

Stephen K. White

Stephen White provides a genealogy or intellectual autobiography of how he developed the concept of “weak ontology,” explaining how his encounters with the writings of William Connolly, Charles Taylor, George Kateb, and Judith Butler reconfigured his seemingly unproblematic nonfoundationalism in ways that surprised and challenged him. He then clarifies the distinctions between moral and amoral sources for our basic commitments and discusses how we come to draw on those sources, specifically whether they are chosen or unchosen. White concludes by suggesting that the considerations of weak ontology may provide a better foundation for human rights than liberal political theory has so far given it, by grounding it not in individual autonomy but in our common experience of subjection to finitude and mortality.

William E. Connolly

After outlining points of contact between White and himself, William Connolly underlines the vital role that affect, sensibility, and faith play in every onto-political theory, including his own. He then responds to two criticisms White has posed to his work: first, that it does not provide grounds for valuing humans over non-humans and, second, that it does not distinguish sufficiently between just and non-just modes of “presencing.” Connolly agrees with White that the human capacity for language is pertinent to both issues. But he also thinks, first, that we must attend to the creative and compositional dimensions of language, as well as the expressive dimension and, second, that there are important affinities between human beings and non-human nature that must be brought front and center if the modern ecological predicament is to be engaged.

Charles Taylor

Suggesting a change in terminology from “ontology” to “philosophical anthropology,” Charles Taylor argues that it is impossible to avoid defining certain fundamental features of human beings—even those who purport to eschew this activity unwittingly participate in it. Examining recent attempts to locate the causes of certain forms of mass violence, Taylor shows the inadequacy of purely biological explanations and the inescapable need to explore the “matrices of meaning” that give discernable form to human drives and desires. Efforts to pinpoint human constants, Taylor submits, must emerge from the struggle to make sense of human activity in specific cultural contexts. Agreeing with White, Taylor also contends that our “posits” or “bets” about these constants must themselves be understood as permanently provisional, contestable, fallible, and partial.

George Kateb

Preferring the term “philosophical anthropology” to “ontology” to refer to reflection on the human condition, George Kateb sees the human being as living in the midst of two tensions: between the individual’s infinitude and finitude and between his or her common humanity and uniqueness. Responding to Stephen White’s criticism that he neglects human finitude, Kateb suggests that there are more dangers in overemphasizing the individual’s finitude than his or her infinitude, which more easily slips from view. While White worries about the potential arrogance a focus on individual infinitude might bring, Kateb argues that a sense of individual infinitude can resist the ways that groups seek to subordinate and even erase individual identity.

Jodi Dean

Jodi Dean argues that contemporary market and religious fundamentalisms, or “strong ontologies,” raise moral and political questions that must not be avoided. While some theorists, like Stephen White and Judith Butler, argue that generosity is the proper response to these fundamentalisms, Dean suggests that this response is misguided. What is needed is a more critical, political response, she argues. While Butler moves further in the direction of critical, rather than affirmative, theory, Dean thinks she does not move far enough. Butler’s focus on ethics constitutes an avoidance of politics and an evasion of the condemnation needed in the face of these fundamentalisms.

Charles Larmore

Charles Larmore argues that political liberalism does indeed have a moral foundation, despite critics’ insistence to the contrary, namely, the idea of equal respect for persons. While we need to be open to the possibility of our own errors, there is no reason, Larmore argues, not to hold our beliefs strongly, even proposing that some things are “right and good, not just for us, but for everyone.” The belief in the equal respect for persons is such an idea, and Larmore highlights three common misconceptions concerning it: it is not the common ground among liberals but rather that which impels them to look for common ground; it is not the object of the democratic will, but rather that which gives the democratic will its distinctive normative shape; and, finally, it does not follow from the very idea of reasonableness, but is instead an historically contingent belief, though one universal in scope.

Leslie Paul Thiele

Leslie Paul Thiele proposes that moral life and democratic politics involve helping people discover who and what they are. One may engage this task through ontology, but a more common and effective way is through the use of stories. The narrative route is more fundamental, as the universal principles employed by ontology to express the nature of human being are derived from our constitutive stories, not the other way around. The use of narratives for moral and political purposes has its inherent dangers, but the formation and interpretation of stories, particularly those that are unfamiliar and challenging, is crucial to moral growth and democratic culture.

Elizabeth Wingrove

Elizabeth Wingrove argues that the identification of an “ontological turn,” or a return to foundationalism, in recent political theory is useful or generative in at least three ways. First, because this turn may be a response to broader, historical shifts in the political landscape, a closer examination of it may reveal hitherto unseen elements to which political theory is reacting. Second, this turn to ontology may in fact signal a renewed interest in theological concerns—a kind of religious rapprochement—currently underway in political theory. Third, looking at ontological assumptions may provide a new way to think about individualism in American political theory, particularly in relation to what it makes possible to affirm politically or even to recognize.