate metaphor helps convince me that MacIntyre is a strong ontologist in my terms. A useful contrast here might be offered between MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who also writes within a Catholic tradition, but who, I will argue, is a weak ontologist. For Taylor, our situation is one of a "conversation" between traditions. He can affirm his religious position and offer strong critiques of opponents, but I can't imagine him deploying the metaphor of light and darkness to characterize the relation of his own tradition to that of his opponents. I take up Taylor's views in chapter 3.

For an overview of strong-ontology-based political thought up through the mid-1960s, see Dante Germino, *Beyond Ideology: The Revival of Political Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

[10] Gianni Vattimo often employs the term *weak thinking* to gesture in a broadly similar direction; and he has at least once used *weak ontology* synonymously. Although my use of the latter term shares a broad directional emphasis, I have no idea whether Vattimo would find my elucidation of the characteristics of a felicitous weak ontology compatible with his own views. See Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture,* trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 85–86.

self, sometimes expressing neutrality toward it. Weak ontology finds the costs of such strategies to outweigh the claimed benefits.

One might object that the distinction between strong and weak ontology is merely a relabeling of the familiar distinction between metaphysical and antimetaphysical or postmodern views, or between foundationalist and antifoundationalist ones. This suspicion is true to a degree. But I would claim that this relabeling serves a useful philosophical purpose. My intention in developing the notion of weak ontology is to call greater attention to the kind of interpretive-existential terrain that anyone who places herself in the "anti" position must explore at some point. In short, I want to shift the intellectual burden here from a preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed, to an engagement with what must be articulated, cultivated, and affirmed in its wake. My delineation of the characteristics of felicitous, weak ontologies is intended as a contribution toward this goal.

Weak ontologies respond to two pressing concerns. First, there is the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable. Second, there is the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life. The latter insight demands from us the affirmative gesture of constructing foundations, the former prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion.

One aspect of constructing such contestable foundations involves the embodiment within them of some signaling of their own limits. Felicitous weak ontologies cannot simply declare their contestability, fallibility, or partiality at the start and then proceed pretty much as before. The reason for this is that an ontology figures our most basic sense of human being, an achievement that always carries a propensity toward naturalization, reification, and unity, even if only implicitly. A weak ontology must possess resources for deflecting this propensity at some point in the unfolding of its dimensions. Its elaboration of fundamental meanings must in some sense fold back upon itself, disrupting its own smooth constitution of a unity. In a way, its contestability will thus be enacted rather than just announced.

1.2. A Stickier Subject

I have suggested that one quality evident in the ontological turn is resistance to the "disengaged self."[11] One of the key notions in weak ontology is that of a stickier subject. This notion can take a variety of specific forms,

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[11] The term "disengaged self" comes from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

as the following chapters will show, but I want to suggest that within this variety a certain style of argument is apparent. Weak ontologies do not proceed by categorical positings of, say, human nature or telos, accompanied by a crystalline conviction of the truth of that positing. Rather, what they offer are figurations of human being in terms of certain existential realities, most notably language, mortality or finitude, natality, and the articulation of "sources of the self."[12] These figurations are accounts of what it is *to be* a certain sort of creature: first, one entangled with language; second, one with a consciousness that it will die; third, one that, despite its entanglement and limitedness, has the capacity for radical novelty; and, finally, one that gives definition to itself against some ultimate background or "source," to which we find ourselves always already attached, and which evokes something like awe, wonder, or reverence. This sense of a background that can be both empowering and humbling is *mis*construed when grasped either as something with a truth that reveals itself to us in an unmediated way or as something that is simply a matter of radical choice. I am borrowing the notion of sources from Charles Taylor, whose work is taken up in chapter 3. While this might appear to give the idea of weak ontology a necessarily theistic cast from the start, since Taylor is indeed a theist, such a conclusion would be incorrect. Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate the philosophical richness of Taylor's notion of sources is to show how it helps in the interpretation of nontheistic thinkers, something I will try to do throughout the book.

When I speak of "existential realities," I mean to claim that language, finitude, natality, and sources are in some brute sense universal constitutives of human being, but also that their meaning is irreparably underdetermined in any categorical sense. There is, for example, simply no demonstrable essence of language or true meaning of finitude. Weak ontologies offer figurations of these universals, whose persuasiveness can never be fully disentangled from an interpretation of present historical circumstances. Fundamental conceptualization here thus means acknowledging that gaining access to something universal about human being and world is always also a construction that cannot rid itself of a historical dimension.

For weak ontology, human being is the negotiation of these existential realities. But when this negotiation is imagined in the fashion of a Teflon self powering itself through the world, there has been an unacceptable impoverishment of figuration. Accepting such an image implies, for example, a figuration of language as, in essence, an instrument: in effect we always "have" language; it never "has" us. Of course, as I just empha-

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[12] Ibid.

sized, such a claim of impoverishment can never be disentangled from historical claims; in this case, claims regarding, say, the various "costs" that Western modernity has had to pay for such a tight embrace of the disengaged self.

So it is through their renewed figuration of these existential universals that weak ontologies compose portraits of human being that are "stickier"; ones, for example, that are more attuned to how language "has" us, and more attentive to vivifying our finitude.

Even though I have emphasized that existential universals are radically underdetermined, one might well wonder how I picked out just these four candidates for such an exalted position in the project of weak ontology. My only answer here is that I find that an engagement with both the traditional problems of moral-political philosophy and the specific questions of late modernity is persuasive only if at least these four existential universals are brought to bear. No claim is implied that others may not be shown to be similarly significant. The appropriate way to test the validity of my initial selection of four is simply to see for oneself whether I am persuasive in my attempts to show how particular thinkers encounter significant problems when they neglect one or more of these universals.

1.3. Cultivation

To speak of "portraits" of human being and "figuration" is to begin calling attention to another characteristic of weak ontologies. They are not simply cognitive in their constitution and effects, but also aesthetic-affective. They not only reflect something that is the case about the reality of human being, but also engender a certain sensibility toward that reality. They disclose the world to us in such a way that we think *and* feel it differently than we might otherwise. Their appeal turns partially on how well they allow us to cope with the pressures and challenges of late modern life.

Weak ontologies have an aesthetic-affective quality in another way as well. This relates to the issue of embracing or adopting them. Since such ontologies do not reflect clear, crystalline truth about the world, they do not entice us with any knockdown power to convince or convert. Within the ontological turn the notion of "cultivation" is continually evoked. The embrace of a weak ontology has a tentative, experimental aspect; one must patiently bring it to life by working it into one's life. In this sense, it is at least somewhat different from conversion (on some accounts) to a religious faith or the rational conviction that such and such is the categorically correct moral rule or code. Yet this emphasis on tentativeness does not imply that one's relation to an ontology is like that to a suit of new clothes taken home on approval. The cognitive and affective

burdens entailed in revisioning the world ensure that when one seriously embraces an ontology, one does not do so in a "light and transient" way. The process of adoption is the initiation of a process of cultivation of oneself and one's disposition to the world. This cultivation unfolds through the measured pursuit of an array of related practices and self-disciplines.

In this sense, weak ontologies share similarities with traditional notions of cultivating virtues. But in the case of the latter, the framework of truth, or the telos, within which the virtues acquire their significance is the unshakable foundation on the basis of which the cultivation proceeds. Such is not the case with weak ontologies. The framework itself is never fully immune from the work of cultivation. Pressures for reconceptualizing or further articulating aspects of it continually arise in the ongoing activity of making specific ethical and political judgments and constructing historical interpretations of who "we" are.

1.4. Circuits of Reflection, Affect, and Argumentation

How precisely do weak ontologies constitute a "foundation" of ethical-political life? Since such ontologies can make no strong claim to reflect the pure truth of being, one cannot derive any clear and incontestable principles or values for ethics and politics. The fundamental conceptualizations such an ontology provides can, at most, prefigure practical insight or judgment, in the sense of providing broad cognitive and affective orientation. Practice draws sustenance from an ontology in the sense of both a reflective bearing upon possibilities for action and a mobilizing of motivational force.

If a critic presses for justification of a particular action or norm adopted in light of a weak ontology, the appropriate response is not a simple and conclusive recourse to the "foundation." Vertical, one-way images of justification are misleading here (whether the path of justification is imagined as leading up to a skyhook or down to a foundation). An ontology certainly articulates our most fundamental intimations of human being, but it is best to think of such intimation as always part of a horizontal circuit of reflection, affect, and argumentation. The circuit is a three-cornered one, with critical energy and discrimination flowing back and forth to each corner. One corner is formed by the judgments and norms relevant to specific contexts of action; these, as I have said, receive a prefiguring influence from ontological concepts, which in turn constitute a second corner. But, as I also noted, such concepts are themselves not immune from pressures for revision arising out of insights gleaned from specific action contexts.

And these two corners are in a similar, two-way relation with the third corner, which is constituted by one's broadest historical "we" claims and narratives.[13] Think for a moment about Lyotard's well-known notion that the "grand narratives" or "metanarratives" (focused around God, Nature, or Progress) of the modern West have increasingly lost their power to convince.[14] He extols instead a proliferation of "petits récits," or "small narratives," for our postmodern times. But perhaps this dichotomy is somewhat misleading. Lyotard is right in his critique of generalizing narratives fixed upon an unshakable philosophical foundation. But the simple image of proliferating small narratives neglects the unavoidable pressures toward generalization in a world where my or our narrative sooner or later runs up against yours. As Clifford Geertz has so nicely put it, "now . . . nobody is leaving anybody alone and isn't ever again going to."[15] What sort of engagement there will be between one small narrative and another only takes shape within the construction, however implicit, of a "grand" or at least grander narrative.

My delineation of the foregoing characteristics of a weak ontology constitutes both a *description* of what I find in the most admirable contributions to the ontological turn, as well as the beginnings of *loose criteria* for assessing the felicity of any given contribution. Whether these criteria are ultimately plausible or illuminating in the way they would have one think about contemporary ethics and political thought is a question best unpacked in the course of considering whether the readings I offer in the following chapters stand up or not. The theorists whose work I examine were chosen both because I find them to be perceptive and distinctive and because they cover a broad spectrum of contemporary views. Again, my underlying aim is to display the phenomenon of weak ontology in an unexpected variety of philosophical quarters. I round up the *un*usual suspects.

I start in chapter 2 in a quarter that has generally been quite skeptical of ontological reflection, namely, liberalism. An interesting initiative

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[13] Having drawn this picture of a circuit of justification, it should be clear where I stand in regard to philosophers who claim that either ontology or ethics is *the* proper starting point of philosophical reflection. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, famously critiques Heidegger for making ontology the first philosophy, whereas in reality it should be ethics; *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). My thought is that there simply is no privileged starting place. Ontological figurations will always be expressing ethical concerns to a degree and ethical insights will always be rooted in some specific way of conceptually carving up self, other, and world.

[14] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

[15] Clifford Geertz, "Local Knowledge: Fact and Law in Comparative Perspective," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 234.

here is George Kateb's attempt to rethink the foundations of liberalism in such a way as to overcome some of the drawbacks that the dominant modern ontology has embedded in that philosophy. By constructing a novel ontological basis, he would relieve liberalism of the familiar charge that it is intrinsically tied to a picture of selves as "monads" or "possessive individualists" whose essential connection to others is constituted instrumentally in terms of self-interest. Since Kateb is speaking from within the liberal tradition, it is perhaps unsurprising that he does not explicitly have much recourse to the language of ontology to describe what he is doing. But that does not really bother me; I am less interested in explicit terminology than in whether ontological refiguration of a certain sort is in fact occurring, and how it is related to ethical-political judgments.

Charles Taylor's work is the focus of chapter 3. His critique of procedural liberalism and affirmation of a kind of communitarianism is certainly self-consciously carried out with explicit ontological claims. *That* he thinks ontologically is thus less of an issue than *how*. Most critics see him as employing a variant of theistically rooted, strong ontology. I will dissent from that judgment, arguing that Taylor in fact provides a fascinating illustration of how theism of a certain kind can frame itself in weak ontological terms.

In chapter 4, I turn to the writings of Judith Butler. Her work is clearly associated with ontology, but primarily in a negative way. Her efforts to find bearings for feminism and gay and lesbian thought have proceeded by means of a persistent critique of the way ontology has traditionally worked to dissimulate power by installing in ethical-political views a level of conceptualization that is beyond contestation. But, as Butler has pursued this line of thought, an affirmative ontological gesture of her own has increasingly become apparent. Like many other poststructuralist or postmodern thinkers, her suspicion of traditional ontology seems to produce some unwillingness to thematize explicitly the philosophical implications of her own gesture. Nevertheless, that gesture is a bold one, possessing more felicity than her critics might lead one to think.

Finally, I turn to perhaps the most conscious contemporary articulator of weak ontology, William Connolly. Like Butler's, his views are broadly describable as poststructuralist or postmodern, although unlike her, his early intellectual roots are not in continental philosophy, but rather in Anglo-American political theory.[16] He is also unlike many poststructuralists or postmodernists in that he is never troubled by bouts of austerity when it comes to the necessity of affirming the weak ontological task. It is the conscious balance he maintains between the critical activity of

[16] See, for example, *The Terms of Political Discourse,* 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). The first edition of this book was published in 1974.

genealogy, in the Nietzschean and Foucauldian sense, on the one hand, and the affirmative activity of articulating an ontology, on the other, that makes his work especially challenging.

Before turning to the substantive analysis, a few cautions and clarifications must be issued. Some readers, especially those trained as professional philosophers, will object from the start that I am simply misusing the concept of ontology, expanding and distorting it. Ontology should refer only to the study of the question: What is being? And ontology is intrinsically concerned with a *true* answer to this single question.[17] Accordingly, it could be argued that the way I bring the theme of contestability into play, as well as the way I expand the range of topics with which ontology is entangled, together contribute to making a complete hash of the concept.

In my defense, I would start by again pointing out that a wide variety of thinkers today are using the concept of ontology in a fashion at least somewhat similar to mine. That is the point of my having started by referring to an ontological turn today. I think the authors whose work I take up might reject one or another aspect of my reading of them, but I doubt they would find my deployment of the concept of ontology to be entirely obtuse.

At this point, the critic could of course take refuge in the objection that the *widespread* misuse of a concept is nevertheless still misuse. But if we think about conceptual change, it is often the case that new uses of a concept are initially identified and criticized as misuses. Think, for example, of the way the usage of the notion of natural right began to shift in the seventeenth century away from an almost exclusive connotation of a right direction for subjects to the additional notion of something that the individual in some sense possessed. Or think of how democracy, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, lost its original negative connotations of disorder and acquired what are now almost exclusively positive connotations. One can easily imagine how defenders of traditional views would have accused their opponents of gross conceptual confusion.

But if weak ontology is thus not entirely confused in a conceptual sense, then perhaps it will be nevertheless so thin in its claims as to amount to nothing more finally than a good helping of air sauce and wind pudding. As for "thinness," I hope that the following chapters, especially the one on Butler, will make clear that weakness and thinness are not the same thing; a felicitous weak ontology should be a rich one, in

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[17] Some of these questions were pressed on me by Simon Critchley in a set of very thoughtful comments on a paper I presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C., September 1997.

terms of the array of concepts it deploys and the skill with which they are elaborated. Furthermore, the affirmation of a weak ontology should not be confused with a stance of continual indecisiveness. I have no doubt that in the nineteenth century many found J. S. Mill's treatment of the uncertainty of practical truth claims in *On Liberty* to imply a paralyzing abandonment of healthy certitudes. But liberals today who make a virtue of Mill's uncertainty don't seem particularly eaten up with paralysis and confusion. Similarly, I see no reason for thinking that acceptance of the central ideas of weak ontology will necessarily imply any debilitating weakness in the practice of one's life. In fact, I would suggest they are more likely to foster a kind of ethical strength. Again, think of Mill. Certainly he was giving up a kind of strength in his claims, but he turned the tables on his opponents. A strength born of an unwarranted rejection of contingency is its own kind of atrophy: a moral-intellectual couch-potatoism that stands in contrast to the active qualities he associated with true "individuality."[18] Similarly, if I am right about weak ontology, it affirms the need for an even greater ethical "fitness," something that is thematized in its particular emphasis on cultivation. One cultivates and contests at more levels of life than the Millean individual.

Another set of criticisms would likely emerge from the position occupied by Richard Rorty. For him, a notion like weak ontology is just a philosophically stilted way of saying "my perspective" on certain topics. Once we give up on strong ontology with its straightforward truth claims, there is just "my perspective," of which one can merely say that it is more or less useful for my "private purposes" of "self-creation."[19] This complaint embodies two sorts of skepticism about weak ontology. The first involves reason and criteria; the second, the relation of philosophical reflection to the private and public spheres.

As for the first sort of skepticism, I understand the Rortyean complaint to be that in a postmetaphysical world, there is just my view and your view, and we should be very careful about dressing up one or the other with any philosophical language that might imply some metaphysical truth claims. In one sense, there is something perpetually refreshing about Rorty's challenge here; it is a good kind of stock criticism to turn upon oneself from time to time. In another sense, however, this complaint, if it is merely repeated like a slogan, begins to have a rather stale smell. My efforts in this book are directed toward looking a bit more

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[18] John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," in *On Liberty and Other Writings,* ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 59.

[19] Richard Rorty, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism,* ed. Simon Critchley (London: Routledge, 1996), 16–17. Cf. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

closely at what makes a set of ideas about fundamental things relatively persuasive today. In effect, it is an exploration of some middle terrain between strong ontology and bald assertions of *my* perspective. My hope is that some possibly interesting things might be said here. The implication of Rorty's complaint is rather that all such efforts are necessarily somehow doomed at the start.

But why should we be so quick to embrace the bipolar world from which this confident judgment flows? Does the simple option of either affirming a strong ontology or proclaiming my perspective not betray a curiously insistent desire to shut off speculation and careful reflection about things in the middle? The real question is: Do the sorts of considerations I draw together in my explication of weak ontology help us think more creatively about the tasks of contemporary moral and political theory or not?

Here we come to Rorty's second ground for skepticism. He finds not the slightest reason to expect that muddling around with notions like weak ontology will produce any legitimate insight for public life. At most it can enhance our efforts at private self-creation. A failure to grasp this truth, moreover, can constitute a real danger to the public world of "real politics," which needs to be discussed only in "banal, familiar terms—terms that do not need philosophical dissection and do not have philosophical presuppositions."[20] As many of his critics have pointed out, the persuasiveness of Rorty's claims here rests on the persuasiveness of his account of public and private. But he has never done more than deploy this distinction in a very general, rhetorical fashion. This deployment has typically been directed at those poststructuralist and postmodernist critics of liberal political institutions whose attacks are long on hyperbole and corrosive language, but short on affirmative conceptualization of, and orientation to, concrete practices and institutions. In effect, Rorty is meeting bludgeon with bludgeon. Within the range of postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of liberalism and modernity, there are some that definitely fit Rorty's portrait. But if my hunch in this book is correct, there is now increasing attention being paid, both within that critical current, as well as others, to the question of affirmation broadly and to the issue of how ontological figures structure ethical-political insight in specific ways. If this is true, then perhaps Rorty's bludgeoning tactics begin to look a bit dated. In the present contest, only thugs would continue to use it.

Since Rorty is not a thug, he will now have to give a more careful account of his sharp distinction between public and private. And I suspect that will be more difficult than he imagines, at least if he is going to

[20] Rorty, "Remarks."

try to continue to strictly quarantine so much reflection and speculation within the private sphere. If this is true, then there seems to be as much of a burden of proof on the Rortyean as on the weak ontologist. Moreover, at one point, Rorty even admits that the sort of speculations included within weak ontology may have at least some public effect. They may, he concedes, be "politically consequential, [but only] in a very indirect and long-term way."[21] When one combines Rorty's own unclarity about the public-private distinction with this admission, and one allows for reasonable disputes over how "indirect" and how "long-term," I would suggest that a good bit of running room opens up for the project upon which this book embarks.

But at least some of Rorty's suspicions about ontology might be given more life if they were seen as concerns shared by liberals generally. Accordingly, one variant of liberalism admits ontology, but only on its terms, arguing that political theory needs only one ontological source: the autonomous, disengaged self. Anything more is dangerous. Another variant—"political liberalism"—argues that the justness of the neutral, liberal state can be established without any recourse whatsoever to ontological sources.[22] The chapters on Taylor and Connolly will contest both of these lines of argument.

[21] Ibid.

[22] For the concept of "political liberalism," see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Donald Moon, *Constructing Community: Moral Pluralism and Tragic Conflicts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy," in *The Virginia Statutes of Religious Freedom,* ed. M. Peterson and R. Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).