Locating the Problem of Personhood for Political Theory

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Declaration

I, Ane Engelstad confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In my thesis I assess critiques of liberalism's explicit or implicit commitment to the view that persons are socially atomistic. I show that the critiques of social atomism are often misunderstood as claiming that there is a political problem with social atomism as an ontology. l argue that there is a deeper reading of the critiques that show that the problem is not *primarily* with social atomism itself, but how it, as an ontology, figures in the political theory. This is a problem for the role of ontology in political theory at large. While any political theory must hold some ontology, by virtue of assuming what it means to be a political subject, some political theories presuppose ontologies not because of their ontic veracity, but because they fit their political intentions.

Following this argument, I assess the means by which some ontological beliefs are picked out by our political beliefs and intentions, and I separate this from careful metaphysical conceptual investigations. Moreover, I investigate the role that these ontological beliefs may play within a larger network of political beliefs. For instance, "human nature is selfish" is a commonly held belief, but its prevalence has been shown to be largely contingent on political and financial climate. However, this belief is treated as bedrock, as we take it to be an ontological truth. As such, it restrains what other things one can believe about human nature and social organisation.

In the conclusion I aim to sketch out the possible methodological ramifications this may have for political theory, and what possible precautions one is to take as a political theorist if one is to avoid the problems for political theory highlighted by the critiques of social atomism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Topic

In this thesis I assess critiques of liberalism's explicit or implicit commitment to the view that persons are socially atomistic. This is an account of personhood that takes the essential features of persons to be internal to them, rather than determined by their relationships and environment. I show that the full ramifications of the critiques of social atomism are not well understood, and that they actually unveil a more systematic problem for political theory about how it relates to conceptions of personhood and ontology in general. I argue that this problem is methodological, and that it must be addressed by any political theory that aims to minimise the epistemic gap between its political aims and knowledge of how to achieve them. Thus, in this thesis, I aim to investigate the actual impact of the critiques of social atomism, and to thereby point towards a better assessment of what methodological ramifications they might have for political theory. I do not aim to make sceptical claims about our political theories or our ontologies; instead, I call for a certain self-reflection about the grounds on which we form political theory, and similarly, awareness about why we hold the ontologies we hold. I will argue that this is a point that has not, but should, in some way or other, be thoroughly processed by political theorists, regardless of whether they ultimately dismiss it as irrelevant for their specific theories.

1.2 Motivation

My motivation for embarking on this discussion is well captured by Charles Mills, who discusses how puzzling value theory looks to the uninitiated. Mills suggests that we

> try to see it with the eyes of somebody coming to formal academic ethical theory and political philosophy for the first time. Forget, in other words, all the articles and monographs and introductory texts you have read over the years that may have socialized you into thinking that this is how normative theory should be done. Perform an operation of Brechtian defamiliarization, estrangement, on your cognition. Wouldn't your spontaneous reaction be: How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics? (Mills 2005, p. 169).

This quote summarises my reaction to political philosophy as a philosophy undergraduate. My only prior experience with political thinking had been from political activism, and it was indeed within this context that I had become interested in philosophy. However, as an activist, theory was used to reach better systematic clarity about specific political problems at hand, but as a philosopher the opposite seemed to be expected; all our discussions were (to me) confusingly apolitical.

When I stumbled upon the Mills quote when researching for this thesis, my drive to research its topic made better sense to me. Though by this point I am more familiar with the methodology of political philosophy, I have never completely managed to shake my initial puzzlement with the discourse. This thesis can be read as an attempt to better understand what the puzzlement consists of, and whether there indeed might be a problem for political theory rooted in this outsider observation.

There are two questions that must be asked with this in mind. First of all, what are the boundaries of the political? The boundaries of what counts as a political concern are constantly pushed against in politi-

cal activism. For instance, the feminist movement sought to break up the "dichotomy between the private and the public" (Pateman 1988, p. 11). The critiques of social atomism, from which I launch my discussion, pushes against the boundaries of what we take to be political by arguing against the idea that our conception of personhood is apolitical.

The second question to ask is how the boundaries of the political cohere with political theory. It may be that my initial puzzlement with political theory was caused by personal befuddlement about the scope of the two, rather than an actual problem with the methodology. However, Charles Mills suggest that this is not necessarily the case, and that we should discuss whether the apparent political neutrality of political theory is a problem, and whether this problem is political.

What I aim to do in this thesis may in some senses be understood to be even further abstracted from something that would be recognized as political by an activist. However, this can be explained by the fact that my aim is not political; I do not wish to advocate a specific political view or theory. Instead I desire to better understand how and on what terms political theories are formed, and how this process does, may, or should relate to the political power structures that surround political theorists.

1.3 Location in Literature

This kind of project can be understood as a form of sociology of political philosophy. The sociology of political philosophy aims to assess the interactions of political theory with the real world, and to understand why certain methods, biases and trends become prevalent. It examines political theory from the outside, and wonders what its nature is, and why it holds the commitments it does. Are they intrinsic to the topic at hand, or are they also formed by external influences that are not directly visible from inside political theory? For instance, Jason Stanley observes that 'many political philosophers who are members of oppressed groups self-describe as working

in "social and political philosophy", whereas members of privileged groups often self-describe as working in "political philosophy" ' (Stanley 2015, p. 33). Might this observation imply something about the real-life political implications of political theory that are not accounted for by the political theories in question?

I take my thesis to fit within this discourse, by virtue of assessing political theory from the outside, and moreover, to further develop an emerging theme within political theory, for which I take Lorna Finlayson's 2015 book *The Political is Political* to be the clearest example. Finlayson claims that not only the content, but the choice of methodology in political theory is in fact political. More specifically, she utilizes critical theories of ideology to show how liberal political philosophy, and in particular Rawlsianism endorses a problematic ontology. While Finlayson does not discuss how political theories implicitly or explicitly endorse certain theories of personhood as foundations for what they take to be a political subject, I will discuss how this is in fact another way in which political methodology is politically invested.

The relation between ontology and political theory is rarely discussed, but it is emerging as a central topic within philosophical and political discussions of disability, race and gender, as well as within social ontology. In examining the connection between ontologies and politics I am particularly indebted to various strands of feminist theory, such as the work of Sally Haslanger, who examines the nature of social kinds, and in particular the ontology of race and gender (2011; 2012). Indeed, the project is inspired by social ontology as a field, as it is concerned with the reality of social objects, structures, groups and constellations, and the mechanisms that form them. On the other hand, I am also indebted to the feminist philosophy of care, and its critique of social atomism, and their political rethinking of what it means for persons to be political beings.

However, despite drawing inspirations from these debates on the intersections of ontology with politics, my project, as will become clear in

Chapter 2, is not an ontological one. Instead, I show how ontology has bearing on the debate of the nature of political methodology. It, therefore, forms a sort of bridge between discussions of social ontology in general, and the political debate about the recognition of care work. I argue that the critique of social atomism forms this bridge.

In this thesis, I aim to answer the following questions:

1. If we take the critiques of social atomism seriously, what does this mean for political theory?

2. Must political theory subscribe to an ontic account of personhood?

3. Is this bound to be a politically problematic account of personhood, such as social atomism?

4. What methodological and epistemic space do political theories have to develop accounts of personhood that are politically unproblematic?

1.4 Structure

I will embark on this project in the following manner: In the second chapter I show that the critiques of social atomism are often misunderstood as claiming that there is a political problem with social atomism as an ontology. I argue that there is a deeper reading of the critiques that show that the problem is not *primarily* with social atomism itself, but how it, as an ontology, figures in the political theory. This is a problem for the role of ontology in political theory at large. While any political theory must hold some ontology, by virtue of assuming what it means to be a political subject, some political theories pre-suppose ontologies not because of their ontic veracity, but because they fit their political intentions.

Thus, in the third chapter I assess the means by which some ontological beliefs are picked out by our political beliefs and intentions, and I separate this from the careful conceptual investigations that we perform within metaphysics. Moreover, I investigate the role these ontological beliefs

may play within a larger network of political beliefs. For instance, "human nature is selfish" is a commonly held belief, but its prevalence has been shown to be largely contingent on political and financial climate. However, this belief is treated as bedrock, as we take it to be an ontological truth. As such, it restrains what other things one can believe about human nature and social organisation.

In the final chapter I sketch out the possible methodological ramifications this may have for political theory, and what possible precautions to take as a political theorist if one is to avoid the problems for political theory highlighted by the critiques of social atomism.

Chapter 2

Locating the Problem of Social Atomism

2.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter I introduce some common critiques of liberal political theory which claim that liberalism is committed to the idea that persons are socially atomistic. This means that social features are extrinsic, rather than intrinsic to what it means to be a person.

Critiques of social atomism arise from time to time throughout the history of political philosophy. In this chapter I argue that the common denominator between these critiques is one that is often overlooked, even by the critics of social atomism. As a result, the actual ramifications of their critique are not well understood. However, I show that they lead to a more general critique of how ontology figures in political theory *as such*. I aim to assess the actual implications of this generalised critique in the chapter following this one, and in the final chapter point towards why this might have substantial ramifications for political theory beyond those that the critiques of social atomism are usually taken to have.

My argument in this chapter will proceed in the following way: first I define social atomism and the contexts where ideas of personhood that fit this description appear. Then I discuss critiques of social atomism, showing

their full ramifications, and that this full account is best developed by the young Karl Marx. This allows me to show that the critiques of social atomism are at their most politically forceful when they are understood as epistemic and methodological critiques.

2.2 Social Atomisim

2.2.1 Definition of social atomism

Social atomism is a conception of personhood that takes the primary features of persons to be intrinsic to the individual. It can, for instance, be seen in contrast to an account of personhood that takes the social relationships a person stands in to constitute the primary features of her personhood. In what sense the features of personhood are primary depends on the debate at hand. The debate may either be concerned with the features of persons it takes to be politically relevant, or it may be concerned with what features of personhood are essential in a deeper, ontological sense. Accordingly, the political sense of social atomism takes the prime purpose of a social structure to ensure the fulfilment of individual ends by protecting individuals from the infringement of others (Taylor 1985, p. 187). It is only the individuality of persons that we take to be the relevant feature of personhood for social organisation. However, we may also take social atomism to refer to the essential features of persons, rather than those that are merely politically relevant. Often the political and the ontic senses of social atomism are treated as equivalent, as the ideal form of social organisation is usually taken to be one that provides a complete platform for human flourishing. Thus, the politically primary features of persons are just the features of human beings that are intrinsic to their species-specific nature. In other words, the ontic features of persons are thought to be relevant for political concerns.

2.2.2 Ontology as a theoretical starting point

As ontology concerns the basic constituents of the world, to use an ontic framework as a theoretical starting point is commonly seen as methodologically virtuous. If we can use our knowledge about the basic constituents of the world to make sense of more complex features, such as social organisation, we seem more likely to "get it right", unbiased by our understanding of the world as it appears to us in our day-to-day endeavours. Thus, it is often assumed that knowledge of the essence of persons allows us to know what a social organisation that respects this essence would look like, and it, accordingly, provides a goal towards which politics should strive (Macpherson 1980, p. x).

2.2.3 This methodology is explicitly endorsed by early contract theory

This is a methodology that is explicitly developed in early contract theory through imagining man in the state of nature. For instance, John Locke takes man's natural state, or essence, to be expressed prior to any social organisation, and he takes social organisation only to follow if external circumstances, such as scarcity of resources, call for it (Locke 1690). Locke's commitment to social atomism as an ontology follows from the idea that human beings are all born equal as members of the same species (*Ibid*, chap. II §46). Locke's account of personhood thus bases the qualitative distinctness and difference of persons, as perceived in everyday life, in the idea of metaphysical sameness. This is explained by the following argument: there is no metaphysical reason why people should stand in unequal relationships as they all share the same basic ontic features. Moreover, there is no ontological reason for people to stand in any relationship to each other at all. For instance, dependency is the only conceivable reason a relationship may be already established prior to the formal establishment of a society. However, dependency is a relationship of difference rather than equality, and so there is

no ontological reason why people would form this kind of relationship unless their environment demands it. In other words, no man has any natural right or reason to claim power over another, and no man need stand in a relation to another to live out their species specific essence. Difference between men of equal essence develops as they are equally given the space to develop their capacities as they please, and as their social context determines the specific relationships in which they may stand with other people. Natural resources determine what and how their intrinsic powers may be disposed of.

Thus, from these ontic premises Locke develops a liberal political theory where an ideal society is purely instrumental to the flourishing of man's nature; it consists of whatever social regulation is deemed necessary to enable men to fulfil their species essences, and to dispose of their intrinsic capacities free from the interference of others (Taylor 1985, p. 187). Society is something opted in to, through a social contract, when people come to the realisation that it provides a better means for securing freedom from interference than living around each other in an unregulated manner. As a result, Locke's account of personhood is atomistic both at the level of ontology and the level of politics (*Ibid*, p. 190); an ideal society ensures the flourishing of their citizens by ensuring that they do not interfere with one another.

2.2.4 This methodology is implicitly endorsed by contract theory *as such*

One may claim that the endorsement of social atomism is only a quirk of the Lockean state of nature narrative (*Ibid*), and is as such not taken to be essential to liberal egalitarian political theory. However, I will argue that contract theory, by virtue of its very methodology, is inextricably linked to social atomism, and subsequently that social atomism is a compatible but not necessary ontology for liberal egalitarian political theory.

Contract theory, broadly construed, is based on the idea that people

actively agree to enter a society together, and that the form the society takes depends on how they negotiate the contract. The contract in turn legitimises the form of the society. Persons are parties to the social contract, and are only members of a society by virtue of actively or tacitly consenting to this contract (D'Agostino, Gaus, and Thrasher 2014). Contract theory thus assumes that society, at least ideally, is deliberately entered into by a series of individual parties that negotiate the way their relationships should be structured.

Thus, contract theory assumes that individuals, as pre-social beings, form the basic constituents of a society, and shows how a social organization may follow. It, therefore, also automatically endorses an ontic account, and subsequently a political account of social atomism. It is the very mechanism of contract theory, by virtue of conceiving of persons as in some way entering society, that leads to an ontic commitment to social atomism. This is because it assumes that social features are only of secondary relevance to what it means to be a person, and that the contract is needed to regulate social relationships such that individuals can live out their essence, rather than conceiving of society as a necessary condition for human flourishing. Thus, it seems that the very method endorsed by contract theory, of taking ontology to be politically neutral, and thus to use it as a starting point for supposedly unbiased political theory, leads to the idea that persons must be treated as social atoms.

2.2.5 Rawlsianism wrongly denies any metaphysical commitment

However, it is possible to argue that the contract theory of John Rawls, which denies the relevance of ontology in political theory altogether, provides a counterexample to my claim that liberal contract theory by default is committed to social atomism at an ontic, and, therefore, political level. Rawls eschews assertions of universal truths, including those about "the essential

nature and identity of persons" under the mantra "political, not metaphysical" (Rawls 1985, p. 223). The social contract, then, does not provide a bridge from pre-social to social existences, but from unstructured to structured social relations. Metaphysics has nothing to do with politics, which is a purely organizational matter.

As a result, the Rawlsian view denounces the method of taking ontological personhood to ground the politically relevant features of persons as political subjects. The goal of Rawls's political theory is not the flourishing of some specifically human essence, or the transition from a specific form of social organisation (or lack thereof) to an ideal one. Instead he aims to provide a method to devise a kind of social organisation that allows each individual to autonomously define and achieve their own definition of "the good" (Francis and Silvers 2010, p. 240). As Rawls's heuristic device can be applied to a range of concrete social and political situations, his theory is supposedly not implicitly committed to a specific form of power distribution. Thus, he does not need to legitimize some specific conception of "the good" as politically unbiased in the way Locke does by anchoring his theory in an ontology.

However, critics of the Rawlsian tradition have argued that a political theory is itself crafted according to some basic principles about what it means for a society to have reached its ideal state, whether this is through some universal conception of "the good", or through the fulfilment of each person's individualized conception of "the good" (Young 1990, p. 25). Thus, Rawls's theory is actually not simply providing a value neutral heuristic device, and, *as such*, he does indeed commit to some specific account of the nature of the subject that politics takes itself to regulate.

Anita Silvers and Leslie Francis argue that the following is involved in the conception of people as self-validating developers of their ideas of the good:

> By exercising the moral power of constructing a conception of
> the good, those who hold these conceptions validate them. Their

idea building is accomplished in abstraction from interaction with others. Ontologically, everyone is an island with respect to constructing conceptions of the good.

And moreover,

[i]f conceptions of the good are interactive and intersubjective products, this picture discards important features of our ontological landscape relating to what kind of social entities human beings are and how we interact with and understand each other (Francis and Silvers 2010, p. 2423).

In other words, the "good", as a distinct conception for each individual, is, *as such*, premised on the same idea of a metaphysical homogeny that Locke is committed to. It assumes that everyone is able to autonomously find their own conception of "the good" independently of others. As Michael Sandel puts it, '[w]hat matters above all, what is most essential to our personhood, are not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them' (1984, p. 86). Although Rawls's political subjects are initially not conceived of as pre-social, but rather pre-societal, they still transition from pre-political subjects to subjects that enter a society based on the outcome of some negotiation. Moreover, there are specific requirements for what it means to be the kind of thing that can transition from a pre-political to political subject. People who are in some way or other incapable of negotiating their own place in society remain pre-political subjects unless some concessions are made on their behalf. This seems a tenuous claim, for instance, when it comes to children and many people with cognitive disabilities. On Rawls's account, their concerns are not primary to the structuring of society. In order to be a political subject they are essentially dependent on others, but this dependency is an aberrance from the norm of what it means to be a subject for political concern.

Though there is a political point to be made here, what I want to draw from this discussion is that Rawls legitimises his political theory

through a conception of personhood that falls outside what he takes to be the domain of his political project. In his contractarian conception of people transitioning into some form of society he implicitly holds an ontic account of personhood which grounds his conception of the political subject. Thus, he does base his conception of political subjecthood in an ontological account of personhood, after all, though this is something he actively resists doing. As a result, Rawls assumes a view that takes human beings to be metaphysically equal, but qualitatively distinct units, just as the traditional contractarian does, by virtue of claiming that individuals can define their own conception of "the good" on the basis of the kinds of beings they are. This ontology is based on the idea that persons are metaphysically homogenous individuals with a given set of capacities. There is no metaphysical reason why people should stand in relationships as they all share the same basic ontic features, and the only conceivable pre-contractual relationship established would be one of dependency, and, thus, inequality. This assumed metaphysical individuality allows for the development of qualitative difference when it comes to such things as personal conceptions of "the good", as these are contingent social circumstances. In other words, Rawls subscribes to the idea that persons are socially atomistic: first in an ontic, and then in a political sense.

In the above discussion I have shown that commitment to social atomism not only follows from the endorsement of a specific methodology that again leads to a specific kind of a political theory, but that the structure of contractarian political theory itself, irrespective of how it is devised, is committed to social atomism. Moreover, contractarianism forms a subset of liberal egalitarian theory in general, as it accommodates for the idea that humans are essentially equal beings, whose individual freedom must be preserved. In other words, liberal theory is compatible with social atomism, and this also means that social atomism is easily assumed as an ontology by any liberal theory unless this is actively (and successfully) resisted. On a more general note, this discussion also shows that ontic commitments cannot *simply* be dismissed as irrelevant for political theory. If a political theory

does not explicitly denounce or commit to some ontology, some ontology will simply be assumed, as the theory must commit to some idea of to whom it applies, in what sense, and through what means.

2.3   The Critiques of Social Atomism

It is now possible to ask whether social atomism is the appropriate ontology for political theory, and whether there is a problem with the way the theory comes to commit to its ontology. The relation between a political theory and its ontology can be evaluated along two parameters: first, whether the theory is internally coherent. Does a political theory that assumes an atomistic conception of personhood produce a coherent theory of how a society of social atoms should be structured? For instance, Michael Sandel takes Rawls to hold an inconsistent ontology when he claims that natural assets should be seen as a common good, while otherwise having a theory that caters to the political subject as an individual rather than a community (Sandel 1984).

The second parameter through which the theory can be evaluated is whether the conception of personhood is defensible in itself, either when it comes to describe what it means to be a person within an actual society, or when it comes to the role that the concept of personhood is taken to play for the political theory. For instance, Robert Nozick critiques Rawls's ontic foundation. Nozick reads Rawls as claiming that natural assets are distributed in a morally arbitrary way, meaning that because people do not naturally deserve them, they should be seen as collective assets. Thus, Nozick takes Rawls to hold such a minimal account of personhood that even natural assets are not taken to be intrinsic features of individuals, and attacks Rawls on the grounds of having an untenable account of what it means to be a person (Nozick 1974, pp. 213-231). However, Nozick's issue with Rawls is only concerned with how exactly the minimal individual is defined. Thus, Nozick does not go further to generally oppose social atomism.

Most standard critiques of social atomism use the second parame-

ter as an evaluative strategy, by asking whether the ontology is a good one for political theory in the first place. This is both the case with the communitarianism of Charles Taylor (1985) and Michael Sandel (1982), and it is also the form many feminist critiques of social atomism take. Moreover, it also resembles the arguments against social atomism made by the young Karl Marx.

However, I argue that Marx showed that the critique of social atomism along the second parameter is necessarily preconditioned on a critique along the first parameter. The feminist and communitarian debates thus overlook the full commitments and ramifications of their critiques, while Marx's argument embodies the structure of these critiques by virtue of presenting a challenge to the internal coherence of political theory at large. In order to show this, I will not focus specifically on the communitarian debate, as the feminist debate is thematically closer to the Marxist critique, and therefore presents a fuller contrast case.

2.3.1 Standard reading: there is a political problem with the ontology

Feminist theorists who argue for the political recognition of care work and care relationships argue that social atomism is a problematic conception of personhood, as relationships of dependence play a crucial role in human life, from infancy, through childhood and old age (Anderson 1999, p. 311, 324). Indeed, any social organisation is dependent on various people fulfilling their part in dependency relationships (Kittay 1999, p. 756). However, since dependency relations are fundamentally unequal and fundamentally social, an egalitarian, rights based theory of justice cannot properly incorporate human dependency as a positive feature of society. On this picture, dependency on others for one's flourishing both entails the failure to live out one's pre-social human essence and letting one's flourishing happen at the whim of someone else's power, by virtue of the unequal structure of the relationship (*Ibid*, p.

xi). As a result, care relationships are seen both as aberrant from the social norm, and as inherently lamentable, though positive dependency relationships are necessary and inevitable in any human society (*Ibid*).

In response to this, theorists such as Susan Moller Okin (1989), Elizabeth Anderson (1999) and Eva Kittay (1999), have argued that the liberal egalitarian paradigm upholds a specific exploitative social power structure, as the labour associated with dependency relations, such as childcare or care of elderly and ill family members is usually unpaid, and is largely undertaken by women. By taking ideal justice and social equality to be the political norm, actual injustices and differences are seen as aberrant. However, in the real, social world it is equality and justice that is aberrant from the social norm, and it is accordingly difference and dependency relationships that should be treated as central characteristics of the political subject (Shklar 1990, p. 39).

To not properly recognise care work as politically equal to other forms of labour thus provides a mechanism to uphold a specific exploitative social power balance where women work for free, and are financially dependent on men. On a personal level, this makes women vulnerable to a range of different forms of exploitation, and deprives them of the autonomy to easily leave abusive and exploitative relationships (Anderson 1999, p. 311). On a societal level, they are not politically and financially recognised for labour that is necessary for the survival of their society.

At this point, the Rawlsian might argue that there is space within the heuristic machinery of the egalitarian theory to recognise care labour, but that we must first "work out a viable theory for the normal range, [before] we can attempt to handle these other cases later" (Rawls 1992, p. 272, n.10). However, as mentioned, this implies that care relationships are a secondary rather than a primary concern of justice (Kittay 1999, p. 77). It is something to be "dealt with", rather than a feature that could play a positive part in structuring society.

It therefore continues to justify the subordination of women to male wage earners, as it treats the symptom rather than the cause of injustice that

takes place when care labour is not recognised (Anderson 1999, p. 311). The recognition of care labour is not seen as a worthy reason for restructuring social organisation. Instead, only care relationships that have already turned exploitative are worthy of political attention. As a result, the feminist claim is that social atomism is a problematic ontology, and liberal political theories should replace it with one that is capable of recognising care relationships.

2.3.2 Alternative reading: there is a problem with the function of the ontology for our political theories

However, as mentioned, it is also possible to critique social atomism along the first parameter, namely by evaluating the role the concept plays for the political theory at hand, rather than merely for the content of its ontology. An example of such a critique is that the claim "all men are born equal" is not justified in and of itself for the Lockean project. While it is just assumed to be a metaphysical truth, and thus seemingly justified *qua* ontology, it has been claimed that this is not the reason Locke chose it as a narrative starting point for his account. Instead it was supposedly picked because it was instrumental to a substantial break with the feudal idea that the dependency relation between lordship and subject is theoretically basic (Kittay 1999, p. 5). Accordingly, this ontic conception of man is not internally justified to the theory by virtue of being a basic, pre-political theoretical starting point. The ontology itself was picked because it covertly served a specific political purpose.

To what extent this genealogy discredits the Lockean theory is debatable. Social atomism may still be an ontologically good account of personhood, though it also happens to serve ulterior purposes for Locke. Thus, this specific critique primarily questions whether the Lockean project covertly fits a specific political aim, rather than being entirely modelled around universal ideals. This critique may thus primarily explain why the Lockean narrative came to prevail in the history of western political theory; it was not neces-

sarily because it was the best or only political theory, but because it aligned with a change in political power structure (Williams 2000, p. 478). However, it does not discredit the Lockean account in and of itself.

A stronger, more systematic argument for the political functional problem of social atomism can also be made, showing parallels to the feminist critiques of social atomism. I will argue that the feminist argument can indeed be subsumed under this argumentative structure, though it makes secondary the question of whether the ontology is correct. I will argue that this is a more forceful critique of social atomism, given its strong connection to specific political theories rather than explicit ontic narratives.

The feminist argument for the recognition of care does not necessarily denounce liberalism as such. Rather it assumes that the political paradigm will change appropriately once it reconsiders what its appropriate political subjects are. As a result, these critiques amount to an interesting claim about the relationship between political theory and ontology; your politics change if your ontology changes. Indeed, it accepts the Lockean claim that ideal politics will follow from a correct ontology, taking the main problem for the Lockean to be that they assume the wrong kind of ontology because it is implicitly biased by its real political attempt to discredit feudalism and to legitimise property ownership.

However, it is the liberal contractarian assumption of *how* ontology figures in their theories, which takes them to be pre-social and thus pre-political, that is being criticised when we criticise social atomism. An ontology somehow based in relationality, care and intersubjectivity simply cannot pass as either pre-social or inherently politically neutral.

Although the critics are sceptical of social atomism in and of itself, the minimum charge, and the clearest commitment of the critiques is that the problem resides in the role social atomism plays in our political theories as a "neutral" theoretical starting point which places constraints on the possible political theories that may follow. Indeed, social atomism might be the wrong framework through which to make sense of human existence within

specific social contexts, but it does not mean that social atomism could not legitimately figure as one of many legitimate descriptions of what it is to be a person within a pluralistic or processual ontic framework, or at some level of description of political personhood. Thus, it seems like the central problem concerning social atomism is how our ontic frameworks can be exploited by specific political projects.

This problem is properly recognised by Karl Marx in an argument that structurally seems to underpin the feminist point in his classic text *On the Jewish Question*. There, in his discussion of the abolition of property ownership as a condition for voting, he argues that

> [t]he property qualification is the last political form in which private property is recognised. But the political suppression of private property not only does not abolish private property, it actually presupposes its existence. The state abolished, after its fashion, the distinctions established by birth, social rank, education, occupation, when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are non political distinctions [...] But the state, none the less, allows private property, education, occupation, to act after their own fashion, namely as private property, education, occupation, and to manifest their particular nature (Marx 1844, p. 33)

Thus, in parallel to the feminist critiques of social atomism, Marx argues that the emphasis on equality as a political virtue means that actual inequalities, such as dependency relations, are ignored as a political topic. However, Marx's point specifically is not about social atomism as an ontology, but our beliefs about social atomism as an ontology. Whereas the feminist critiques fit within a larger concern about the recognition of the specific form of stereotypically "feminine" existence that embodies care relationships, and it is on this basis they propose an alternative ontology, in this essay, Marx does not attempt to fit his negative critique around a positive project.

Instead, his essay is concerned in particular with what it means to have political status. This allows him to claim that actual emancipation, i.e. human flourishing, is a different matter from having political status, and that having political status does not automatically imply that all aspects of one's social existence are recognised as politically salient. Thus, Marx positions his critique such that it does not necessarily imply that a specific ontology determines a specific political philosophy. The story is more complex.

One of Marx's key arguments is that instead of leading to a society structured around property rights, belief in social atomism as the essence of personhood is held because we live in a society where the dynamics of property are so embedded that we take them for granted. People who benefit from property as a social power do not need to actively scheme to keep it a social power through their political theories or legal frameworks. Since property as a power does not pose an obstacle to property owners, they do not perceive it as something that merits political regulation, and they therefore abolish it as a political differentiator. To not recognise property as a political differentiator is to turn it into a pre-political concern, forming part of what we take to be pre-social, and thus essential. So, unwittingly, a choice has been made about what the salient features of man as political, and thus ontological subject must be. In the words of Charles Mills, social atomism allows for

> abstract[ing] away from relations of structural domination, ex-
> ploitation, coercion, and oppression, which in reality, of course,
> will profoundly shape the ontology of those same individuals, lo-
> cating them in superior and inferior positions in social hierarchies
> of various kinds (Mills 2005, p. 168).

As a result, ontological social atomism is not only instrumental to the disposal of one form of social power, as is claimed in the critique of Locke's connection to the abandonment of political feudalism; it serves as a narrative that justifies the existence and maintenance of this social power.

So, the Marxist claim here is that our ontological beliefs do not

form neutral reasons for which one should hold a specific political theory; instead they are picked out as primary according to whether they cohere with some political aim, and hence they provide a circular, or empty, form of grounding or justification. This is a problem even when one uses ontologies as a theoretical starting point, given that the very idea of the basic units of political theory being pre-political can serve specific political purposes.

However, it is not evident that Marx's story is a superior take on the critiques of social atomism, so in the following sections I will argue that this is indeed the stronger and more politically potent critique, and that the feminist argument falls within its scope, though it fails to develop its full ramifications.

2.3.3 Only Marx's version of the critique of social atomism is robust

The feminist critic of social atomism may respond to the Marxian version by claiming that the problem with social atomism that they aim to highlight is related to the methodological failure to examine experiences of injustice before a theory of injustice is devised (Shklar 1990, p. 39). Social atomism follows naturally from an ideal theory methodology, whereas the recognition of human beings as fundamentally and necessarily standing in relationships to each other is grounded in a real-life investigation of what it means to be a person, and what aspects of personhood are marginalised on the liberal account. Thus, though the problem is part methodological, the core issue remains that social atomism is simply the wrong kind of ontology for a truly egalitarian political theory.

However, the Marxist critique showed that the content of social atomism did not pose the main problem for liberalism. Instead, the issue concerned the interpretative structures through which the concept arose and is utilised. Proximity to the epistemic object at hand is not a sufficient condition for justified political belief when the issue is hermeneutical. For

instance, many women refuse to recognise that they are being discriminated against in the workplace, despite clear evidence that they do experience discrimination (Lafontaine 1983). So while women have better experiential acquaintance with sexual harassment, this does not mean that they necessarily have the hermeneutic framework to properly make sense of their own experiences (Brownmiller 1990). In this respect, the key issue with social atomism remains methodological rather than ontic.

While the feminist argument for the recognition of care simply claims that the ontology of contract theory is wrong, the view that is being criticised is premised on a specific methodology that assumes that ontologies are pre-social, and thus conflates political and ontological features of personhood. The problem at this point is not social atomism alone, but how social atomism follows from a view that makes a set of methodological assumptions. As the feminist argument does not locate the key problem to inhere in this conflation, it therefore, in its positive project, simply assumes that an alternative ontology leads to the identification of the appropriate politically primary features of personhood. But this assumption is in need of further argument.

It could be argued that the failure to provide such a justification does not matter much, as the feminist argument for the recognition of care still seems to get its political point across when arguing that care work has been excluded as a political concern by the liberal paradigm. However, I think this leads to a too easy dismissal of the feminist argument by the Rawlsian. Specifically, the Rawlsian may take their critique of social atomism to "get at" an entirely different concern than social atomism as an ontology, as the political injustice at hand in not recognising care work is taken to have no demonstrable connection to its ontic underpinnings. After all, there are ways of modifying a political theory "at the edges", so that the injustice at hand may be compensated for. The liberal thus takes himself to be unchallenged by the feminist critiques of social atomism, though he is still incapable of recognising dependency relations on positive terms. This surface recognition

of care work continues to justify the political mechanism that subordinates female wage earners to male ones, as it treats the symptom rather than the cause of the social disadvantage (Anderson 1999, p. 311). Nevertheless, the Rawlsian may still argue that the feminist critic of social atomism has had her political concern addressed on his account, while her ontological critique is dismissed as irrelevant in scope.

Thus, only a critique of social atomism that follows the specific structure of the Marxist argument forms a robust critique of the liberal paradigm, as it properly recognises the problem of social atomism as a *political* problem. The specific benefit of the Marxist critique is that it raises the problem of ontology to matter for political methodology, rather than reducing political theory to some ontic base. Thus, it forms a critique of the theoretical mechanisms of liberal political theory as such. As demonstrated, this is where the issue resides.

Though the feminist can of course resist the Rawlsian challenge by claiming that any political theory indeed does need an ontology, even the Rawlsian, she does not discuss on what possible terms ontology can be an unproblematic feature of political theories. Her discussion of the ontic in political theory is centred on ontology itself, rather than on the methodological issue of what it means for a political theory to hold an ontology. If political theory demands ontology, but the choice of ontology is already political, even when it may seem politically neutral, it appears to be impossible to develop a virtuous political theory. Thus, it is not clear that introducing a discussion of ontology is politically helpful in any respect, given the feminist structure of the argument. It primarily leads to an unresolved scepticism about ontology and political theory at large. Marx's critique pulls apart the negative critique of social atomism, which concerns the mechanisms of the political theory itself, from a positive political project where he introduces a new ontology. In so doing he opens up a more nuanced picture. As a result, Marx also potentially avoids the resistance to the critiques of social atomism that may follow from a will to avoid scepticism about ontology in political

theory.

The feminist critique of social atomism, which aims to recognise the value of care labour, would greatly benefit from incorporating the structure of the Marxist argument by properly separating and individually developing the claim that the way social atomism is determined as an ontology is biased in a way that reinforces a given power structure, and the claim that social atomism is a bad social ontology. Both claims can be made without being treated as necessarily, or straightforwardly connected. As a result, the feminist will be able to claim in the first instance that while social atomism is undoubtedly a true description of the relations between persons within specific social contexts, we take it to be true irrespective of the context that makes it true. Moreover, she can claim that as the belief is taken to hold universally, it is not raised to the level of an explicitly political issue, and we come to accept it as a belief about ourselves and our relationships, despite its deep political function. By separating this from the second claim, which demands change in ontology, the second claim can be better understood in the inevitable role it plays for political theory. By then considering the second claim's demand for change in ontology separately, it can be better understood in the inevitable role it plays for political theory. By implementing this structural change, the feminist will be significantly strengthened. A proper understanding of the role of ontology in political theory is found in space carved out by Marx's methodological criticism. It is this space I take myself to investigate in Chapter 3.

2.3.4 The alternative reading unveils the full ramifications of the critiques of social atomism for political theory in general

Given that the Marxist critique provides fuller analysis of the role of social atomism for liberal political theory, it is possible to properly assess what the actual ramifications of the critique may be. Moreover, given that the Marxist

critique of social atomism does not attack the content of the ontology directly, but the role it plays for the political theory, this seems to also raise some questions for political methodology in general.

As mentioned, the key problem with social atomism for Marx is that the egalitarian liberal obscures the grounds and political aims on which his theory is founded by referring to its ideal nature and political neutrality. The ontology, by virtue of its apolitical content is instrumental to this obfuscation. To simply (or primarily) claim that social atomism is the wrong kind of ontology is to embrace the premises that cause the problem of social atomism, which is to confuse the distinction between what is, namely the actual, and what must be, which is usually taken to be the ontic or the essential. It does not present a clear discussion of how political theory should negotiate the gap between a real political state of affairs and that of an imagined better one.

This also means that at the very least a "virtuous" political theory aims to be as clear as possible about its real life political aims, commitments and functions, and not only about its ideal aims and functions. This includes recognising how and on what terms it commits to some ontology about what it means to be a person within a group of people, and how this relates to what it means to be a political subject or whatever unit the political theory takes itself to regulate. Thus, the critique of social atomism does not only concern liberal theory specifically, but the role of ontology in political theory at large. How, and to what extent can one establish a "virtuous" relationship between political theory and how its ontology is picked out?

The idea that ontologies may be politically determined makes more sense on this account, than on one that takes ontologies to necessarily be inherently political. The problem concerns how political theories pick out ontologies, and whether this can be done in an apolitical manner, not whether the content of the ontology is inherently political in scope.

Thus, the more general question at hand, revealed by the critiques of social atomism, is not ontic, but epistemic; it concerns how we pick out some

beliefs at the expense of others, in particular how we pick our ontologies in relation to our political theories. What kind of epistemic constraint do ontic beliefs put on our political theories? What kind of epistemic constraint do political theories put on our ontic beliefs? How does this epistemic dynamic obscure, or involuntarily misalign political ideals, knowledge of the real world, and ideas of how to get from the real world to a better state of affairs?

2.4 Two Core Claims

As a summary of my findings in this chapter, and in order to establish the foundation of the discussion that is to follow, I will make the two following core claims. First I claim that we must reframe the critique of social atomism primarily as an issue of methodological priority. Secondly I claim that we should distinguish ontic beliefs as they exist in our everyday sets of beliefs, and purely metaphysical endeavours.

2.4.1 The first core claim: the critique of social atomism uncovers a methodological issue about how political theories in general relate to their presumed ontologies

The first core claim I extract from my discussion is that we must reframe the critique of social atomism primarily as an issue of methodological priority. While, indeed, the critique may highlight a problem for the content of the ontology in and of itself, the most important and powerful claim at hand is that it shines a light on an unresolved issue about how political theory relates to its ontology, and how the confusion about whether the problem is ontic or methodological has legitimised a lack of willingness to deal with it as a problem. In other words, it is equally problematic for political theories to not talk about their ontologies as it is to simply treat the problem of social atomism as merely ontic. Both strategies provide opportunities to dismiss

the problem as politically insignificant.

Methodology within political philosophy, within the tradition of analytic philosophy, to which Rawls belongs, has been treated as an apolitical issue. Lorna Finlayson argues that this is a grave mistake, and that our practices in developing political theories are political from the outset (Finlayson 2015, p. 5). The way we come to form political belief is itself a political process, and unless we are self-reflective about the way in which we engage with this process, our political beliefs will implicitly defend specific kinds of political views and protect specific kinds of people. Without recurring into a discussion about truth and relativism, legitimate questions can be asked about the relationship between politics and the real world standpoint of the political theories. While it may be that political theorists are in fact capable of abstracting from such a standpoint, it is both tenuous that this is desirable for political theory as it aims to bridge the theoretical gap between a real, flawed social organization and a better state of affairs. Acquaintance with real social organization surely cannot only be biased and thus detrimental to a political theory, but also is in some form essential if a theory is to have any real world impact.

We must untangle the following: political theory aims to deduce how to get from a current form of social organisation to a better one, whether this is merely by figuring out what a better one looks like, figuring out what actions to take to get there, or both. The political theor*ist*, on the other hand, sees the world and the social organisation she lives in, and is tasked with abstracting from this acquaintance in order to deduce what a better state of affairs looks like. The political theorist does not necessarily have complete or unbiased knowledge of a current state of affairs, but her theory concerns how one should move beyond the current state of affairs *as it is*, irrespective of the limits of her knowledge. She can follow two routes to achieve her aim; either she abstracts from her real world standpoint, and moves from the abstraction to a conception of a social organisation that is not the current one, or she aims to move from her real world standpoint to

a more objective conception of the world, from which she will be able to diagnose the reasons why the current state of affairs is not the ideal one. Is the move of the political theorist possible at all without also bringing personal perspectives to bear on the results? Can the political theorist ever make the same inference as the political theory ideally does?

Unless political theorists are in fact reflective about the way in which they form their political theories, we cannot be certain that they in fact are successful in abstracting their theoretical projects from some intentional or unintentional real political motive, so a discussion of methodology is in all cases called for. As a result of my discussion of the structure of the critiques of social atomism, a discussion about the role of ontology for the various political theories falls within these brackets.

2.4.2 The second core claim: we must separate ontic beliefs from ontology

The second core claim follows; ontic beliefs and ontologies are of distinct epistemic nature, and a failure to separate the two can be politically exploited. Marx shows that ontic beliefs may be politically determined; social atomism is the implied ontology of liberalism because it fits their political aims. This also means that social atomism is not chosen because of its metaphysical content, but because of its political function. Thus, we must separate social atomism as an ontology from the beliefs we have about social atomism as an ontology. Marx shows that some ontic beliefs play part of a more general belief forming process, and are not just determined by genuine ontological knowledge. Both ontology and ontic belief are topically external to the domain of political theory, but are also topically such that they may be implied by political theory. However, they are of a different epistemic nature. The liberal takes the transition from ontology to politics to be methodologically virtuous. The problem is that ontic beliefs may be determined by politics, and that we do not automatically tell apart genuine ontologies from our ontic

beliefs.

Indeed, according to developmental psychologist Susan Gelman, ontology or essence beliefs form their own epistemic category, not only for the metaphysician, but for everyday belief formation of what things are. In her book *The Essential Child*, Gelman argues, on the basis of extensive research, that we quickly learn that the ontic refers to categories of natural kinds, which we take to be real, discovered and thus rooted in nature. This is opposed to what we categorise as invented objects. According to Gelman, ontic beliefs, or essence beliefs as she calls them, hold that there is some unobservable property, be it part, substance or ineffable quality, *the essence*, that causes things to be the way they are. The essence gives rise to the observable similarities shared by members of a category. People believe everyday words reflect this real-world structure. Words such as "dog", "tree", "gold" or "schizophrenic" are believed to map directly on to natural kinds. Not all words do, but those that refer to basic level categories of natural kinds, as well as many words for social categories are taken to have this property (Gelman 2003, p. 7). This makes essentialising a basic feature of human cognition, and moreover, essentialising motivates stereotyping, prompting us to believe that certain (social) categories imply a way things necessarily are and must be (*Ibid*, p. 12). Thus, it seems that we can and should distinguish between ontic beliefs as they exist as part of our everyday sets of beliefs, and purely metaphysical endeavours.

For the sake of brevity, from now on I will refer to everyday essence beliefs as ontic beliefs, and metaphysical essence beliefs as ontological beliefs. Though the latter may be tainted by our political projects and aims, this is not necessarily the case, as the project itself is not primarily determined by our day-to-day navigation of the social world, but by careful conceptual investigation. However, topically, the overlap may be great, and it does not seem improbable that social bias will form some of the metaphysician's intuitions, though the methodology by which the ontic beliefs reached are distinct, at least on the surface. I will discuss this distinction in the final

chapter, but a fully-fledged discussion of potential political influence in the field of metaphysics must be a topic for a different thesis entirely.

The main point I aim to make is that we can distinguish between the metaphysical endeavour of discerning the features of the world in a principled way, and the everyday formation about the basic constituents of the world. The two may of course inform each other, but the fact that ontic beliefs may be determined by other things than metaphysical investigation may not be a problem for our actual metaphysical investigations, but rather for the basic beliefs we have about the world, and the consequences we take them to have in our day-to-day life. As a result, my key interest is in the fact that we seem to hold a set of beliefs about essences that are not necessarily determined by the actual metaphysical essence, but are in some sense or other constrained by social factors. Moreover, my interest is in how the two categories are confused, and how this can be exploited by our political projects by feigning a closer relationship to some metaphysical foundation than to our political beliefs at large. The following are examples of everyday ontic beliefs that I have in mind, and that I will primarily be concerned with in this thesis:

> **"Human beings are inherently selfish"** - In an episode entitled *New Baboon*, of the podcast Radiolab, a reporter follows John Horgan, a science journalist as he asks whether a world without war is possible to a series of people in his neighbourhood. In 9 out of 10 cases people respond negatively, which is a major shift from similar polls conducted in the 1980's. However, more puzzlingly, when people are asked the follow-up question "Why do you think so?", the answer invariably consists of some appeal to human nature as being inherently greedy, selfish or competitive (Miller and Krulwich 2009). Horgan claims that this response seems to change with political climate, and though this study in itself is not large enough to be scientifically sound, the live testimonies of people unflinchingly making these claims highlight

how we, in our everyday endeavours, feel confident about making essence claims, or form essence beliefs that we robustly believe in, though no particular thorough metaphysical investigation has actually taken place. Moreover, we fall back on these essence beliefs as the final justification of any political belief we do hold, as it seems to be a position from which one cannot be swayed by virtue of its seemingly robust truth.

"Women are naturally better carers" - This is a claim similar to the claim "human beings are inherently selfish". Moreover, this seems to be a prolific belief, automatically appealed to when justifying a traditional labour division within the family. Cordelia Fine, a neuroscientist who aims to show how we falsely come to hold gendered essence beliefs, claims that we know exactly to what spouse I refer when I say 'head of the household' (Fine 2010, p. 79), and we immediately take gendered behaviour to be explained by biology (*Ibid*, p. 190), despite the fact that this has proven difficult to establish, even with modern neuroscience (*Ibid*, p. 104). Moreover, a well demonstrated mechanism of devaluing care work is to take family life and women's lives to be an inherently emotional matter, and therefore not political (Saul 2003, p. 5). In other words, our ontic inferences are often motivated by a range of other purposes and inferences made at a socially contingent surface level rather than some potentially deeper ontic sense.

"Time is quantifiable" - This can be claimed to be another such example, though possibly more disputable and less commonly held. However, as an example it highlights that there are ways in which even the most "neutral" seeming domain may depend in some way on our social perception of it. Though the nature of quantifiable time in relation to our experience of duration

seems to be a purely metaphysical concern, there is anthropological evidence (though controversial) that not all cultures perceive time in the same way that the western world does. Famously, Benjamin Lee Whorf claimed of the Native American Hopi tribe that they had "no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at equal rate, out of a future, through the present, into a past" (Whorf 1956, p. 57). This founded the basis of the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about linguistic relativity. It may not establish that time is ontologically different for the Hopi, in and of itself, but that as a culture they relate to it in a way distinct from a western, industrialised world.

In contrast to the above examples, the kinds of purely metaphysical discussions I have in mind concerns such things as metaphysical possibility, personal identity and the nature of duration and time. Though, as mentioned, these *could* topically overlap with everyday ontic belief formation, they have all also been subject to thorough conceptual investigation by metaphysicians, and are therefore of a potentially different epistemic character than the types of beliefs I am concerned with following my analysis of the critiques of social atomism. They are not designed for constraining the possible set of social beliefs to hold, and their determination is not necessarily constrained by the set of social beliefs we already hold. Social atomism can be understood either as a metaphysical account of personhood, or merely as an ontic belief. It is social atomism in this latter form that I will be concerned with in the following discussion.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, I have claimed that the epistemic relation between ontic belief and political belief formation is not much discussed in political theory, but

that it seems to take some form of methodological priority if we are to avoid the problems the liberal theorist faces in the critiques of social atomism. Our ontic inferences seem to play some important part in our formation of political beliefs, and so we must know the political premises on which these are formed. This is particularly important as ontic beliefs are often strongly determined by our political and social beliefs, while ontologies are not as clearly thus determined. However, there seems to be neither little discussion of political methodology, nor the nature of ontic beliefs and commitment in political theory, meaning that it is altogether unclear on which terms the ontology of the political theory at hand is determined. We must discuss this if we are to properly criticise the use of social atomism in political theories. Thus, in the following chapter I ask what it means for an ontic belief to be politically determined, and in the final chapter I outline the kind of problem it poses for political theory.

Chapter 3

How Should we Understand the Determination of Ontic Belief in Relation to Political Beliefs?

3.1 Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that Marx's critique of social atomism shows that ontic beliefs may be politically determined in the following way:

1. social atomism is the chosen ontology because it fits a specific political project, but it is taken to *justify* the project by virtue of being apolitical in its content.

2. This also means that social atomism is not chosen purely because of its ontological content, but more likely because of its political function.

3. This also means that there may be a problem not only for social atomism, but also for other ontic beliefs that can fulfil this political function for a political theory.

4. Generally, ontic beliefs can fulfil this function because they are taken to be apolitical in content *qua* ontology, and therefore seemingly justify

any political theory that follows, but they may just as easily be picked *by* a political theory because it fits its content.

5. The content of an ontic belief is apolitical, but its function, and thus the reason it figures as the chosen ontology for a political theory may not be apolitical. The former fact obscures the latter.

6. Moreover, I showed that even if a political theory does not actively subscribe to an ontology, it cannot escape some ontic commitment on which it relies.

Thus, is it the case that all political theories hold ontologies on politically biased grounds? Is there methodological space for a political theory to relate to its ontology in a non-deceptive and unbiased manner? As a precondition for answering these questions we must

1. separate the meaning of ontology from ontic belief;

2. understand that ontic beliefs form part of a general belief forming process, and are not just determined by genuine ontological knowledge;

3. and treat the confusion about how our ontic beliefs are determined as part of what it is to be an epistemic agent, rather than an intentional deception by political theorists.

Considering these preconditions, in this chapter I will examine what it means for an ontic belief to be politically determined. Ontic belief topically concerns the domain of what we take to be the premise of our experiences, rather than our experiences themselves. How can experience determine our ontic belief at all, let alone our political intentions? By asking this question I aim to better understand the epistemic mechanisms at play, and thus, what to be aware of when either criticising the use of ontology in a political theory, or when developing political theories.

My discussion will proceed in the following manner: first, I examine the features of social atomism as an ontic belief, with the intent of mapping

out its functional properties as a belief. Then I examine how these features play together with other beliefs in a network of beliefs, whereupon I examine how, within this network, political beliefs may interact with beliefs that do not share content domain, and are therefore not taken to be political. In the final chapter, I will discuss what ramifications this may have for political theory at large.

3.2 What Are the Features of Ontic Belief?

In this section, I aim to assess the functional features of ontic belief, given my analysis of social atomism in the previous chapter. In the following section, I utilise this assessment to understand better what role ontic belief may play within our general belief systems.

3.2.1 Analogy between ontic and factual belief

As established, we take social atomism to be the starting point from which to develop political theory, while it is actually chosen as an ontology because it justifies the political theory at hand. This confusion arises because we take ontic beliefs to be grounded in metaphysical reality, exempting their reality from any political determination.

This epistemic confusion can be treated as analogous to Lorna Finlayson's discussion of the political nature of factual beliefs. To be clear, in this discussion I refer to "factual beliefs", i.e. propositional beliefs about facts, when I use the term "fact", rather than denoting something that simply holds of the world, irrespective of whether someone holds a belief that it must be the case.

Finlayson argues that facts are not always politically neutral, selfstanding theoretical units (Finlayson 2015, p. 128). She takes great issue with the idea that facts are apolitical because they map on to the real world; that a belief about a fact is a belief about an established truth about the world does not imply political neutrality. The *function* a fact plays in a set

of beliefs can be deeply political, even if the content of the fact is "neutrally" true. The *capability* of playing this function is intrinsic to the fact, by virtue of the political role it may serve within a larger belief network. Thus, the political nature (or possible political neutrality) of the fact is determined by examining the contexts in which we take them to hold, and within the heuristic framework in which we interpret them, rather than the mere truth of its content.

This can happen in two ways: The first way facts can serve a problematic political function is through their hermeneutical context, both in terms of concepts available, and in terms of what access they provide to a larger pool of knowledge of genuine states of affairs. In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker argues that there are specific injustices one can suffer *as a knower* (Fricker 2007, p. 5). One specific such injustice is hermeneutical, meaning that the conceptual framework through which we make sense of the world is not necessarily equipped to interpret all the features of the world that we experience. Fricker's point is that what features of the world we are hermeneutically equipped to make sense of is a question of definitional power. For instance, the specific experiences of marginalised people often fall outside this framework, as the suppression of their voices is instrumental to maintenance of their state of marginalisation.

The common 19th century "female" diagnosis of hysteria is a good example of this. Given the framework of medical knowledge at the time, the diagnosis was correctly attributed to a specific range of symptoms. However, the concept of hysteria itself functioned as a device to undermine the experiences of women in a patriarchal society, and the underlying psychological and medical issues they triggered (Hustvedt 2010; Micale 1990, p. 320). Instead of recognising the social issues at hand, the medical framework concealed the fact that the root of the various perceived problems was indeed social, and the proposed cure included forced conformity with ascribed gender roles (Devereux 1980). In a contemporary medical hermeneutical context, given our knowledge of the underlying causes of the symptoms of hysteria, and given

our historical knowledge, the statement "X has hysteria" does not refer to anything, and is therefore false. However, given the definition of hysteria as simply applying to a nebulous range of symptoms, the application of the term was correct within the specific historical medical hermeneutic framework that gave rise to it.

As a result, the establishment of hysteria as a concept did not only pick out a specific kind of factual proposition, it also precluded a deeper investigation into the causes of the symptoms of hysteria by having an established term into which they could be categorised. In other words, the key concern through which the concept was developed was the maintenance of some social order, rather than truth in some deeper sense. What is absorbed into our pool of "truths about the world" depends on the hermeneutic framework at play. Thus, what counts as falling within the range of true statements is also a question of power to control the hermeneutic framework, and it is therefore also a political concern.

The second way facts can serve a problematic political function does not appeal to the idea of a hermeneutic framework. It claims that while many facts themselves may be correctly seen as trivially true, trivial truths can still be combined to make politically motivated arguments. Victim blaming is an example of this. It is the assumption that there was some feature about the victim of a crime that caused a perpetrator to offend, such as carrying a fat wallet or wearing a short skirt. Though this might be a factually true aspect of the merely causal history at hand, the salient feature of the case is that it was the perpetrator who was responsible for the offence, not the victim. In this case, when there is a choice between "truths", it is some political agenda that picks out which one counts as the salient facts of the situation, rather than *vice versa* (Finlayson 2015, p. 128).

Thus, I take Finlayson's argument to show that the truth of a fact can be detached from a) how we pick out truths from a set of true (and false) states of affairs b) under what conditions we take a fact to be true. The failure to recognise how these come apart may be politically exploited. Thus, the

function of a belief within a set of beliefs may be political, irrespective of the veracity of its content.

At this point it is possible to spot some similarities between Finlayson's discussion of facts and what I take to be the issue with the role of ontology within political theory. It seems to be case that the function an ontic belief may play within a larger set of beliefs can be political, irrespective of whether the ontology itself may hold true of the world. This similarity may be strengthened, as the issue of ontic belief seems to be adequately diagnosed in examples analogous to the ones given when discussing the political nature of facts. For instance, hermeneutical frameworks seem to propose the same kind of epistemic obstacle. As with the example of hysteria, we can discern the specifically political nature of the exclusion of some ontic belief for the benefit of specific power structures. This is clear from the discussion of social atomism from the perspective of the ethics of care, which complains that the liberal framework is unable to treat human relations as a political issue, while social atomism makes immediate sense for it. Both atomism and relationality might apply correctly as ways of making sense of different aspects of human existence, but only one is taken to be ontologically salient. The problem is not that social atomism is picked out, but that it is taken to be true within all explanatory contexts because it is taken to denote some form of immutable essence. The ontic belief that is most easily perceived through our general sets of beliefs about the structure of the world excludes the possibility of seeing a more nuanced picture. As with the example of hysteria, our belief in social atomism arguably picks out something in the world that fits its description; it does not examine the world in order to form beliefs that are not preconceived.

3.2.2 Where ontic and factual beliefs differ

It is important to notice that the above argument is an argument from analogy. It shows that, as with factual propositions, the capability the ontic belief has of playing a political function is intrinsic to the type of belief we take

it to be. Ontic beliefs, by virtue of being tied to a larger belief system, are often held because they cohere with this belief system, regardless of whether the belief is true. Yet, people hold them because they think it is true, by virtue of being the kind of belief it is.

However, the specific capability of ontic belief to play a political function is not necessarily the same as the one that holds for facts in general. Thus, what, specifically, is the functional difference between ontic and factual beliefs? *Prima facie*, there does not seem to be any difference apart from content domain; while ontic beliefs concern sub-phenomenal essences alone, factual beliefs concern the world at large, in its necessities and contingencies. It is possible to have a factual belief about a specific political state of affairs, and it is also possible to have a factual belief about the molecular structure of water. Thus, we can take ontic beliefs to form a subset of factual beliefs. While ontic beliefs share features with factual beliefs by virtue of being the same species of belief, there are also specific features of ontic beliefs that do not apply to factual beliefs at large. Features of factual beliefs that concern experiential truths are not shared with ontic beliefs, which are taken to concern pre-experiential truths. For instance, while we can easily make sense of how our factual political beliefs are politically determined, we cannot talk of the political determination of ontic belief as a feature of its topical domain.

However, there might be reason to think that ontic beliefs are even more prone to covert political determination than factual beliefs at large. As discussed, with facts, the main way this happens is that their status as fact follows from a specific belief network that makes sense of the world, rather than some straightforward connection to the "fact" in the world itself. Additionally, for ontic beliefs, it is unclear what a straight-forward connection to the world itself consists of. Though factual beliefs at large may also be resilient to the demonstration of contradictory evidence, by virtue of their assumed connection to the truth, there seems to be an added level of complication for ontic beliefs.

Given Susan Gelman's research on how we think of ontic beliefs as denoting some ineffable substratum on which everything we experience is contingent (Gelman 2003), it is, by the very definition of ontic belief hard to simply pick out evidence that contradicts them (Quine and Ullian 1978, p. 14). For instance, evidence that ontic beliefs are to some extent culturally contingent, such as the basis for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, does not seem to compel us to question whether non-metaphysical features determine our ontologies. Since our ontic beliefs are biased in a way that prevents them from being revised by experiential evidence, evidence that challenges our ontic narrative is often treated as a deviation from the norm, so that our general conception of the world is not rocked by a change in belief foundation.

This example highlights that the way ontic beliefs are treated within our belief system depends on the nature of the kind of belief we assume we are dealing with. A different kind of mechanism appears at play from the one concerning factual beliefs that are not ontic, for which truth connection alone is the central question. Ontic beliefs may be perceived as credible even if the truth connection appears severed. Ontic beliefs therefore also seem to be more theoretically slippery than factual beliefs; we can make them do what we want them to do for our theories, without facing evidence-based challenges. This provides another reason why the feminist argument against social atomism does not seem sufficiently strong to be taken seriously by liberal theorists. The fact that women face specific forms of discrimination by lack of recognition does neither necessarily hint at the ontology of the political theory being wrong, nor does it sufficiently compel the liberal theorist to revise the ontic foundation of his theory.

3.3 How do Ontic Beliefs Fit Within a Web of Belief?

I have now isolated what I take to be the special features of ontic beliefs. The main thing I have established is that ontic beliefs create a strong illusion

that they are independent of the framework through which we develop other beliefs and intentions.

We cannot safely assume that ontic beliefs are basic or self-standing, and that our other beliefs flow from them. Instead our immediate formation of ontic beliefs is restrained by other beliefs, and again serves as a constraint on the other beliefs we may coherently hold. The ways in which beliefs can be interlinked and mutually determining have been discussed in many different ways. I demonstrate how to make sense of the epistemic mistake that occurs when we misunderstand the nature and cause of ontic belief. I employ Quine's web of belief, adapting it to the political case, to make clear how existing accounts of belief formation can be political when they are not about politics. In the following sections, I show what it means for a belief to be determined by a surrounding network of beliefs. In turn, I show that the features of ontic beliefs, as I have isolated them, can be seen to intermingle with political motivations *qua* their role within a belief network.

3.3.1 Quine's web of belief

Probably the most famous account of how beliefs are interrelated and mutually determine each other can be found in W.V.O Quine's essay *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951). There he provides a response to the logical positivists, and their epistemic distinction between analytic and synthetic truth (Hylton 2014). According to the positivist, on one hand, analytic sentences supposedly hold their truth within themselves. For instance, "All bachelors are unmarried men." is a sentence true in and of itself, as the concept of bachelor simply means "unmarried man". On the other hand, the truth of the synthetic sentence "some bachelors are philosophers" can only be determined by looking at empirical evidence.

However, Quine denies this epistemic distinction. He argues that we reject both for the same kind of *reasons*. Our rejection of analytic sentences might lead to a change in language use, but the *reason* to reject it is empirical, just like it is for the synthetic sentence. For instance, our reasons to reject the

analytic sentence "A bachelor is an unmarried man" would be of the same kind as rejecting the synthetic sentence "Some bachelor is a philosopher". The rejection happens on the basis of evidence. However, when we reject synthetic sentences this usually has less severe consequences for the content of our concepts.

Quine's claims that our choice of language is not theoretically neutral, grounds this argument. What counts as a simple, analytic sentence depends on the theory, or worldview, one aims to get at, rather than the internal logic of our concepts. Most of our propositional beliefs are not justified by the relation of the individual proposition to experience, considered in isolation. What matters is the relation between some larger chunk of theory and our experiences (*Ibid*). Thus, any proposition is only answerable to experience when a larger set of beliefs backs it up.

For instance, "all bachelors are unmarried men" must be backed up by a set of beliefs about the nature of bachelorhood, the meaning and significance of marriage and gender. Some sentences have greater systematic connection and impact to our theory as a whole, while others can be discarded without making much difference in how the theory applies to experience. Thus, a rejection of the sentence "All bachelors are unmarried men" will lead to a systematic questioning of our social taxonomy of gendered relations, while the rejection of the sentence "some bachelors are philosophers" may lead to some revision, but not in a systematic, theory altering way.

It is on this background possible to make sense of Quine's "web of belief" analogy. He argues that our beliefs are interrelated as in a web. The beliefs closer to the centre of the web are harder to revise as they are connected to the whole set of beliefs in a much stronger way; they form the conceptual core of the theory. Thus, the unrevisability of supposedly analytic sentence beliefs can be explained on these terms; their rejection would have a greater systematic impact on our belief webs. For instance, if we discovered evidence that discarded our beliefs that 2+2=4, our whole worldview would be seriously altered.

3.3.2 The isolated features of ontic belief are compatible with the Quinean framework

From this brief outline, we can see how Quine's web of belief might be related to how we understand ontic belief in relation to wider sets of beliefs. As mentioned, we generally perceive ontic beliefs to not be sensitive to contradictory experience, both by virtue of being understood as factual, but even more so by virtue of being understood as forming the premise of our experiences, rather than our experiences themselves. Thus, our understanding of ontic beliefs can be treated as analogous to the way Quine argues that we treat analytic sentences.

First of all, Quine distinguishes between the sentence itself and the reasons we have for holding it. While analytic sentences hold true by virtue of their internal logic, the reasons we hold or reject a sentence depend on a set of external beliefs. This aligns nicely with what seems to be going on when we take ontic beliefs to be determined by other beliefs. The content of the belief itself may consistently hold true of the world, and this is evident upon scrutinising the belief. Following the form of Quine's argument shows that the *reason* that this ontic belief is picked out, as opposed to another, is still partly determined by a broader belief network for which this belief makes sense (Quine 1951, p. 42).

So while we take ontic beliefs to explain or underpin observable data, leading to the belief that they are altogether resistant to experiential evidence, there is really only a perceived epistemic difference between the determination of these beliefs and determination of beliefs that are taken to be sensitive to revision on an experiential basis. They are all determined by the same interrelation of beliefs, or "theory", to use Quine's terminology. Just as the belief that my garden should have fences follows from its coherence with the belief that a piece of property is mine, so does social atomism cohere by virtue of distinguishing "me" and "mine" as essentially different from "you" and "yours". The more beliefs I have that lead to atomistic behaviour

the more likely we are to assume that people simply are social atoms. The key difference between ontic beliefs and our other beliefs is that the former beliefs are closer to the centre of the web, thus it will have great consequences for our whole set of beliefs if we need to revise them, as seems to be the case with "2+2=4". It is not difficult to imagine that our whole conception of the social world would be rocked if we radically altered our conception of the boundaries of personhood. Quine claims that ontological questions are just as prone to play this kind of role within our belief networks as, for instance, scientific questions (*Ibid*, p. 43).

This does not mean that the feminist critique of social atomism is, after all, sufficiently powerful when it claims that social atomism is the wrong kind of ontology. It is because this discussion is still taking place at the level of ontic belief, rather than being a critique of the ontology *as such*. The ontology can only be criticised as wrong on the Quinean framework by virtue of its relation to a whole network of belief. When the ontology is challenged, the *reason* for holding it is challenged, as is the reason for holding the network at large. Social atomism is not bad because it can merely be replaced by a "better" ontology, an ontology is better because the reason for holding it, and its surrounding belief network, is better. It is this step that is not sufficiently discussed in the feminist literature on social atomism.

From this discussion, it seems clear that ontic beliefs may belong to the centre of our web of beliefs, as their possible alteration may have profound consequences for our web of belief as such. This makes them seem robust to us, when in fact it is their interconnection to our other beliefs that makes them robust. This leads to the illusion that ontic beliefs must be bedrock: true independent from other beliefs, and that other beliefs simply *follow* from the ontic beliefs in conjunction with experience. It explains how we overlook the fact that ontic beliefs are a construction, but that we naturally and intuitively treat them as bedrock. This, in turn, explains why most non-philosophical discussions end at "X must be the case because of human nature", as it appears to us an unchallengeable claim.

This, therefore, seems to be a good explanatory model for what the epistemic issue at hand must be when political philosophers simply take ontic beliefs to be ontologically justified, disregarding other ways that this belief must also be inevitably determined if it is even to make sense to us. Moreover, challenging ontologies (implicitly) endorsed within various political theories could therefore, on the Quinean picture, present a particularly potent critique, as they may overturn the whole theory as such. However, to challenge them as ontologies, seeking to find a better one, rather than challenging the terms on which the ontic belief is really held, misses out on this.

3.3.3 Issues with the Quinean framework

Nevertheless, the idea that ontology has this central role within the Quinean framework has come under attack. Hilary Putnam rightly argues that it does not seem to *necessarily* make a radical difference to our belief framework if we have to reconsider some ontological belief. Putnam specifically uses the example of quantum logic to express this point. He argues that there seem to be good reasons to think that Boolean logic is not explanatorily sufficient for all of our experiences of the mechanics of the real world, a world we know must also be explained by quantum mechanics. In other words, there is compelling evidence that we live in a non-boolean world. However, it is not clear that this will make any difference to our experience of the world or our theories about it. We may introduce quantum logic as the new theory, as it seems to explain the quirks of quantum mechanics, though we know it is not unlikely that it is explanatorily flawed. Thus, a change in our ontological understanding does not seem to make a difference to the world as it is in front of us, though it may still explain parts of its ontology (Putnam 1980, p. 93).

However, there is an epistemic difference between the kind of ontology Putnam utilises as a counterexample, and ontic beliefs as a set of everyday beliefs about the world. The former is an ontological endeavour

that ultimately aims to develop a theory that best captures the world as it actually is. The latter, which is what I am concerned with, does not necessarily stem from a careful conceptual and theoretical analysis. Ontic beliefs are beliefs formed from *within* a specific theory, but I take that change in ontology *as such* to mean overthrowing a theory by replacing it with a new one. The formation of ontic beliefs aims to fit a specific framework, while the metaphysical endeavour is concerned with challenging or maintaining a specific framework. The metaphysical endeavour does not necessarily have a greater claim to make sense of the world as it is for us, but rather it may explain or highlight parts that were otherwise obscured. Actual metaphysical endeavours aim to identify the necessary features of the world that underpin the contingent ones, and therefore do not seem to have a bearing on our belief networks at large. However, ontic beliefs *follow* from a range of general beliefs we have about the world around us. Change in ontic belief therefore more plausibly prompts us to reconsider how we make sense of the world. In this way, ontic beliefs cohere within Quine's web of belief analogy while avoiding Putnam's objection to it. Additionally, I do not wish to further commit to the Quinean metaphysics, or coherentism of truth or justification. I primarily seek to utilise Quine's framework to explain how beliefs we take to hold, irrespective of external evidence, must in some sense be contingent on other beliefs, by virtue of being a belief, and by virtue of being a belief with a specific meaning.

Given these clarifications with respect to Putnam's objection to Quine, I take Quine's web of belief analogy to be useful in explaining the source of confusion about the role of ontic beliefs within our framework. It explains the mechanism by which ontic beliefs come apart from ontologies. Moreover, it explains how ontic beliefs may be determined by a range of weaker beliefs, by virtue of being closely connected with all the beliefs in the network. It is not implausible to claim that, at least in some possible sense, political beliefs and purposes come into the determination of the ontic belief, helping to place it exactly where it is among the whole belief web.

3.4 How do Political Beliefs Determine Ontic Beliefs?

The next important question to ask if we are to gain better clarity about the role of ontology in political theory is exactly how and to what extent this kind of determination of meaning can be a political matter. That all beliefs are partly determined for reasons extrinsic to their content seems to open up the possibility that political reasons might play a part. However, we are still unclear about how political purposes come to serve as reasons for holding beliefs we take to belong to entirely different domains, and how this determination can play a significant political role. This question is particularly tricky with respect to ontic beliefs, which are in their content so far removed from any particular political projects as commonly conceivable.

3.4.1 Ideology – what it is not

There are many theories about how our webs of beliefs are politically determined, all of which stem from a Marxist theory of ideology, which claims that our belief networks are partly determined by power dynamics external to the epistemic agent. However, this idea has been generalised and transformed to the extent that a strong Marxist orthodoxy does not seem required to embrace it (Eagleton 2007, p. 3). For my purposes, an account of ideology that fills the explanatory gap of how politics determine ontic beliefs must avoid both over-determination and under-determination.

In the case of over-determination, a theory of ideology must resist an account that claims that all beliefs are politically determined at all times. The simplest systematic explanation to why even our ontic beliefs appear to be politically determined will simply be that it is the intrinsic nature of any belief forming process to align with a dominating political project. However, that a belief is formed for reasons extrinsic to the content of the belief does not *necessarily* imply that the motive must be political, though it allows political motives to enter the equation. It would be ridiculous to claim that

none of our beliefs are formed for the reasons we, as epistemic agents, take ourselves to assign them. If I believe that I want a glass of water to quench my thirst, upon which I receive one, this is sound proof that my beliefs map on to my reasons for holding it, in a way that does not seem to have further political ramifications. However, insofar as I choose tap water over Coca Cola, having a drink of water may be a miniscule political act, as I choose to not financially support a major soft drink company.

More importantly, the claim that our whole belief network is determined by a specific power structure is simply proven untrue by the mere range of political dissent, disagreement and activism that exists *within* societies we take to be strictly structured by one specific power structure, be it some outright authoritarian regime or the neo-liberal chase for profit. In fact, it is this very observation that has led to a general dismissal of ideology as a useful theoretical concept (Eagleton 2007, p. xx). Moreover, an overdetermined account of ideology is incapable of explaining how a political dissenter may still hold mainstream ontic beliefs about such things as the nature of persons, or the essence of womanhood. For instance, it has rarely been the case that socialist movements have actively endorsed a non-mainstream, non-essentialist conception of womanhood. In fact, in many cases these movements have been places where gender essentialism and misogyny has flourished (Murray 2016; Pål Steigan 2014; Platt 2014).

However, we must distinguish the claim that all beliefs are determined *by* a power structure from the claim that all beliefs are determined *from within* this power structure, which surely seems true, given our social situation as thinkers. As established in my discussion of Quine, ontic beliefs are determined *from within a theory*. The claim that all beliefs are determined from within a power structure makes ideology prone to underdetermination. Ontic beliefs can still be perceived as thematically so far away from the political domain that it is neither clear that ontic beliefs make a political difference, nor that they are determined by politics in a way that they would not have within a different power structure. Ontic beliefs appear

to be of the same domain as my example belief about water quenching my thirst, which is clearly not socially contingent. However, in the context of a different power structure it is not clear that the ontic belief that persons are social atoms would hold in the same way. Given the way I employ the Quinean framework, it follows that ontic beliefs must in part be determined by our repeated experiences with the external world, in which social and political experiences play a large part. Moreover, the account of social atomism that I gave in Chapter 2 indicates that there indeed seem to be political reasons for why we hold at least some ontic beliefs, leaving all ontic beliefs *vulnerable* to this kind of determination.

3.4.2   Ideology – what it is

Here, I isolate the features of a theory of ideology that adequately explain the dynamics of the formation of ontic beliefs that make them politically vulnerable. I do this in order to establish what actual epistemic process may lead to the political determination of ontic belief, and whether and to what extent this is a systematic issue.

As mentioned, the basic meaning of ideology is that of a belief system determined by specific power relations, which also reinforces these relations. Power relations partly explain why a specific belief is held. It is not a sufficient condition that the belief accidentally reinforces the power structure at hand. It is beneficial to the dairy industry that I accidentally hold a belief that milk is the cornerstone of a healthy diet. Yet, this belief is not ideological unless the dairy industry also ultimately is the source of my belief. Alternatively, if my belief that milk is healthy was formed by a specific power structure due to a certain advertisement, this self-preservation may be ideological even if it ultimately fails at its task. If I am lactose intolerant, but hold the belief that milk is healthy as a result of advertising, the belief remains ideological if it would sway me to buy milk had I not been intolerant. The key mechanism of ideology is that the maintenance of given power relations provides the source of a specific belief.

Theories of how beliefs are ideologically determined vary with the different accounts of ideology, but most often, they merely state that there is a connection between belief and power, rather than explaining the epistemic dynamic at play. This has led Michael Rosen to question whether such an adequate explanation in fact exists at all (Rosen 1996). Can anything stronger than a correlation between power structure and belief systems be established? How does one bridge the gap between a social structure and individual epistemic agents in a belief forming process?

Rosen concludes that no current theory of ideology convincingly moves beyond the establishment of a correlation, but for my account of the political determination of ontic belief, the establishment of a correlation does not get me particularly far. For my purposes, I only need to isolate the epistemic features that fill the explanatory gap between ontic belief and political determination, cohering with what in fact seems to be the case when we form ontic beliefs, and cohering as closely as possible with the account of social atomism that prompted this discussion. I thus pick features of ideological accounts as highlighted by various theorists who discuss and use it, and I settle on the account that has most explanatory power for my purposes.

3.4.2.1 The ways in which beliefs may correlate with power structures

Though, according to Rosen, it is not clear that more than correlation can be properly established in these belief formation procedures, picking out how and to what extent specific beliefs are determined by a specific ideology is still a step towards greater epistemic clarity. For instance, given that the minimal commitment of an account of ideology is the claim that belief networks are determined *by* and *for* specific power structures, this does not necessarily entail a one-to-one mapping between belief and power structure. Though in some cases there might be a direct causal relation between a specific power structure and a specific belief, often this is not the case. Being a lord and believing that the aristocracy is a socially valuable institution, even within

a liberal society, appears causally related. However, even if the lord's social position gives him reason to hold this belief, it does not seem necessary that he holds this belief because of his social position. For instance, he might resist this belief because he is somehow ashamed of his inherited power in a society that, at least on the surface, condemns difference treatment based on social situation. To complicate the story further, though the lord might be ashamed of his position, he still might not take an active stance against the aristocracy, as is the case with Lord Warburton in Henry James's novel, *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). This demonstrates that we struggle to empirically establish the situations in which a power structure *consistently causes* a specific set of beliefs, and again when this set of beliefs will *cause* the strengthening of the power structure that gave rise to it.

We can systematically break down how belief systems may relate to power structures in the following fashion:

1. The power structure gives rise to a specific belief. This can happen in either a weak or a strong manner.

   - The weak determination can be likened to what David Hume calls the "circumstances of justice". Roughly, Hume claims that our idea of justice only makes sense given a (loosely defined) set of material pre-conditions. "Justice", for example, does not arise as a concept in times of extreme scarcity, as everyone is preoccupied watching their own backs. Determining what form of food distribution is just does not make sense when there is not enough for anyone. Moreover, "justice" does not arise as a concept in times of extreme abundance, as no-one would care about the idea of "mine" and "yours" (Hume, 1978: 494). The material conditions that give rise to a specific power structure within a given society dictates the concepts, and thus beliefs, that may arise. For instance, without the concept of justice, I cannot claim that if my bike was taken without my consent, it was in fact stolen. "Theft"

only makes sense as a concept when it also possibly entails specific legal procedures and consequences. The set of beliefs that I can have is limited by the material conditions and ensuing power structure at hand.

- The strong determination of ontology is the case of the determination of specific beliefs within a belief network. For instance, the belief that America is the greatest country in the world is widely held amongst U.S. citizens (and elsewhere) because it is constantly reiterated by policy-makers as a way to justify the invasion of other countries, or other such acts in the interest of the maintenance of U.S power, or power within the U.S (Stanley 2015, p. 245).

2. Ideological beliefs are beliefs that reinforce a specific power structure. We can argue that ideological beliefs sometimes arise because we are already working to reinforce a specific power structure. We can claim that ideological beliefs are formed in order to prompt specific actions that reinforce a given power structure. This is the case with the belief that milk is the cornerstone of a healthy diet. Conversely, sometimes the action that reinforces the power structure gives rise to the belief itself. For instance, the U.S. invasion of a new country may lead to the belief that America is the greatest country in the world, as it showcases its military prowess.

3.4.2.2 Ideological belief webs

The above fine-graining of the ways in which beliefs may correlate with a power structure is still too simplistic to explain the dynamics of the formation and sustainability of ideologies. It implies that while there are stronger and weaker knowable correlations between power structures and specific beliefs, there is always a specific cause for a specific belief formation, though this cause may not always be knowable to us. However, the specific feature of

ideological beliefs is that they are the result of a whole specific belief web; their cause *is* nebulous, it not only appears to be. For instance, imagine that the belief "milk is the cornerstone of a healthy diet" *is* ideological. It seems implausible that I would hold this belief because I was exposed to a single piece of dairy advertising. Obviously, some ad may have contributed strongly to my belief formation, but it would also require conversations with other people, other beliefs, habits and lack thereof. It follows that if I live in a society that takes for granted that dairy forms the cornerstone of a healthy diet, I might not so easily think to challenge the dairy industry and its practices. However, if I was concerned about animal welfare, it might give me reason to challenge the dairy industry; I find in turn that the belief that milk is healthy might not have such an immediate sway in terms of shaping my beliefs about the *necessary* constituents of a healthy diet.

This idea corresponds nicely to what Robert Stalnaker calls the linguistic "common ground" (Stalnaker 2002, p. 279-280). The common ground consists of beliefs that are not propositionally explicit to us, but still determine the meaning of propositions we hear and internalise. The common ground is contingent on various cultural practices, habits and general ways in which life is structured. Habits, practices and structures are moulded around both physical, practical, social and personal intentions and limitations. In other words, patterns of behaviour are at least partly determined by social structures, and social structures are again determined by a given distribution of power that maintains or destroys them. Patterns of behaviour underpin the common ground of belief, which determines what beliefs make immediate sense to us.

The above account is compatible with the Quinean conception of belief webs. If we hold a theory of ideology as not only concerning single random beliefs, but systematically influencing our whole webs of belief, by virtue of establishing a common ground, we cannot talk about ideology as single causes of beliefs, but about reasons for holding a belief that also determine what role the belief will play in the general belief system. For instance,

the belief that America is a great country, as understood by a group of pacifist nature-loving Americans, does not sway the nature-loving Americans to embrace warmongering, though it may sway a different demographic. Thus, though the belief may be held by both groups, the differing common grounds also determine how the group acts on the belief, and whether this action aligns with some distribution of power.

Similarly, the common ground can determine the meaning of the belief itself. For instance, whether we take generic sentences, such as "beef is food" to simply mean that beef, intrinsically, is food, depends on whether we live in a society of meat eaters or vegetarians. There are many things that we can eat, and that might in fact be delicious, but that we still do not consider food. Pets and children fall within this category, why not beef? However, if no vegetarian was present when the sentence "beef is food" was uttered, it would probably be left unchallenged as a statement about the intrinsic property of beef (Haslanger 2011, p. 189). The belief about the nature of beef is ideological on this account because in a society where this is indeed how one treats beef, there are financial and sentimental investments in the continued practice. The belief again leads to a further consumption of meat, partly because of the belief itself, and partly because our surrounding structures support the practice.

Car culture is another example of this cycle of belief and behaviour. When I spent some time in suburban Washington DC, and Maryland during the summer of 2014, there was no way to eat out, do grocery shopping or any other social or practical activity without having a car, or by dangerously walking along the sides of busy highways. It was physically and practically impossible to choose anything other than car as a means of transportation, leading to the belief that this was indeed the only way to get from A to B. While it is in fact true that cars were the only means of transportation available, the belief that cars were the only means of transportation is ideological because it reinforced a behaviour that reinforced a social structure that prioritises cars. It is not before one starts to think that cars *currently*

are the only option, but they do not *need to be in the future*, that one escapes this ideology, by challenging the power structure at hand.

Given the above account, what makes a belief ideological is not primarily its truth or falsehood, since truth is only a secondary concern to its alignment with the common ground. Beliefs are simply more prone to be false because the truth of the belief is not the main concern of our belief forming process. Thus, ideologies function by way of obscuring our political imagination by confusing the way things are (or should be, according to certain people with specific interests in mind), and the way things must be (Haslanger 2011). This confusion happens easily because we often navigate the world on auto-pilot, taking the necessity of our everyday habits and actions for granted, such as driving a car. This is not in itself bad epistemic practice, in fact it is virtuous of a knower to not dissect the nature, purpose and functioning of every little part of our surroundings, and how we relate to them. If we examine every miniscule detail of our environment, we end up not being able to efficiently engage with the world, even in a critical manner. Most of us will not need to know the exact internal mechanics of our microwave, or how it was produced and distributed as long as we are able to operate it without trouble. Indeed it would be politically counterproductive if one obsessed over every such detail rather than efficiently channelling one's mental energies on specific causes and political projects (Fricker 2015, p. 2).

3.4.2.3 Good and bad ideology

At this point, I have demonstrated that ideological belief formation fits the Quinean account; it is belief formation from within a power structure. Also, at this point, the distinction between good knowers and victims of ideology appears to be blurry. I must therefore distinguish between epistemically harmless and politically noxious ideological belief formation. I take a good ideology to be a belief network that helps us perform desired actions. For instance, I want to get to the library, and I know that I get there by taking the bus. I am thirsty, and so I have a bottle of coke. Both choosing to ride

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the bus and choosing to drink the coke are choices determined by what is available to us within a given power structure. Nevertheless, both choices help us fulfil our intentions given our beliefs about the world. We navigate a specific power structure in the way we find fit for our specific projects, and as a result we help in our own small way to reinforce that structure.

Bad ideology, then is when these beliefs in fact undermine our projects, and when we confuse our own intentions and well-being with the reproduction and well-being of a power structure (Eagleton 2007; Rosen 1996). For instance, as a woman, I may believe I have natural nurturing skills, and I may also believe that this implies that it would be a good choice to give up my career if I was to have children. This would be a genuine possibility, given the specific society I live in, but it would also contribute to sustaining a structure where women do care labour for free. My acting on my belief would be in the interest of this power structure. Yet, it would not necessarily be in my interest, as I would have to renounce a set of career goals and projects that have so far have given my life a sense of purpose, rather than perhaps fighting for a work-culture that accommodates balancing family and career. However, given my belief about my intrinsic nature as a nurturer, this latter option is not on the cards. Thus, when in good ideology, we are clear about what actions our beliefs lead to, and what political ends we thereby embrace, in bad ideology, my choices are obfuscated because my belief *primarily* aligns with an external power structure, rather than my desires, intentions or aims.

Obviously, it is possible to resist bad ideological beliefs about the world, and to uncover that they do not *primarily* align with our intentions. This is what feminist ethics of care does when advocating for the recognition of relational modes of being, and this is what the environmentalist does when she advocates for cycle lanes in a car dominated infrastructure. However, this is a project that is epistemically (and otherwise) much harder to embark on than to follow the status quo, as the beliefs challenged are beliefs that we often come to see as "the way things just are", by virtue of being implicit features of our linguistic and cultural common ground.

3.4.3 Ontic belief in ideology

I have explained how ideology corresponds to the formation of beliefs within a power structure, without necessarily implying that all our beliefs are strongly determined by this power structure, or that we are inevitably being deceived. From this, the next question to answer is what role ontic beliefs play in this story. It is not clear that political intentions enter our *ontic* belief formation in any significant way.

In certain ways, it seems evident from my account that ontic beliefs would be heavily politically determined. If my minimal Quinean story holds, it is possible to make sense of ontic beliefs as highly generalised beliefs about the world. They can be understood as belonging to the centre of our web of beliefs because they form a sort of lowest common denominator of our experiences of a specific environment. This is why they appear abstract and far removed from our everyday experiences, while still also underpinning them; ontic beliefs are actually abstractions of experience. For instance, we can explain our bias towards an individualistic or atomist conception of personhood by reference to our regular encounters with persons in a context where this is taken to be the appropriate way of treating them. If I constantly navigate the world thinking of myself as distinct from you, and fearing the repercussions of impinging on you or your property, and I am treated likewise, it seems natural that atomism forms the conception of personhood in a (neo-) liberal society.

To give a more innocuous example, our constant encounters with chairs lead us to not question their existence as things in our world on which we can sit, and this being their intrinsic function. The reason we naturally pick out these features as essential is because this is how we constantly *treat* the world; these are the features that simply *are* salient for our various everyday endeavours. Similarly, we need to think of persons as atomistic because we repeatedly need to pick out clear distinctions, for instance, between what is mine and what is yours, if we are to avoid social repercussions. On this account, all of our beliefs about the world, including our political convictions,

habits and general social structures (legal, infrastructural etc.) will influence the reasons we pick out the ontic beliefs we do. Moreover, our webs of beliefs, with our ontic beliefs at the centre, disposes us to approach the world in a specific way, for instance, by just taking for granted that human beings are social atoms, or that women are natural carers. Moreover, by approaching the world in this way, our ontic beliefs are reaffirmed.

3.4.3.1 Bad accounts of the political nature of determining ontic belief

Given the general nature of ontic belief, it seems like specific political purposes may be far removed or watered down through the process of generalising experiences that lead to ontic beliefs. For instance, our everyday encounters with chairs surely do not matter in political terms when we come to form a belief about the nature of chairs, though this belief is formed by habits, and its attributed function is socially contingent. Yet, the account of social atomism indicates that ontic beliefs are at the very least vulnerable to being picked out for political purposes. Thus, we must ask, what part of determining ontic belief, i.e. the very epistemic endeavour of generalising, is political? There are a number of explanations for what may be going on. I begin by dismissing the problematic ones, before moving on to the most compelling explanation.

First of all, the picking out of specific ontic beliefs to reinforce specific political power structures can be explained by the active scheming to protect the privilege of people who benefit from the consequences of a set of beliefs, for which the ontology is central. This is the kind of story Rousseau tells in the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*. There, he argues how the conception of man as essentially equal, and subsequently the legal framework that supported this idea, was fashioned by an elite who intended to make the lower classes come to terms with their domination by assuming that poor utilisation of their own faculties, rather than unjust social structures, were responsible for their disadvantage (Rousseau

1755, p. 173). However, this is an epistemically heavy handed and conspiratorial account of why society is structured in such a way that we come to hold certain ontic beliefs. It seems plausible that the financial elite may sit down and decide on a fair few things between themselves, but it is not evident that ontic beliefs and how they are formed would be among them. Given the nature of ontic beliefs, as beliefs that just seem natural and unquestionably true to us, we have not explained why the ruling classes may be able to take a step back and assess why *these* ontic beliefs would be preferable to others.

A better explanation would be that certain things may be epistemically available given specific epistemic positions, which may provide better or worse perspectives or hermeneutic frameworks through which to pick out features of the world. This position must, at least partly, be shaped by social position. It is here possible to appeal to Simone Weil's pane of glass analogy; someone that does not see a pane of glass in front of them might not be aware of not seeing it, however the presence of the glass might be painfully visible to someone who sees it from a slightly different angle, and moreover, so is the other person's oblivion (Weil 1957). A woman may see male privilege at play, while the privileged man may not be aware of it, as the privilege does not pose a social or epistemic obstacle to him. It makes his navigation as a social agent go smoothly, so it does not offer him reason to give it much thought. This partly explains why many faulty ontic beliefs are not challenged, for political reasons. People who are comfortable with the organisation of the world and the way they navigate it will not naturally ask questions about the necessary order of things, and the basic categories through which they make sense of this order. While the belief about the essential function of the chair may not be shaped by a specific perspective because there is no power invested in there being such a belief, the perspectives from which the essence of gender roles or personhood may change given the various investments of power there may be in the various definitions. Nevertheless, this does not explain the emergence of specific ontic beliefs, only how they maintain themselves. Moreover, it does not explain how people who lack social privilege

may also internalise the ontic beliefs that serve a power hierarchy that they are not invested in.

An explanation may be found in Jon Elster's discussion of the fable of sour grapes. He argues that our knowledge of what social possibilities may be obscured by a process, driven by our personal desires, that seemingly leads only to a single evident choice (Elster 1982, p. 219). The fable concerns a fox who sees grapes that are out of his reach, and instead of treating his inability to reach the grapes as a personal failure or loss, he excludes the grapes from his list of desires by claiming that they were sour anyway. Similarly, the woman who observes male privilege may come to think that he moves in a domain that she would not, *as a woman*, want to be a part of anyway.

This explanation is incomplete as the epistemic blame is with the victim of ideology, rather than the social structure that creates epistemic obstacles. It is the woman who accepts her inferiority who epistemically missteps when simply thinking that an unfair state of affairs is not lamentable. However, this is not the full story. The core of the problem is not the faculties of the victim, but with the skewed attribution of gender roles. This is not brought sharply enough into relief by Elster's story. It is the distribution itself that is responsible for the systematic epistemic dynamic, not the victim's vanity or sudden inability to think critically. Elster's fable explains how we easily may choose the simpler, internal explanation, namely our own motives, rather than an intricate analysis of why the world is structured the way it is. But, ultimately, it hinges on the mere drive for social self-preservation of the knower, and for the maintenance of the knower's self-respect. The issue with ontic belief is more complicated. Our accounts of personhood, for instance, seem more complexly determined than merely our drive to positively and easily explain the way we fit into the world. As a belief at the centre of our web, it seems implicitly determined by a range of things, from our generalised experiences of social encounters to how we are treated by social institutions. Thus, indeed, ontic beliefs do not necessarily seem to follow from an active decision about how we make sense of the world,

though this active decision might be a side-effect of what we implicitly take to be metaphysically, socially and politically possible.

3.4.3.2 A better account of the political nature of determining ontic belief

The above accounts of the political nature of the process of determining ontic beliefs are not bad in and of themselves; they are bad because they are incomplete. They do not map the full complexity of how the ontic belief forming process seems to actually happen. Primarily, what is missing from these accounts is the idea that while human beings take themselves solely to understand and shape the world, the world also resists our actions in various ways, and this resistance also takes part in the formation of meaning and belief. This is a crucial insight made by Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. His discussion alludes to the important fact that mere opinion and human activity on the world is not the only thing that creates culture and meaning. The way the world resists our actions in various ways plays a part in our general belief and concept formation, as well as our understanding about our own place within the world (Sartre 1960, p. 165). Iris Marion Young argues that this idea sounds more obscure than it is; Sartre is merely claiming that the inert objects we encounter bear the mark of past actions that may or may not fit our own goals (Young 2011, p. 54).

Sartre's story goes as follows: The first step in this dialectic between a person and her surroundings starts with the person having a need, and acting accordingly. The material world is inert; it resists our actions, such that our actions must also be modified to fit around it. The need can only be fulfilled with this in mind. For instance, I can only build a chair out of a piece of wood if I am attentive to the material structure of the wood. If I carve the wrong way, or make the legs too spindly, the wood will refuse to satisfy my desire to make it a chair. Moreover, if a second person wants to continue crafting the chair after I give up mid-project, this person has to respect the piece of wood in the condition they find it. The half-finished

chair bears the mark of the person who made it, and will again determine partly what kind of chair it will be once it is done. The key point is that we, as a society, form the material world out of our own interests, but this material world also ultimately resists us, and itself determines what actions are possible. For instance, the society of car-lovers that lacks both pavements, public transport and cycle lanes was built to suit the existence of a specific community, but it also determines what is possible to do without eradicating the infrastructure altogether (Desan 1965, p. 100).

So far, nothing new. The point of this story is that our encounter with the material world, and in its resistance to our actions, determines the meaning of various concepts we form about the world. Any change to the inert structure of the world will also cohere with a change in determination of meaning. For instance, in the Stone Age there were limitless natural resources by today's standards, but few means to take advantage of them. A waterfall was an obstacle, rather than a power source. However, today, given our technological advancements, the waterfall is capable of taking on the latter meaning for us.

At the level of the individual and her specific relation to her social world, Sartre gives the following example of people on a bus from a poor neighbourhood driving through a rich one. The people on the bus face the inertia of the world by completely depending on the bus system to take them where they need to go. When on the bus, they have no power to alter the route or change the stops, as and when convenient. However, the people who live in the rich neighbourhood, that the bus traverses, are capable of driving cars; the fulfilment of their various endeavours do not happen at the whim of the bus system. Given that the poor use the bus and the rich drive cars, and the difference is visible to both parties, there is no sense of community or blending or shared possibility between the classes by virtue of their shared experience of living at the whim of the same inert structure. The relative inertia of social and physical structures imbues the individual with social meaning about their lives and possibilities, and the lives and possibilities of

others (Sartre 1960, p. 180).

3.4.3.3 The political determination of ontic belief

We can now answer what part it is of our ontic belief formation, i.e. the very epistemic endeavour of generalising, that is political. Further, why are some ontic beliefs problematic in this respect, though their meaning is socially determined, while others are not?

On the Sartrean account, our social environment itself reinforces our ideas about what the world is like, and what aspects of the world are unchangeable. Moreover, our specific social position, our social possibilities and specific ways of relating to the world take part in shaping what this reality is for us. Our behaviour in relation to this reality in turn shapes our environment, and our relation to it. For instance, at a neighbourhood planning commissions meeting there might only be certain people that manage to navigate the bureaucratic rules successfully, speak eloquently within their allotted time, dodge any implicit bias that may work to their disservice, and present a case that they know will fall within the scope of acceptability for the planning commissions office. (Young 1990, p. 76).

Our conception of an ontic belief is of a thing that is true irrespective of context. Yet, it is our relation to the aspects of the world that simply seem inert to us, the basic structures that shape our encounters with the world, that are generalised into a belief about essences. A belief about the essence of chair as being built to sit on is apolitical. The chair is a social object, whose social meaning, and essence is exhausted by this fact. However, a specific belief about the essence of personhood, as given as a generalisation about the various ways in which a society relates to persons, is not necessarily exhaustive of what a person *must be*, in all contexts. There is thus a social and political bias within a given social structure to think of persons as having one specific kind of essence, given the way the world continuously fights back when attempting to treat persons in a radically different manner (thus the lack of recognition of care relationships). However, we are not right in

thinking that this is an exhaustive definition of what it *is* to be a person.

We can now better understand how social atomism becomes absorbed and internalised as an essence belief about persons, in the way Marx meant when he discusses it in relation to property rights in *On the Jewish Question.* It is not the case that because human beings are essentially social atoms, property rights follow naturally, which is what is claimed by Locke. A society, structured around property rights, is centred around ideas of what is mine and what is yours, ignoring the importance of dependency relations by leaving their maintenance to women, and making women politically and intellectually invisible. As we go about our lives, the "meaning" of other people is merely something that is not me, and has no right to what is me or mine, as property and legal structures protect them. In such a society, we walk through streets full of houses surrounded by garden fences, which serve no other practical purpose but to signify that this is the border of your social agency. Thus, we are discouraged from interacting with our neighbours, and we come to believe that strangers cannot be trusted. The more society is structured in this way, the more it kicks back at us, blocking other possible ideas of how things could be. We cannot treat our ontic beliefs as separate from this process of forming a shared common ground, where social obstacles play a big part in determining their content, and, more often than not, will determine a content that makes us treat the world as if it is immutably so. It is when we think the world is immutably so that we have reached an essence belief. A society without property seems inconceivable within the current social structure, and therefore seems inconceivable in general. In fact, this seems to be the main charge against Marxism in any non-academic setting; it is generally believed that human beings are too selfish for a communist society to be feasible. However, it simply means that the Marxian imagined property-less society lies beyond our current, socially contingent conception of what it means to be a person.

Still, this account explains how dissent and pluralism is possible within societies. The woman who witnesses male privilege in action becomes

more acutely aware of what she is not, as the world forms an obstacle for her. She also witnesses that the world does not form an obstacle in this respect for everyone. Alternatively, the man who experiences this privilege, will not have noticed anything in particular unless he is attuned to the social dynamics at play with respect to his own privilege. Moreover, the woman may either think that the problem is intrinsic to her, and gets on with her life as she knows it, or she may think that the problem is extrinsic. The latter realisation will be harder to endorse by the mere fact that there are patriarchal structures in the way that are inert, and take a great effort to alter, just as the fight for a pedestrian or cycle friendly environment will be much tougher in the city structured around car use, than simply getting into your car. Every time we face a social obstacle, big or small, we must negotiate our role in the world with respect to it. The accumulation of beliefs gathered by "getting on with your life" within a specific power structure, will by default imbue us with a shared implicit common ground about the way things "just are". Ontic beliefs thus in turn restrain what beliefs we are capable of having about the world.

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

Here, I have located how ontic beliefs may be determined by our political projects in a systematic manner, and without placing particular blame on epistemic agents. In addition, I have shown in what cases ontic beliefs may be thus determined, ensuring that this is not a sceptical claim about our essence beliefs as *such*. Concerns and ramifications of this account for political theory are discussed in the following chapter.

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Chapter 4

What are the Ramifications for Political Theory?

4.1 Introduction

Before tying my discussion together in a conclusion about the political determination of ontology, I need to address one main worry about whether I can draw any conclusions about the role of ontologies for political theories, and if I can, whether my discussion will make any significant difference to the formation of political theories *as such*. In this chapter I will assess this worry, respond to it, and accordingly clarify what my discussion of the political determination of ontic belief may mean for political theory. First I explain the worry, then I assess reasons why one may argue that it is simplistic. Finally, I draw conclusions about the ramifications of the critiques of social atomism for political theory at large, based on this assessment.

4.2 Addressing a Criticism

The worry is that political theory may be conceived of as more closely related to the kind of conceptual investigation I argued gives rise to ontologies, as opposed to my definition of ontic belief. So far in my discussion I have only addressed ontic belief. I demonstrated that to understand the impact of the

critiques of social atomism, we must treat it as an epistemic issue about how we form our political beliefs in relation to ontic beliefs and *vice versa*. Further, I argued, this must be methodologically separated from any genuine metaphysical project. This helps to gain further clarity on what to look out for as epistemic fallacies, in assuming a relation between our ontologies and political theories.

However, actual political theories, rather than political beliefs, might be found to be based on genuine metaphysical commitments. In principle, political theorists are undertaking a vastly different epistemic project from the kind of habitual belief formation I describe in Chapter 3. The very methodology endorsed by philosophers relies on an idea forming process that is active and critical, rather than passive and habitual. Though philosophy may be instrumental for improving our knowledge of the world, it does not aim to simply accept concepts we learn and use by simply navigating the world. Thus, it seems possible, and even likely, that insofar as political theorists are committed to an ontology, it is in the metaphysical, rather than in the epistemic sense.

The following example might highlight the distinction between everyday belief formation and belief formation *qua* philosophy: G.A. Cohen argued that he believed in the analytic-synthetic distinction because he chose Oxford over Harvard for graduate school (Vavova 2015, p. 33). The belief was implicitly caused by exposure and habit, in the way most everyday beliefs are formed. Obviously, this choice does not in itself justify the belief he came to hold because of it. However, because Cohen chose Oxford over Harvard, he also presumably learnt all the good reasons to hold the belief, and on these terms, the belief could potentially be philosophically justified. Thus, though Cohen's beliefs about the analytic-synthetic distinction may have been caused by various experiences related to his social agency, he could claim that the cause of a belief is not the same as the reason he sustained it, and by virtue of examining the conceptual belief in its own right, this provided the appropriate justification for latching on to it. In analogy, the

political theorist who holds a political belief can claim that part of her very endeavour is to properly assess the concept in its own right, while a layperson with a political belief caused by the same social forces may not embark on a process to clarify her reasons for holding the belief.

My whole argument in Chapter 3 relied on a separation of ontic belief from ontology based on a distinction between conceptual investigation and the determination of a belief from inside a web of beliefs. Yet, we can claim that a belief may be justified by other things than our reasons for holding them, and that it is the endeavour of philosophers to carefully assess concepts on their own terms.

Given this distinction, methodologically, political theorists are seemingly utilising actual ontologies rather than ontic beliefs, by virtue of not epistemically engaging with ontic ideas merely as part of a social common ground. In other words, developing a political theory, and utilising ontic concepts in so doing, can be seen as an entirely different epistemic endeavour from forming ontic beliefs in relation to general political intentions and purposes. The philosopher could legitimately, in a methodologically unproblematic way, claim that their ontologies are pre-political, and properly grounding their political theories, without facing the kind of criticism I presented in Chapter 2.

4.3 Reasons to not Accept the Criticism

However, it is neither clear that my discussion in Chapter 3 can, nor should, be ignored by political theorists, given the above argument. The division between the layperson's epistemic endeavours and that of the political theorist is not clear cut, and may also lead to a range of other theoretical commitments that may need clarification if the theory is to retain theoretical potency. I will go through five reasons why this is the case.

4.3.1 First reason: ontologies do not guarantee methodological virtue

First of all, I argue that even when political theories subscribe to actual ontologies, this is not a sufficient condition for methodological virtue; how political and ontic features map on to each other must also be clarified. The main position under attack in this thesis is political theories that either do not take themselves to hold an ontology, or do not discuss the conditions under which they hold an ontology, and therefore assume that their ontology justifies their political theory by virtue of being topically apolitical. I therefore do not attack the theory itself, nor undermine the very idea that legitimate ontological beliefs could virtuously figure in political theory. What I do attack is the fact that this is rarely the case, and that a bare minimum condition for improving this situation is not to replace one ontology for another, but to strive for greater epistemic and methodological clarity about one's own position and commitments as a political theorist.

Nevertheless, if the problem is epistemic rather than ontic, we may indeed allow for holding genuine ontologies, to mould our politics around. There may, for example, just not be a political problem with subscribing to a state of nature narrative. Thus, it can be claimed that insofar as the philosopher does recognise that the role of ontology must be discussed in his political theory, he can just claim that he does have the right form of ontology, on the right grounds, and that this suffices when it comes to methodological clarity. The problem is simply solved by locating the correct ontology, by clarifying the terms on which it is right, and then by building a political theory from there without further scrutiny.

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the substitution of one ontology with another does not solve the core issue raised by the critiques of social atomism, which argues that the very idea of ontology as politically neutral, and theoretically basic, is a political problem. Even if properly specified as a metaphysical ontology, the assumption that an ontology can in and of itself

be politically neutral, and thus an apt starting point for a fair political theory, is still a methodological problem along these lines. This is because discussion is still lacking between whether the political theory is picking out politically salient features of the ontological definition of persons; ontologically salient features of the political subject for their political theory; or simply the whole, complete ontology as it stands, in and of itself. In other words, we may have a completely legitimate ontology at the base of our political theory, but unless the political theorist explains what aspects of the ontology she takes to be the relevant constraint for her theory, and why, it remains unclear whether it is the ontology that constrains the political theories available, or *vice versa*.

For instance, there is a difference between holding social atomism as a complete ontology of personhood, from which politics follow, and to take social atomism to be the one ontic feature of personhood that is politically relevant, but not an exhaustive ontic account of personhood as such. The choice of ontic commitment may be politically motivated, though the conceptual realities of the chosen ontic features are not politically determined as such.

Though this discussion does not vindicate my argument in Chapter 3, it shows that merely substituting ontology for ontic belief does not solve the problem highlighted by the critiques of social atomism, and so the relevance of Chapter 3 cannot be dismissed on these terms.

4.3.2 Second reason: there are contextual reasons for settling on ontologies

The second reason for not accepting this dismissal of my argument in Chapter 3 is that part of the methodological question at hand does not concern the role and the process of picking out of the content of ontic beliefs as much as a worry about the philosophical options that are bypassed by settling on one ontology without a contextual discussion.

In a paper on how philosophers settle on what theories they take

to be superior, Bruce Kuklick argues that though we believe we pick a set of thinkers for a philosophical canon because they are obviously historically central and theoretically superior, many superior and significant thinkers are left out for various reasons other than their philosophical merit or influence (Kuklick 1984). For instance, Kuklick claims that Locke's philosophy as a whole was important in the US, as Locke already stood in a prominent position as a "founding father", and that this is one of the reasons he remains within the canon. Philosophical merit is a necessary, but not always sufficient condition for philosophical credibility and influence (*ibid*, p. 126). We can make sense of the problem of why social atomism is picked out by liberalism along a similar vein. The usual answer would be that it seems to be the best and most rational ontology. However, as demonstrated, there seem to be other motivations at play too, though the ontology may be a good one, and moreover, these motivations prevent other ontologies from being on our radar as politically salient.

Thus, though the content of the theory itself may be virtuous and justified, the reason it is chosen, among a range of equally suitable contenders, may be a political and historical question. While this may not pose a problem for the metaphysical account as such, to fail to recognise this contingency in itself obscures why our reasons for holding a given ontology should be discussed within political theory.

4.3.3 Third reason: the philosopher is also a social agent

The third reason for not dismissing Chapter 3 is that there are many reasons to think that the division between the ontic belief formation of the philosopher and the lay person is unclear. Though I defined the difference as one between everyday belief formation and conceptual investigation, this does not mean that the boundary is clear in practice. As discussed in my separation of ontology and ontic belief, I claimed that the two may overlap topically,

and it is as such not always evident when an ontology that seems perfectly legitimate or unbiased in fact should be subject to genealogical as well as metaphysical scrutiny. Our choice of ontology may, for instance, cohere with ontic beliefs we already hold. If we hold ontic beliefs about the atomistic nature of persons, this may form at least one reason for endorsing genuine ontologies that claim the same.

A more trivial argument, but still important, is that the political philosopher is indeed a social agent, though she takes her theoretical endeavour to a large extent to look beyond social situation. However, this means that the philosopher does not, merely by virtue of being a philosopher, provide any reassurances that she keeps the two sides of her epistemic being completely separate. Although she may be under the illusion that this is the case, it is impossible to tell, unless she is also openly discussing potential epistemic biases that may influence her theoretical work. It is indeed this epistemic clarity that I am calling for in this thesis; the problem social atomism highlights for liberal theory is how, if we do not treat the problem of ontology as a problem of epistemology, this leads to an obfuscation about whether the mechanism of a theory aligns with its actual political goals.

4.3.4 Fourth reason: philosophy is a type of social agency

The fourth reason Chapter 3 cannot merely be dismissed is that political methodology is a political matter in and of itself. It has been argued that even when the division between the philosopher and the social agent is clarified, how one deliberately chooses to go about forming one's political philosophy has a range of epistemological implications, and is not an apolitical question. Moreover, it has been argued that even careful conceptual analysis is in itself a political choice, and that the philosopher is also a social agent in this right. In other words, being a philosopher is also its own form of social agency. In the following sections I present several versions of this argument. I will not

make a strong case for any of them. Instead, my main purpose is to show how the methodology of prioritising analytic conceptual investigation is in fact vulnerable to political criticism.

The first example of such a critique has been made by Lorna Finlayson (2015) and Raymond Geuss (2008). Finlayson has argued that that "[t]he political theorist, on this view is not adequately understood as merely commenting on politics; she is a political actor - in however small a way" (Finlayson 2015, p. 138). In *The Political is Political*, Finlayson claims that the Rawlsian tradition, and the acceptance of its methodology within analytic philosophy, is in itself ideological. It makes perfect sense if operating from within the analytic framework, but it is detached from any question of real life politics. Thus, it prevents actual political questions from being at the forefront of the mind of the political philosopher, and it actually serves to endorse the actual political status quo. Though this story may be seen as simplistic, Finlayson's general point is that the Rawlsian methodology leads to a set of theoretical biases, and that if these are to be avoided, the mechanisms of the Rawlsian account have to be constantly monitored. Emphasis on conceptual clarity alone does not tease out these issues, but instead prevents us from taking this outsider perspective on our own political projects. Geuss argues, along a similar vein, that theories which are unreflective of the political nature of how they are formed will reinforce the real life political structures that surround it (Geuss 2008, p. 12).

Although Finlayson and Geuss's criticisms are aimed at liberal theory in particular, their arguments could apply to political methodology in general. A stronger claim is given by, for instance, the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács, and under his influence, the first generation Frankfurt School Critical Theorist, Max Horkheimer.

Horkheimer argues that if we think of reason itself as just the functioning of the thinking mechanism performing inference, deduction and classification, and that this is separate from the content it infers, deduces and classifies, then there is no reasonable aim, and reason itself is free to 'be-

come harnessed to the social process' (Horkheimer 1947, p. 13). When the origin of an idea and the social context of its thinker is seen as irrelevant, thought becomes a tool in the process of production of ideas, rather than being by default critical and autonomous, and by default engaging with real life problems and questions about what to do if one is to solve them (*ibid*, p. 20).

A more pointed account of the mechanisms that Horkheimer alludes to is found in Georg Lukács's account of reification, where he more directly discusses what it means for thought to be harnessed by the social process. Lukács argues that capitalism depends on a conception of the world as standing in rigid, "lawlike" relations, as this kind of predictability is required for any form of mass production. This halts the organic and unpredictable development of the social process. For instance, the time and space of pre-modern craft, where the artisan takes his time to plan and produce the object according to his own will and ability, allowing each process to be a little different, is transformed into regulated, rule-bound production.

> This process stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of
> man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of
> his personality, they are things which he can own or dispose of
> like the various objects of the external world. (Lukács 1975, p.
> 100).

This describes human abilities as becoming reified through the capitalist mode of production. Rationality is taken to be merely instrumental to this kind of predictable productive process.

In other words, emphasis on careful conceptual analysis is symptomatic of a specific mode of production, and does a disservice to other modes of production. Moreover, by letting the rational process concern what the concepts tell us, rather than the wider context in which we find the concept, the thinker does not appear to be the authentic master of the process. She thinks that the concept must be the way it is for its own, pre-social reasons. Therefore, she does not investigate our contingent reasons for holding

various concepts, and thus she does not examine how the world could be otherwise. According to Lukács, even political methodologies that aim to detach themselves from any political grounding are indeed symptomatic of some kind of wider political context.

However, as highlighted at the beginning of this section, I do not particularly seek to commit to this story, or to any of the above presented stories in particular. My aim here is to show that if social atomism is to be avoided as a problem for political theory, Chapter 3 cannot merely be dismissed on the grounds of a distinction between conceptual analysis and the epistemic and social situation of the non-philosopher. There are other narratives to be given that deny the distinction. Their minimum implication, irrespective of their theoretical credibility, is that by virtue of providing a counter-narrative, they demand a transparent discussion of why, and on what grounds specific concepts are picked out, and what function they serve within a more generalised belief system.

4.3.5 Fifth reason: genealogy and epistemic commitment

One main challenge against my narrative remains in the following question: is it ever the case that a belief we take to be justified, by reasons other than our initial reason for holding it, is debunked by the fact that our initial reason for holding the belief is flawed?

The main point of my discussion is that the contingent reasons for why we hold ontic beliefs are symptomatic of a generalised political process of idea production. Contingent reasons make a difference to whether we should hold specific political theories, and how we should understand them. The discussion of alternative narratives and political sources of specific forms of beliefs matter less if they do not in fact, as the source of the belief, also discredit the belief.

However, whether or not contentious origins alone could debunk

beliefs is an enormous discussion within epistemology. Amia Srinivasan argues that whether one takes the genealogy of a belief to actually debunk a belief depends on a range of other epistemological commitments (Srinivasan 2015). Thus, any belief that appears to be held for reasons other than those that supposedly justify it, can only be argued to be debunked by (or detached from) its origins if it is accompanied by a larger argument about its supporting epistemic commitments. This must also be provided when one makes both genealogical and purely conceptual claims within political theory. If Srinivasan is right, the whole question of genealogical justification can indeed be sidestepped in reaching the conclusion I intend to reach, namely that the bare minimum that is required of political theory, given the critiques of social atomism, is epistemic and methodological clarity about ontological commitments. This establishes another level of discussion about how political theories should be assessed, and on what grounds they count as methodologically virtuous theories.

Bernard Williams brings out my motivations for this claim well by arguing that

> [p]hilosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry (Williams 2000, p. 489).

Moreover,

> there is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activities of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them; and third, the historical activity of understanding

where they came from. The activities are in various ways continuous with one another. This helps to define both intelligence in political action (because of the connection of the first with the second and the third), and also realism in political philosophy (because of the connection of the second with the first and the third). If there is a difficulty in combining the third of these activities with the first two, it is the difficulty of thinking about two things at once, not a problem in consistently taking both of them seriously (*Ibid*, p. 491).

In other words, we may legitimately think of the content of a concept separately, taking it to be justified in and of itself. However, this thought must always come with a further story about the role and meaning of the concept within a wider context. To focus only on the second order discussion is politically pernicious, and serves as a cover-up tactic. This does not mean that its conceptual truth or meaning must be relative, it only means that there are further parameters for what it means for a political theory to be good or bad. Thus, we should not stop striving for objectivity or better politics, or give up on the idea that ontology can be a positive force for our political projects; we cannot do this without being very clear about the obstacles at hand.

4.3.6   Summary of reasons

For every reason given against the relevance of my discussion in Chapter 3 for political theory, the same, basic claim emerges. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to establish the nature of an ideal political methodology, I repeatedly call for an increased openness and discussion within political theory, not only about the content of the theories, but political theory's methodological mechanism, origin and relation (or lack thereof) to political concerns.

I claim that

1. our political methodologies are not obviously inherently self-validating;

2. if the distinction between ontology and ontic belief is not discussed (which it normally is not), we cannot be sure how and in what ways epistemic bias does come into play for the political theory;

3. even if we were to operate with a clear distinction between the two, this is not in and of itself a sufficient condition for epistemic and method-ological transparency about the political purpose and mechanisms of the political theory at hand.

4.4 Where Does This Leave Political Theory?

In highlighting and analysing these specific problems, my discussion does not indicate how political theory *should* relate to ontology. I have simply clarified what the problems consist in, so that it is possible to take them into account, and to know how to properly avoid them. It was for this reason I assessed various critiques of social atomism in Chapter 2, and also for this reason that I discussed the potential epistemic mechanisms at play in the actual problem of ontology for political theory in Chapter 3. In the following sections I suggest that we should think about ontology in political theory.

4.4.1 Methodological Openness

First, I expand on what I take the methodological discussion to consist in at the basic level, and what I take it to solve. I have argued that methodological clarity and openness is the minimum requirement for avoiding the kinds of problems that liberal theory faces with social atomism. This affords some leeway between various reductive stances on the role of ontology for political theory. However, exactly what this role is, is still vague. Currently, such a discussion largely does not take place, but should be had.

The most important lesson from my discussion of ideology in Chap-ter 3 is that the way, and the extent to which, a belief is ideological, is a

matter of degree. While some statements are clearly ideological and overtly political, statements such as "milk is good for you" are not obviously so. Moreover, though beliefs are formed in conjunction with social structures, and social structures are largely determined by the distribution of power in a society, the social agent also has some degree of power to resist these structures, and to create structures of their own, whether this is within their home, within their friend group, or in their immediate community. It is within this power that the individual may find epistemic space to disagree with the linguistic common ground of her community.

However, as discussed, challenging the common ground, and challenging social structures is a more complicated endeavour than to uncritically follow the structures at hand. To simply assume epistemic neutrality, or abstraction from a given position, is not a way to challenge the common ground. The idea of epistemic neutrality in relation to politics obscures what political projects are one's own, and what political projects are in fact counteracting our political values. One may make efforts to step outside one's immediate epistemic position, and strive to leave one's biases and personal interests behind. But, to assume a broader neutrality would mean a more generalised epistemic perspective, which broadly implies accepting the linguistic common ground by virtue of needing concepts from which to theorise from. Without a sense of one's own struggle against structures, and of actively motioning to move beyond them, we reproduce current ones.

Yet this does not mean that disinterest or measured analyticity does not have a positive role to play for political theory. Indeed, this is just what the search for methodological and epistemic clarity is all about. It is rational to be as clear as possible about one's own limitations and possibilities, as well as epistemic position in relation to a given social structure. This clarity is a genuine, rather than a relativistic improvement for the theory. This may also mean that one has to be clear about the impossibility of reaching some absolute standpoint or perfect theory, though this does not mean that it one cannot and should not strive towards it. Bernard Williams expresses this

nicely when he claims that

> [...]we and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the
> same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it,
> we can be free of what is indeed another scientistic illusion, that
> it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as
> best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which
> would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view
> that was free of contingent historical perspective (Williams, 2000:
> 193-4).

In more practical terms, Lorna Finlayson makes a similar point
when discussing how it is possible to be a political realist without also being
a political defeatist. To be clear about, and to use a genuinely political state
of affairs as a theoretical starting point does not mean that one should take
the current state of affairs to be inevitable or impossible to move beyond.
Accepting the existence, conditions and pervasiveness of specific social struc-
tures means that we can be clearer about the political possibilities that may
be implemented in order to dismantle (or at least, chip away at) them. To
know of pervasive social mechanisms and the reasons why they exist and per-
sist does not mean politically accepting them as an inevitable ill, and it does
not mean accepting that this is the way things must be (Finlayson 2015, p.
124-5). Indeed, this is part of the deceptive mechanism that ontology easily
forms for political theory; it makes things that exist seem like they always
must exist in some form or other, barring the ability to think past a current
political state of affairs.

Obviously, to move beyond these kinds of illusions require us to
constantly check our our own political principles against the political status
quo, and to modify goals and theoretical mechanisms accordingly whenever
there seems to be a misalignment between the aim of the theory and how it
plays out in a real world context. With ontic assumptions, we are obliged
to assume that the ontology is one that simply holds for the thing at hand,
in and of itself. We are, therefore, also very likely in our political projects

to be wrong in our ontologies from time to time, and to confuse ontologies and contingent states of affairs. Undoubtedly, specifically social ontologies do concern the realities of things in their social contingencies, but the point is that while the role they play for us and our theories may change with changes in the political landscape, the ontology in some sense still expresses the ideal nature of the thing. This was highlighted in my discussion of the ontology of personhood versus the ontology of chairs in Chapter 3. Thus, more than anything, epistemic flexibility and self-reflection is necessary in this constant negotiation amongst political ideals, theory and real world.

Awareness of political reality should not be taken to occlude political possibilities. However, political possibilities and aims must be checked against the state of affairs it aims to rectify on a regular basis in order to ensure that this is indeed what the theory is doing. This is not a static, one-time task, but must be a flexible process, as the world, our knowledge of the world, and our epistemic relation to the world changes. In other words, this is never a completed project, but a continuous process of change, modification and improvement as the world and our relation to it changes around us.

It follows that I can make a set of negative, and a few positive claims about what is genuinely possible if one is to take seriously my discussion of ontology for political theory. First of all, I am not claiming what a right kind of ontology is for political theory; in fact, this may vary with context and political claim. For instance, individuals, groups, relations and social groups that are in a constant position of change, or change with social structure, are all relevant ontic descriptions of what certain political theories aim to regulate in specific cases. Persons may fall within any of these categories depending on the question at hand, and no account may necessarily have a stronger claim on exactly what it is to be a person within a social organisation. All of these could hold at both an ontic and a political level. Still, I do not want to occlude the possibility that there may be a right kind of ontology for political theory, such as a process-based one, which allows for vacillation between

individualism and collectivism; a relational one; or one that combines various levels of explanation. However, how to reach this conclusion goes beyond my findings here. Moreover, I am not subscribing to a specifically political theory. Further, my criticism of liberalism is not meant to rule it out entirely; rather, I show how it easily obscures central issues concerning its ontology.

On a positive note, my discussion allows me to make a minimal distinction between good and bad political theories when it comes to ontology. Though it is tenuous whether straightforwardly good political theories exist, the distinction provides a scale of assessment and a way to point out what may go wrong. On my account, a good theory is a theory for which, at the very least, the aim aligns with the means to reach it. There is complete clarity of the theoretical mechanisms and how they work. For instance, a good egalitarian theory is one that is completely clear about for whom the principle of equality should apply to, and which actively endorses certain forms of difference or antagonism that the theory may lead to when applied in real life. Thus, a good theory is not necessarily a good theory in an ethical sense, but a transparent one.

Conversely, a monarchy that is justified by divine appointment, rather than a simple endorsement of unequal distribution of power, is an example of a bad political theory. Indeed, most political theories fall, to some extent, within the bad category. Either the aim is appropriate, but the theory does not have the methodological mechanism to be clear about exactly how the aim is reached, or the overarching aim of the theory is obscured or lost altogether in its implementation. The critics of social atomism attack singular liberal theories on the former terms, while theories that solely endorse conceptual nit-picking, rather than a discussion of its broader aims, fall within the latter. Lorna Finlayson clearly seems to think that most scholars of Rawlsianism are complicit in this form of engagement (*Ibid*, p. 41-45), but this is a debate I will leave to be had elsewhere.

The reason why most theories will in some way or other fall within the bad category is that political theory will always struggle to form a fully

comprehensive project, as one always has to start from somewhere without always (or indeed ever) having sufficient knowledge of its grounds. This leads to problems for bridging the gap between a current state of affairs and what is perceived to be a better one, which is the task of political theory. Given our struggle to fully comprehend our theoretical starting point and its ramifications, we cannot be certain that the supposed better state of affairs will indeed be an improvement of the current one, or whether it just changes what is perceived as a political issue without dealing with the initial political problem one sought to rectify. In other words, it is hard to know what theoretical mechanism will appropriately align with our political aim, though sound research does go a lot of the way. This realisation highlights how constant self-reflectiveness about one's own project and its intended implementation is paramount in order to develop a *less* bad theory. This also means that although most political theories are bad in some sense or other, this does not need to imply either relativism or scepticism. There are indeed better and worse theoretical mechanisms at play, and the question of what ontology to endorse is a question of what debate one is engaging with.

4.4.2 Can Ontologies Play a Positive Role for our Political Theories?

As for the role of ontology in our political theories, do they perform any positive work, or do they simply present one specific way in which our theories are vulnerable to misalignment between aim and mechanism? Could we possibly conceive of ontology as part of a virtuous or "good" political theory, or is it simply one of the reasons why a "good" theory is unachievable? Does it not merely belong to the domain of ideal theory, which, given my discussion of theoretical absolutes and perspectives, always poses some form of a problem for political theory? Given that the content of ontology is so far removed from politics, it seemingly plays the role of an inconvenient side effect of politics, rather than playing a positive part. Richard Rorty,

for instance, seems to claim this. He thinks political theory needs to dispel ontic commitments, and instead figure out what good psychology is, when we figure out that our beliefs are not ontically grounded (Rorty 1989). This is the only way we should think of the political subject.

However, I take it to be that it is possible to think of ontology for political theory in radically different terms. For instance, ontology in politics can be thought of as opening up our political imagination. We often struggle to achieve a perspective on what political aims lay beyond our current situation, and we thus face the threat of reinforcing current social structures by lack of access to a wider epistemic horizon. As a result, any device that helps to think past what we already know, while still being rooted in the familiar and the seemingly feasible, is of great help to political theories that aim to bridge the gap between "here" and a better state of affairs.

For instance, one limiting thought is that persons are nothing more, and with no more potential, than what is evident in their current social manifestation. Instead, if one thinks properly about what human beings are and have the potential to be, or simply imagines that human nature could be defined free from current assumptions about human nature, it is also possible to imagine the social organization around these beings as radically altered. For instance, it is possible to challenge the pervasive thought that human beings are inherently selfish, and imagine what a society that did not accommodate for selfishness may look like. The ontology is not reduced to a question of psychology, but is instead recognised as necessary for political theories, and therefore also provides another parameter through which one could contrast and develop ideas.

This is broadly how I take Karl Marx's discussion of species essence to work; it allows him to think past the various historical phases of social organisation and to deduce what else might be possible, given the nature of the human subject. This enabled not only his critique of capitalism, but also his discussion of what may come next. This also resonates with John Dewey's claim in *The Public and its Problems* that democracy in the ideal sense is

not a fact and never will be, but that we must nevertheless have faith in democratic ideals in our deliberation. They should be action-guiding (Dewey 1946). In other words, the ideal aspect of political theory, for which our ontic assumptions are directed, plays a positive part in guiding our actions towards something beyond the reaffirmation of some status quo. It leads to some form of change and possibly progress, and although the ideal may never in itself be reached, it may indeed be revised or modified for every step of political change, and also be in itself a necessary constituent in moving beyond a political status quo. Thus, a constant reflectivity about when the ideals may become inadequate or inappropriate, paired with a constant analysis of why this is the ideal that matters, permits incremental steps towards political improvement.

In relation to this, my discussion of Quine is interesting. I established that change in ontic belief can generally lead to a radical change in theory. However, mere change in ontology does not make the political theory more robust or justified. Thus, change in ontology can only primarily be treated as a methodological tool to open up for radical imagination previously closed off by the liberal paradigm. It changes the scope of the web of belief and its possible internal connections. This radical imagination must, however, be accompanied by an analysis of the epistemic and methodological mechanisms that has allowed us to think of it, and how it connects to the current political perspective. This avoids the trap of merely assuming some ontology for the political theory by not taking it to be politically significant, and therefore rehashing the structures that produce the linguistic common ground, in the way that liberal theory is accused of doing by the critics of social atomism. Although ontology can form a useful imaginary device, it is important to keep in mind that this only suggests a possible positive role for ontology in political theory. My main aim has been to show that this is entirely possible, and even desirable. I will leave open whether there are better suggestions on how one should not only avoid holding ontologies on the wrong terms, but also employ the fact that political theory must hold

some ontic commitment as a positive theoretical mechanism.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In summary: I showed that the critiques of social atomism, if properly understood, highlight a problem of how liberalism comes to hold this account of personhood, and that the critique of social atomism as an ontology is only of secondary relevance. As a result, the critiques of social atomism pose a more general problem for the way we think of political methodology; it shows that our ontic beliefs may be determined by our political intentions, and that our political projects, by virtue of having ontic commitments, may also incorporate specific political intentions that they do not explicitly commit to. Following this, I gave an account of the mechanism behind how our ontic beliefs are plausibly politically determined. Finally, I countered the claim that this discussion has no bearing on our actual political theories, and I concluded that this cannot be ruled out.

Throughout this discussion I have demonstrated that the role of personhood in political theories, and thus ontic beliefs in general, is a crucial point of discussion when political theories are developed. This discussion again leads to other questions about the political nature of methodological mechanisms that are applied in political theory. I have shown that virtuous political theories that accept the critiques of social atomism, and incorporate its lessons, are conceivable. However, I do not go on to show how to form virtuous political theories with this conclusion in mind, nor do I show what ontologies are politically virtuous. These are questions to be answered in a

longer research project. Here I have highlighted a new and important area of debate for political theory. Thus, I hope to prompt further discussion within this area, as well as to provide guidelines for how to approach the formation of political theories *as such.*

Wordcount: 29 420

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