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**UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE**

**FACULTÉ DES SCIENCES
ÉCONOMIQUES ET SOCIALES**

POLITICAL THEORY AND THE METAPHYSICS OF THE SELF: OUTLINE OF A MODEL-BASED APPROACH

MASTER'S THESIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Yoann Della Croce

Under the Supervision of Prof. Matteo Gianni

Spring 2019

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In loving memory of A. and E. Imbruglia

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INTRODUCTION

« I feared that if I started with the question « What is Justice ? » I would never get to questions about immigration. In ordering a dinner, it is wiser to start with a menu than with the Cartesian *cogito*. »

Joseph Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration*, 2013 (p. 298)

... And yet my goal here is to do the exact opposite as to what Carens recommends us. Political philosophy has always been at unease in its relationship with metaphysics and ontology. Liberal theorists, inspired by the works of John Rawls and especially his 1985 paper *Justice as Fairness: Political, not Metaphysical* have grown weary of dubious metaphysical foundations in theories of justice (Rawls, 1985 ; Flikschuh, 2000). Those concerns have been shared by critical and feminist theorists as well, who recognized metaphysics as a discipline that could offer one tools of domination through the essentialization of oppressed minorities (Haslanger, 2012). The debate between liberals and communitarians that was raging throughout the the 1980's to the end of the 1990's was mostly centered around one disagreement: the nature of the human self and how this nature relates to the world around us (Sandel, 1982). Those disagreements regarding the ontology of the self were of metaphysical natures and seemed irresolvable. It seems that since then, the metaphysical controversies have gone under the rug, quite literally. Despite the dispute not being present in mainstream contemporary political theory, the issue at stake remains unresolved. Contemporary theorists have brought up what has been dubbed as an « ontological turn » where metaphysics are taken seriously again and brought back to the theoretical stage for they could be useful in understanding our socio-political world (Rosenthal, 2016 ; 2018).

Yet, the concerns raised by both Rawls and various philosophers of the empiricist strand throughout the 20th century regarding metaphysics remain unsolved and particularly salient in political theorizing. Both the epistemological problems with the fundamental uncertain nature of metaphysics and the moral dangers of essentialization remain looming at large. Such concerns have not been addressed by advocates of the ontological turn in political theory. The question I wish to answer here is thus the following: How should we, as political theorists, consider and work with ontological assertions regarding the nature of the human self?

As one can guess from this research question, the aim of this thesis is primarily methodological. As any methodological inquiry, it requires to touch on epistemological concerns as well, and due to the nature of normative political theory, on moral concerns too.

But the main point I wish to make is indeed concerned with methodology, thus trying to address the question of *how* we should build our theories around the problem of ontological assertions. Methodological research in political theory is still scarce and relatively young. One book, *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* edited by Adrian Blau, published in 2017 addressed those issues directly. Before that, all one can find are isolated articles in philosophical handbook about methodology, and still none are more than a decade old (Blau, 2017). My thesis draws heavy inspiration from the works of those methodologically-driven scholars, particularly in List & Valentini's approach which attempt to shed light on political theory's methodology through insights from the philosophy of science (List & Valentin, 2016). Indeed, the arguments I will present here are not only influenced by the analytical strand of the philosophy of science, I also take a closer look at the content of some of these philosophers' works and try to apply relevant parts of their analysis to the methodology of political theory.

My argument is centered around a defense of ontological pluralism through the use of a model-based approach to ontology. I argue against monistic and « true » accounts of ontology and sketch out a pluralistic view of ontological accounts inspired by Rudolf Carnap. I defend this thesis on epistemological and moral grounds. I argue that we should make use of models, or models of the self, within the framework of this pluralism. This is for two reasons: First, it allows us to avoid the exclusion of alternative ontological accounts, and second it allows us to create theories closer to empirical reality as ontological models are directly informed by said-reality.

Before diving into the work itself, there are some elements that I wish to clarify regarding the nature of what I am presenting here and its ambitions. My goal is not so much to give a definite answer through a bulletproof argument in order to terminate a given debate amongst theorists. On the contrary, my hope here is to ignite a debate and stem a discussion regarding the issues I discuss. In this sense, this thesis is somewhat *exploratory* in its nature. Despite the analytical, and perhaps cold, voice that I use throughout the argument, almost all of what I argue for is left up for debate, which perhaps is the only thing I may affirm with certainty in regard to this thesis : there is a fundamental need for debate over the problems I attempt to raise here. If I manage to give useful methodological insights over the next pages, I will most certainly have achieved much more than what I could possibly hope for.

Outline

The structure of the paper is as follows: In the first section I take a close look at how ontology and metaphysics are involved in political philosophy, and in the second section I develop my argument for a model-based ontological pluralism. I start by clarifying definitions of terms that I will recurrently use throughout the paper, namely metaphysics and ontology. I then turn to the historical and philosophical reasons of why political philosophers have grown weary of metaphysics and ontology, in doing so I stress a particular importance on the influence of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle on contemporary philosophical thought. I then identify two problems with metaphysics : epistemological and moral. Epistemological because of its fundamentally uncertain nature, and moral because of how this uncertainty may be used to exercise domination on minorities through essentialization. After identifying these problems, I explain why ontology and metaphysics are inescapable from philosophical thought, through the use of W.V.O. Quine and social philosopher Ruth Groff. I then present two defenses of metaphysics in political philosophy as expressed by Flikschuh, namely positive and negative, and show the problems with both. Concluding this section, I take some time to assess Rawls' *Political, not Metaphysical* in depth. With the help of the work of Boran, I draw links between Rawls' view on metaphysics and the views of the intellectual leader of the Vienna Circle, Rudolf Carnap. I show why both failed in their goal of freeing philosophical thought from metaphysics, despite their intentions going in the right direction. I finish by presenting a view that will form the theoretical ground of my argument, namely Carnap's logical pluralism.

I then start the second section of this thesis by first demonstrating how Carnap's pluralism may help us create a better framework for understanding ontological disputes. I stress the importance of the role of political philosophy as practical philosophy and not as the pursuit of truth, which gives us some leeway in understanding how we should talk about ontology. I then establish three principles that a framework for ontology must respect in order to avoid the two problems I mentioned earlier, and I propose ontological pluralism as the best fitting framework for these principles. I then assess the work of Stephen K. White, who made a point similar to mine about ontological pluralism in political theory. While I agree with some of his conclusions and draw inspiration from them, I reject his argument for being too particularistic and unfit for the three principles. I use his insights to formulate a common basis from which we can debate ontology on sounder grounds. I then explain why adopting an approach in which we understand ontological accounts as models helps us best reach the ideal framework of ontological pluralism. I do this by explicating some characteristics of models, and show how

these characteristics fit the three principles and are helpful for normative political theorizing. I then conclude with some remarks regarding a limit of my argument, namely the fact that it is not enough to just allow pluralism through the use of models, for we also require a criterion according to which we can choose which model suits which situation the best. I unfortunately do not have the space to explore this issue in depth and must leave it up for further research. I then conclude with some remarks on the public role of political philosophy.

SECTION I: METAPHYSICS, ONTOLOGY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

DEFINING THE TERMS: METAPHYSICS AND ONTOLOGY

Before diving into strictly speaking philosophical analysis, I must start by setting up some definitions and clarify the terminology which I will make use of in this paper. This very task alone is already assured to draw some controversy, as the ideas I wish to define here have been the subject of not merely decades of disputes, but have been conflictual ever since the time of Greek philosophers. My goal here is thus not to attempt to give a true and final definition of what metaphysics and ontology is, but solely to explain what I mean by using them while trying to keep such fundamental definitions as least controversial as possible. I can only hope that the reader will find them broad enough to avoid unnecessary disputes about the foundations of the argument I present here, while finding them precise enough to be useful and give substance to my words. I will first start by giving a definition of metaphysics, and then of ontology, which I will characterize as a sub-field of metaphysical investigation. I then will clarify some terms that will be used throughout my paper, in order to avoid any confusion about the subject matter of my argument.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics as an academic discipline is sometimes referred to as *First philosophy*, coining Aristotle's terms. It is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the « big questions », such as what is change? What is nothing? How does time work? How do things cause each other? and so on. The word's etymology itself is not particularly useful, as it was coined by Aristotle's students to describe the philosopher's works that came after his seminal *Physics* (Metaphysics meaning literally *after the physics*), and which became the groundwork for the main metaphysical questions that philosophers still ponder today. The lack of a commonly accepted definition still makes for analytical vagueness even amongst some of the most famous political philosophers, Rawls himself having written that one of the difficulties that arise when we inquire on the metaphysics of political theories is that there is no clear understanding of what metaphysics consist of (Rawls, 1985).

It is however not my intention to dwell on the origins and the history of metaphysics¹. For my purposes, I will use a definition commonly used across analytic philosophy, ranging from pure analytical metaphysicians to political philosophers. Such a definition states that metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality, as we human beings perceive it (Flikschuh, 2000 ; Lowe, 1998). By fundamental structure, one must understand that, as *metaphysics* imply, it is concerned with what goes beyond the eye and therefore empirical observation. This definition being supported by at least both E.J. Lowe, a famous metaphysician, and Katrin Flikschuh, a political philosopher, I believe it is enough to understand what is at stake here without falling flat on controversial grounds.

Ontology

Defining ontology brings up a challenge. That is so because of mainly one fact : the relatively recent appearance of the word has sparked two different ways of understanding it, one belonging to the continental tradition of philosophy and the other to the analytical one, or if one prefers references to scholars, one influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger and the other by the works of W.V.O. Quine (Van Inwagen, 2009). The continental, or Heideggerian tradition focuses on a definition of ontology as the study of being and the modes of being. That is to say, what *is it*

¹ For a brilliant account of the history and controversies surrounding metaphysics, see the excellent Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article dedicated to these questions : <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/> (accessed on October 4th, 2018).

like to be? What is a being? And the likes². Scholars from this tradition claim that ontology as a subject is separated from metaphysics. I will not go any further and argue that they are wrong or right, for I am not concerned with this tradition: as the paper I am presenting here is self-proclaimed to belong to the tradition of analytic philosophy, and the definition of metaphysics I have given belonging to this tradition, I will focus my attention on what analytical philosophers have said about the subject of ontology. As I mentioned, the most popular answer on this matter belongs to Quine, which describes ontology as the study of what there is, or what exists in the world (Quine, 1971). Whereas metaphysics inquire on the fundamental structure of reality, ontology aims at discovering what things exist in this structure. It is therefore not focused on *structure*, but rather on *objects*. In formal terms, ontology is what ranges over the existential quantifier \exists (Turner, 2010).

As such, ontology must be understood as a sub-field of metaphysical inquiry. In other terms, the set of all metaphysical questions contains the set of all ontological questions. Thus, depending on the level of analysis I want to investigate, I will use one or the other term. When referring to the broader epistemological issues of metaphysical assumptions, I will speak of metaphysics, and when referring to particular points concerning the nature of precise metaphysical objects, I will use ontology.

Now, what objects am I talking about? Here again, terminology varies. By ontology, or ontological conception, I refer to what Rawls calls « the nature of persons » (Rawls, 1985), or what Sandel calls the « metaphysics of the self » (Sandel, 1982), or what Groff simply calls « human self » (Groff, 2012). In this sense, my focus here is on the ontological conceptions of the human self. Although more trivial, the term « human nature » also comes to mind when trying to grasp this concept. Despite being all different words, all of them converge towards the same meaning, it is not up to me to declare which one of them has the best definition. I however find Sandel's formulation confusing, and will therefore not make any use of it in my argument, for it conflates the two levels of analysis we have just established. All of this to say, I will use the terms « nature of persons », « nature of the self » and « ontological conceptions » interchangeably. As I said, they are all concerned with the same issues, namely how are our minds constituted as human beings? Are we capable of being rational? Is every man an island? Is there no self beyond social constructs? And so forth. The range of subjects covered by such

² For a classical reading on continental thought of ontology, see Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time, a Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Albany : State University of New York Press. (Originally published in 1927, translated by Joan Stambaugh). For an account of ontology as ways of being in contemporary metaphysics, see McDaniel, K. (2009). « Ways of Being », in *Metametaphysics* (ed. Chalmers, D., Manley, D. & Wasserman, R.). Oxford : Clarendon Press.

assumptions is rather broad and differs from author to author, making it pointless to try to issue a definitive list of all the questions addressed by ontological conceptions.

Now that I have defined what the terminology I use means, I must turn to define what it does not mean. As it has been indicated by Rawls' quote in the paragraph regarding metaphysics' definition, there appears to be some confusion amongst political philosophers regarding the meaning of the word and over what it ranges exactly. As I will develop upon later, there is a significant amount of scholarly that has associated metaphysics with metaethics, or more precisely with metaethical realism, namely the idea that there exists some moral truths that are valid objects of inquiry in the world. While this way of understanding metaphysics certainly makes sense from a historical perspective as I shall show in the next sub-section, I believe it is a too narrow way to frame the problem, and not a particularly relevant way to tackle political philosophy's issues with metaphysics. Another tradition, pragmatism, also has had its word to say about metaphysics, understanding it as a metaphysical *truth* in political philosophy. In this sense, it is more concerned with epistemology than with metaphysics per se. I do not explore neither of these two conceptions in this paper. My aim is to stick to the definition of metaphysics I have given, a more conventional one and yet one that is surprisingly unpopular in the contemporary literature of political philosophy. I will however come back to this distinction later when analyzing Rawls' paper *Political, Not Metaphysical*. Now that I have defined my terminology and stated both what the words I use cover and do not cover, it is time to dive head first into the first proper part of my paper, namely the history and conflicted relationship between metaphysics and normative political philosophy.

METAPHYSICS AND THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY NORMATIVE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Political philosophy has had a complicated and troublesome relationship with metaphysics all along the 20th century. Indeed, when we look at the history of the field's activity, there seems to be a rather huge gap between 19th century thinkers (one may think of Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill for instance) and John Rawls' 1971 *A Theory of Justice*³. In order to understand this

³ This statement is, of course, somehow caricatural. There have been central political philosophy scholars in this period, such as Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss, to name a few. It is however dishonest to say that political philosophy was as thriving as it is now back in the first half of the 20th century.

situation, I will take a look at one particular group of thinkers that have been attributed the guilt of political philosophy's coma-like state, namely the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle (Laslett, 1967). I will then turn to Rawls and explain why taking the Vienna Circle into account is helpful when trying to understand the tumultuous relationship that Rawls holds with metaphysics.

The Logical Positivists and the Anti-metaphysical Stance

Back in 1920's Vienna, a group of philosophers and scientists influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* gathered together with the goal of bringing some order into philosophy and the way it deals with its problems⁴. Those thinkers had grown sick and tired of the recent trend of idealism, both British and German, and argued that philosophy needed a rigorous methodology in order to provide answers its questions and cut the unceasing meaningless rambling that was the dominant standpoint back in the days. Through the use of solely logical and empirical methods, they sought to eliminate the whole discipline of metaphysics altogether, a discipline that they literally considered as meaningless rambling leading only to confusion and incomprehensible questions and answers (Ayer, 1936). It is worth mentioning that one of their main targets at this time was Heidegger and his ontology of being that I have mentioned in the precedent sub-section. Indeed, in a paper directed towards Heidegger bluntly called « *The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language* », Rudolf Carnap, one of most prominent figure of the Vienna Circle, attempted to demonstrate not only that metaphysics was literally incomprehensible babbling, but also famously stated that « Metaphysicians are musicians without any musical ability » (Carnap, 1932). Their most famous attempt at discarding metaphysics was through the establishment of what was called the verification principle, which states that all knowledge is either 1) positive, therefore knowable through empirical investigation or 2) logical, therefore knowable through form analysis of language (Ayer, 1936). What didn't fit in either of these two categories was to be considered dubious and a waste of time. One might notice that the logical positivists are heavily influenced by some of the most famous words in David Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* « *If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?*

⁴ For an in-depth and complete overview of the history and diversity of logical positivist thought, see Ayer, A.J. (1959). *Logical Positivism*. New York : The Free Press or, for a french account, Ouelbani, M. (2008). *Le Cercle de Vienne*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. » (Hume, 1748).

The situation described so far does not look too bad for normative political philosophy. What the logical positivists were aiming for was the elimination of metaphysics and incidentally theology and discarded them as unphilosophical. The trouble begins in the later parts of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. After his argumentation against metaphysics, Ayer turns to ethics and aesthetics and states that none of them can be explored via the verification principle. Ethics and aesthetics are thus relegated to emotivism, namely the doctrine that says that moral judgements, for example, are nothing but subjective emotions what we feel as a reaction towards certain things, and they therefore do not fit for analytical inquiry: they are just feelings (Ayer, 1936)⁵. And therefore, analytical philosophy as described by the Vienna Circle has no space for any form of normative inquiry as it is considered meaningless rambling just like metaphysics.

Logical positivism later found its partial demise in the hands of W.V.O. Quine, who argued in his seminal « *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* » that the whole project of the Vienna Circle was ultimately self-defeating, as the principle of verification itself could not be established through neither analytical nor empirical means, and was therefore metaphysical (Quine, 1971). While as I shall show this counter-argument does not rebut the totality of the complex thought of the Vienna Circle, it certainly was devastating when it came out and allowed metaphysicians, aesthetics theorists and political and moral philosophers to serenely get back to work. One must understand that the influence of the Vienna Circle in analytic philosophy was immense, and political philosophy could not escape it. Hence the reason why some thinkers have affirmed, when commenting on the reason of political philosophy's dead-like state, that « *the logical positivists did it* » (Laslett, 1967). A similar point has been made by Catherine Zuckert when narrating the history of contemporary political philosophy, restating that indeed the lack of cognitive substance of moral philosophy as described by the logical positivists has been a huge factor in the discipline's decline after the First World War (Zuckert, 2011). For these very reasons, I argue that the history of political philosophy, and its relationship with metaphysics, cannot be properly understood without taking into account the influence of the Vienna Circle throughout analytic philosophy and epistemology. The same goes for Rawls' writings on metaphysics.

⁵ While less popular, such an account of moral philosophy remains today under the name of metaethical non-cognitivism. For an account of this idea, see the relevant chapters in McPherson, T. & Plunkett, D. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*. New York : Routledge.

It is indeed crucial to take into account this very specific historical and epistemological context when reading Rawls' work, and specifically one aspect of it: his aversion to metaphysics. *A Theory of Justice* was written at a time where logical positivism was decaying, but its influence remained strong, that is the early 1970s. Normative ethics was in a bad spot, and normative political philosophy suffered, as I said, the same treatment. Rawls attempted to bring normative political philosophy back on its feet, and had to do so through a very careful process of dodging anything remotely resembling « dubious » metaphysics in order to make his work, and his discipline, look serious to other analytic philosophers (Schwartz, 2012). Such circumstances and influences on his work can help us better understand the meaning behind his famous 1985 article « Justice as Fairness: Political, not Metaphysical » in which he denies the use of any sort of metaphysical assumptions in his theory of justice as fairness (Rawls, 1985). I will not spend any more time on this paper in this section, as a fairly significant chunk of my paper will be dedicated to an in-depth analysis of it. Of course, one must not take my words too far, Rawls had other reasons to be wary of metaphysics beyond this sole historical factor. As he put it himself, the use of metaphysics precludes the proper use of public reason and embodies particularistic conceptions of the good, neither are satisfactory for his theory of justice to ever be accomplished (Rawls, 1993). Nonetheless, forgetting about the Vienna Circle's influence on such early works of political philosophy would be a mistake and would give us an incomplete picture of the reasons why metaphysics is a topic so divisive and controversial amongst political theorists from the 1980s up until today (Rawls, 1985 ; Hampton, 1989 ; Adams, 1999 ; Flikschuh, 2000 ; White, 2000 ; Rosenthal, 2016). It is also worth noting that such a revival of normative ethics is largely due to the end of the fact/value dichotomy as it has been argued by Hilary Putnam in the 1980s. I will not develop it further in my argument, for it does not match the central point of the thesis I defend here. Indeed, while Putnam's work has been crucial in showing that the logical positivist argument against ethics, indeed showing that the divide between what was considered as facts, with cognitive content, and values, without any, is false and useless. As I have however said, my work here is focused towards metaphysics strictly speaking, and not metaethics or moral inquiry. Again, this does not mean that there aren't moral implications in the ideas discussed here, I indeed argue there are, but this has not much to do with the fact that moral assertions are as worth of study as so-called factual ones. As Putnam said himself, affirming that the fact/value dichotomy is useless does not imply that the *distinction* between the two is (Putnam, 2002). I will come back to the importance of this distinction in the second part of my paper, where I discuss the difference between ontologies and normative ideals.

TWO PROBLEMS WITH METAPHYSICS

Now after this rather lengthy (and unfortunately, nevertheless caricatural) scene-setting, one might wonder *why exactly are metaphysical assumptions problematic?* So far, what we have seen is that a group of philosophers from Vienna in the 1930s deemed metaphysics as senseless and void of any cognitive content, and that they had an important influence on both the history of philosophy and epistemology in the 20th century, and which has most likely been an influence to Rawls to a certain extent. I shall now expose, at least succinctly, what I call the two problems of metaphysics are. The first one is of epistemological nature, in which I will present both the logical positivist argument against metaphysics, some counter-arguments, and some reasons why certain analytic philosophers are still reluctant to engage with this field today. The second one is of moral nature, an issue less tackled than the first one in the literature. It is concerned with the *role* that metaphysical assumptions play in our normative theories and what they accomplish in our epistemic justifications. And consequently, what impact assumptions of such nature might have in the real world we live in every day. I will show that, as unexpected as it sounds, here we find a convergence between liberal political theorists, critical feminists and surprisingly, the logical positivists themselves. Despite appearing to be separate dimensions of a same subject, these two problems are nevertheless linked together; as I will show, the complex and problematic epistemological nature of metaphysical assumptions is precisely the cause of their moral problem. To make myself clearer, I will draw the links between the two problems I describe here and our subject of interest here, namely the ontological conceptions of the self in political philosophy.

The First Problem: Epistemological

As I have stated in the definitions section, metaphysics as a subject is as old as philosophy itself. And the attacks that metaphysics had to defend itself against are as old as that as well, the recent anti-metaphysical turn led by the logical positivists is by no means a new idea (Carnap, 1932 ; Ayer, 1936 ; Haslanger, 2012 ; Schwartz, 2012).

At this point, the unfamiliar reader might be wondering: what exactly is so wrong with metaphysics for it to face such criticism? A complete and exhaustive answer would unfortunately require more pages than the few I am allocated here, but I hope to be able to at least give an idea of what its main controversial points are.

The word that perhaps comes up the most often in the scholarly engaged against metaphysics is « dubious » (Haslanger, 2012). The reason for this qualification lies in the very nature of metaphysics itself, more precisely in its *speculative* nature (Sprigge, 1998 ; Gare, 1999). Recall what we have seen when defining metaphysics: it aims at unravelling the fundamental structure of reality as we human beings perceive it, the key word here being *fundamental*. Metaphysics has been accused of seeking the ultimate *a priori* truths of reality, a reality that, by definition, goes beyond the concrete physical world that we can experience. Without any way of potentially test and verify metaphysical statements, metaphysics has thus been dubbed speculative by nature. It makes all metaphysical inquiries uncertain by nature, as we have no way to actually go on and measure metaphysical objects in order to verify how accurate our theories are. The logical positivists, despite not being entirely original in their project, have perhaps taken the attack on metaphysics a step further. As I have stated earlier, they came up with a verification principle that defined all truths as either analytic or synthetic; tautological (such as the truths of mathematics and logic) or verifiable by empirical experience. Metaphysics could not be defined as a series of tautologies, and could not either be verified through any experience. It was therefore out of the realm of the principle and thrown to the trash as worthless, its questions labelled as « pseudo-problems » (Ayer, 1936). Rudolf Carnap in his famous 1932 paper « *The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language* » went further down this road and described the questions within the metaphysical domain as « *entirely meaningless* » (Carnap, 1932). The reason why being that such statements are filled with words that have no clear meaning attributed to them, they bear no links to any meaningful definition. In other words, metaphysicians use words and conceptions that actually do not signify anything; they are void of sense and thus meaningless. Quite literally, when confronted with the metaphysician, the logical positivist would not even attempt to discuss and explain why she is mistaken, he would simply state that he did not understand a single word she just said (*ibid*). But perhaps I am sounding a little arcane here, so let me introduce an example used by Carnap himself to illustrate what the logical positivists were talking about when discussing the meaninglessness of metaphysical statements.

« What is to be investigated is being only and – *nothing* else; being alone and further – *nothing*; solely being, and beyond being – nothing. *What about this Nothing? (...) Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e. the Negation, exists?* Or is it the other way around? *Does Negation and the Not exist only because the Nothing exists? (...) We assert: the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation. (...) Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing (...) we know the Nothing (...) Anxiety reveals the Nothing. (...) That for which and because of which we were anxious, was « really » – nothing. Indeed: the Nothing itself – as such – was present. (...) What about this Nothing? – The Nothing itself nothings. »* (*ibid*, italics in the original).

As Carnap himself says in a footnote, poking fun at the existential/hermeneutical tradition, any passage from the numerous metaphysicians of the time would have illustrated the thesis well, but this one by Martin Heidegger's 1929 « *Was ist Metaphysik ?* » seems to do the job in a rather exceptional way (*ibid*). Here we see exactly what Carnap is talking about, the concepts of nothing, the not and the negation do not seem to be directed towards any cogent meaning and the entire statement appears to us as completely incomprehensible and meaningless. Though this example might seem caricatural, the argument remains the same for all sorts of metaphysics, its lack of cognitive meaning and clear definitions, on top of its impossibility to be verified either analytically or empirically, has brought the logical positivists to discard the whole discipline as pseudo-philosophy and useless. While the positivists were certainly extreme regarding metaphysics, the criticism has stood up through the decades and even today many analytic philosophers remain suspicious of speculative metaphysics, despite the many great works of analytical metaphysicians that have sought to bring metaphysics back on the table, to an honorable degree of success⁶.

Let us quickly get back to political philosophy for a moment and consider the implications of what I have just said for the discipline. To avoid any confusion, recall that I have defined ontology as a sub-field of the broader discipline of metaphysics, it therefore follows that the criticism that holds for metaphysics also holds for ontology. The most important element to keep

⁶ Such thinkers include for instance David K. Lewis or Saul Kripke, just to cite two of the most important figures of contemporary analytical metaphysics. There are many others but I unfortunately do not have the time nor space to list them here, for more information see the Stanford Encyclopedia page on metaphysics that appears in the definitions section. For respective seminal works, see Lewis, D. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Hoboken : Blackwell Publishing, and Kripke, S. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press.

in mind with the epistemological problem is the fact that we cannot ever observe or test our metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the human self. Be it that the self is constituted on its own through the sheer power of reason, through a dialectical process with the other or that there is no self at all beyond social norms and power relations (respectively liberal, communitarian and post-modern ontologies), all of these are speculative metaphysics about how the self works, how it is constituted or the nature of its existence. There is no way to go and measure which one of these three assertions is true. We speculate about the nature of the self, and build theories upon this speculative basis. One might already begin to see the problem here, for it sounds fairly counter-productive to build theories of justice that can be accepted to all in societies marked by the fact of pluralism on foundations that are speculative, uncertain and which guarantee controversy. While the three assertions I have listed all sound reasonable and « make sense », one must realize the amplitude of the issue at stake here. Knowing that these assertions are nothing but speculations and lack any kind of solid ground, nothing can keep me from building a whole theory of justice based on the assertion that God lives within our mind and gifts us with a natural sense of right and wrong. Despite the fact that no serious contemporary theorist would come up with such an ontology, there are virtually no safeguards that are able to restrain myself from making use of it. This is a serious issue for the whole discipline of political philosophy, and it is exactly the one at stake in my paper.

There of course have been defences of metaphysics and criticism of the logical positivist argument, which is not taken seriously by any serious philosopher today (Friedman, 1999). Perhaps the most famous of them is W.V.O. Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction his 1951 « *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* ». I will however not introduce his argument right now, as this section is strictly dedicated to the epistemological problems posed by metaphysics. I will come back to Quine when discussing Rawls' « *Political, not Metaphysical* » in comparison with the ideas of the Vienna Circle, as I have said earlier.

The Second Problem: Moral

The second issue with metaphysics I wish to discuss is less known than the one I just explicated. While there have been numerous epistemological attacks on metaphysics, ranging from describing it as nonsensical to useless and worthless, there have also been some moral criticisms towards the discipline. Here I list three of them: first, the liberal/Rawlsian critique ; secondly, the

feminist critique ; and finally the logical positivist's critique, specifically Carnap's, which constitutes an unlikely ally to the two other paradigms here.

But beforehand, let me shortly elaborate on what I mean by *moral* problems of metaphysics. Unlike with epistemological problems, which lie in the very fact of engaging with metaphysical inquiry, the moral problems tackle the consequences of engaging in such inquiries. It is an illusion to believe that philosophy lies in the dark corners of academic departments, never to escape to the real world or have any influence on it. Our philosophical and theoretical inquiries have an impact, even if slight, on the concrete world, and our experiences from the concrete world informs our philosophical views in a mirrored way. It was after all Wittgenstein that said that all philosophy was a political act, a point that has been re-stated by many theorists, mostly hailing from the critical paradigm (McCauley, 1976 ; Tully, 1989 ; Pohlhaus & Wright, 2002). Metaphysics is very prone to have such an influence, by its very definition of seeking the fundamental structure of reality. Such strong and bold claims might have a rather strong effect in the real world and our conception of it. And this very effect, or consequence, is indeed subject to moral evaluation. While the magnitude of these consequences might be open to discussion when considering the works of purely analytical metaphysicians who investigate on fairly abstract issues using formal methods to draw themselves closer to objectivity, they are not at all to be taken lightly when considering the works of political and social philosophers, especially normativists. As I will show, if we consider metaphysical assumptions to be at the foundations of theories of justice, then the consequences that such speculative assumptions have are of tremendous weight. And such consequences can potentially be fairly aggravating. Let me illustrate these points by explicating the three moral critiques of metaphysics I have just mentioned.

First, and perhaps the most famous anti-metaphysical account, we have the criticism that originated from liberal theorists, and especially John Rawls, who stated his anti-metaphysical view in 1975's « *The Independence of Moral Theory* », in 1985's « *Justice as Fairness: Political, Not Metaphysical* » and again in his 1993 *Political Liberalism*. The reasons for his disdain for metaphysics are most likely multiple I have suggested earlier, but here I wish to stick to Rawls' words. For Rawls, making use of metaphysics in political theory will block the very possibility of ever reaching a consensus between citizens with diverse comprehensive doctrines (as we live in societies defined by *the fact of pluralism*), for because of their uncertain epistemological nature and the impossibility to ever settle on metaphysical truth, we are bound to conflict when discussing metaphysics. Thus, using a metaphysical foundation for a theory of

justice makes such a theory become one particular comprehensive view amongst others, and is therefore unfit to be referred to as a *political* conception of justice. It will lead to a twisted and distorted sense of morality which will not be accepted by citizens who relate to a plurality of metaphysical views, but will lead to domination and the forcing of the values dictated by the hereby hypothetical metaphysical theory of justice upon them (Rawls, 1985 ; 1993). The principles of justice should therefore be metaphysically neutral in order to avoid irresolvable conflict and potential morally wrong consequences.

A second account is to be found in recent feminist theory, in this case in Sally Haslanger's 2012 *Resisting Reality*, though the criticism mentioned here is not new in critical and feminist theory as well as in the philosophy of race in which the same argument goes valid. Haslanger affirms the need and legitimacy of feminist perspective on metaphysics which should seek to investigate on how traditional metaphysical assumptions about the nature of persons have shaped the social world we live in today. Indeed, through their speculative and uncertain nature, metaphysics can serve as a formidable tool of domination. By assigning metaphysical characteristics to groups of persons, or one might say *essentialize* them, it becomes easy to categorize said groups in ways that go in the dominant's interest. For instance, saying that women are x or y way because it is in their nature to be so may justify unfair policies towards them by virtue of following a « natural law ». Such a law being as I said based on speculative inquiries on the fundamental structure of reality, and thus uncertain. Haslanger argues that metaphysics, and by consequent ontology, have both been used to dominate minorities throughout the ages, and that this is the reason why feminist theorists, in a similar fashion to the logical positivists, have called metaphysics dubious and remain skeptical of such inquiries, while also considering them a waste of time (Haslanger, 2012). Here we see an even more concrete consequence of what metaphysical assumptions can lead to, indeed by assigning persons ontological characteristics, we become able to justify otherwise unjustifiable policies towards them on the sole ground that it is just the way they *are*. One will of course be quick to remark that Haslanger's argument works just as well when tackling issues of racism.

The third and final moral critique arises from the Vienna Circle itself, and particularly from Rudolf Carnap. This might come as both expected and unexpected. Expected because as we have seen just earlier, the Vienna Circle actively sought the destruction of metaphysics, and one may reasonably expect that there might be moral motivations behind such an endeavour. Unexpected, because the positivist program of the Vienna Circle, their attachment to neutrality and to a very specific form of knowledge might seem at odds with critical works such as Haslanger's that I have just presented. Nevertheless, the complexity of Carnap's thought in particular has proven an

ally in feminist concerns of the kind I have just mentioned, especially through his views on ontological pluralism (Yap, 2010). I will come back to this latter point in the second part of my paper, where I will argue for this very kind of pluralism regarding metaphysics.

But let me come back to the first assertion I have made in the precedent paragraph. The attentive reader will have noticed a weird inconsistency. I have just said that the logical positivists had moral motivations behind their ideas that I will go as far as calling the normative project of the Vienna Circle. However, I have also developed on how the logical positivists rejected ethics as an unworthy field of study. So how can I possibly say that they had a normative project at all? The answer lies in very thin details. One must first understand the historical and political context in which the Vienna Circle emerged, and who it was constituted of. The Vienna Circle was a group of philosophers and scientists from Jewish origins who were developing their ideas in both Austria and Germany during the 1930's, that is during the rise of the Nazi regime to power (Ouelbani, 2008). Both Carnap and Otto Neurath, another member of the Circle, hoped that the scientific approach they were recommending for philosophical investigations would lead to a more rational and reasonable world, where faith would become nothing but an artifact from past times (Schilpp, 1963). There are good grounds to suspect that witnessing the rise of Nazi regime and its heavy use of metaphysical arguments concerning the nature of groups of persons – be they German, Jewish, or any other minorities that suffered their atrocities – is partly responsible for the radical rejection of metaphysics from the Circle (Ouelbani, 2008). It is indeed interesting to mention a certain formulation that Carnap uses when he describes the metaphysicians of the time such as Heidegger: lack of *responsibility* (Carnap, 1932 ; Schilpp, 1963), a term one can find in both his articles and his autobiography. The use of such a word fits very well the point I am arguing for here, as philosophers who make use of unexamined metaphysical assumptions and who lack the rigour behind their investigations can indeed be referred to as *irresponsible*, if one admits that there might be very real consequences for people in the world because of our own theories. As I have said, this point runs behind the logical positivist thought but is never explicitly admitted as a normative ideal, indeed that would prove contradictory with the Circle's own intentions. I nevertheless argue that it would be naive to set aside the contextual, historical and political aspects that surrounded the Vienna Circle, after all composed mainly of self-declared socialists (Schilpp, 1963 ; Ouelbani, 2008).

Let us quickly recap. We have seen that metaphysics can either be: unfit for political justice for their speculative nature can never be subject to any form of consensus and thus encompass the views of a particular view of the world; used as a mean of domination through the assignment of

characteristics that help justify the unjustifiable to those who lack power ; handled irresponsibly by philosophers who may not realize that their ideas can be used as the grounding for the most horrific actions imaginable. All of these arguments are linked to the epistemological nature of metaphysics, hence the reason why the moral problems of metaphysics must be understood as a direct consequence of the epistemological problems that surround this discipline. As I have drawn the picture so far, I hope to have shown two things. One, that we theorists are not as innocent as we may think when we engage in such metaphysical talk, and two that perhaps the best thing to do, if my argument holds, would be to simply throw metaphysics down the trash can of political philosophy, as Rawls suggested, because the risks around its use is just too big. In the next section, I show that unfortunately, this endeavour is far from easy and most likely impossible, as we might not be able to escape from the metaphysical and ontological assumptions that lie at the heart of our theories.

THE INESCAPABILITY OF METAPHYSICS AND ONTOLOGY

I have so far argued that doing political philosophy with metaphysics comes with certain risks that we should strive to avoid. The issue at stake seems rather straightforward: if metaphysics, because of its epistemological nature, represents such a threat of being an unwanted parasite in theoretical reflections, then we should simply let go of it altogether and move along without it. Some scholars, mainly from the liberal tradition (and mainly following Rawls), have indeed argued in favour of such a way of doing political philosophy, a point I will come back to soon. Things are unfortunately not that easy, and it is not as easy as it seems to get rid of metaphysics, it is in fact impossible. I will hereby quickly present the thought of two scholars that have tackled this issue directly. The first, W.V.O. Quine, speaks from the standpoint of the philosophy of science and is pretty much arguing directly against Carnap, the logical positivists and their anti-metaphysical stance, it is widely believed that he put the final nail on the coffin of the Vienna Circle. The second, Ruth Groff, is a social and political philosopher who has recently published works that are, while much less famous than Quine's papers, as incisive and insightful on this matter as him. The thought of these two philosophers will hopefully convince the reader that metaphysics and ontology are in fact, inescapable in any kind of philosophical enterprise, be it political or of any other kind.

Quine : Ontological Commitment

Let us start with Quine. As I have mentioned, his famous paper *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* has been acknowledged as being a devastating blow to logical positivism. His argument is actually fairly simple to grasp. The positivists, in their anti-metaphysical battle, held that in order to put the state of knowledge in order, any kind of knowledge must be filtered through a *verification principle*, that I have already introduced before. While stating that all knowledge was either analytic or synthetic, the principle could not derive itself from any empirical or logical ground, and was therefore metaphysical in its very nature (Quine, 1971).

But that does not help us on the matter of metaphysical inescapability. What is of interest to us here is another famous paper by Quine, namely *On What There Is*. In there, Quine argues that by making use of an existential quantifier \exists and postulating the existence of a thing x , we are ontologically committed to the existence of x (Quine, 1971). This is not just a semantic matter, as Quine himself says (*ibid*). This ontological commitment is indeed of metaphysical nature as it refers to what ultimately exists in the world. Remember that we described metaphysics as the study of the fundamental structure of the world as it is perceived, and thus speaking of what exists in the world will irremediably be considered as metaphysics. Let me illustrate. If I say that the human self is constituted through the sole use of reason, I am making two metaphysical claims. First, of course the object *self* is constituted through the function of reason; in other words I speak of what a certain object is made of (or rather, speculate about it). Formally, such a statement is represented in the following way⁷ :

$$\exists x F(x)$$

Second, following Quine, in stating that the self is constituted in so and so ways, I have committed myself to the existence of the object *self*. This ontological commitment is located in the existential quantifier of the aforementioned formal statement:

$$\exists x$$

What I said is indeed not different from saying « There exists a self, and this self is constituted by the sole use of reason », which fits Quine's description of ontological commitment perfectly. I cannot speak of an object that does not exist in the world as it is according to my ontology, and I am therefore committed to its ontological existence whenever I speak about it.

⁷ I deeply apologize for the use of formal logic. I believe it is hopeful in understanding the argument, and hopefully it is light enough to not bring any confusion to the reader.

Groff: The Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality

We can now turn to Groff's account which is closer to political philosophy than Quine's. In her 2013 book *Ontology Revisited*, Groff argues against what she calls the myth of metaphysical neutrality by turning to various theorists arising from different paradigms (such as Hume, Mill, Adorno and Nussbaum) and attacking their lack of recognition of their own metaphysical assumptions (Groff, 2013). Groff argues that no matter what, any political or social theory is committed to some assumptions about the existence of selves, the nature of causation and the agents' ability to create causal chains. It is an idea that I believe is fairly intuitive. One cannot coherently maintain his wish to do normative theory and simultaneously hold that determinism regarding agents is true, it would be pointless to do so: why make moral injunctions when the nature of agents will always lead them to act in a determined way? And what is the value of *my* discourse as a theorist if it was also determined by who knows what factors (*ibid*)? Groff argues that this refusal to engage in metaphysics is due to Hume's skepticism (and mechanistic philosophy, Hume's view of the world being often described as the *cold dead world of mechanism*) and his influence on both science and the philosophy of science, an influence that refuses to acknowledge the capacity of agents to be bearers of cause and whose selves actually exist. It is worthwhile to note that Groff does not go on to say that everybody has gone off tracks because of Hume's influence, but she stresses that it is crucial for theorists to take a close look at what their metaphysical assumptions are for the sake of clarity and coherence. As she put it in a recent paper, « *Lack of clarity about underlying philosophical commitments leads to lack of clarity at other levels of analysis* » (Groff, 2017), an idea that is indeed at the very core of my own paper as well.

What's to Do? Positive and Negative Defences

It seems like we are hitting a wall here. I have established that metaphysics and ontology can cause potential harm when used in political theory due to their speculative nature. But at the same time, we cannot seem to articulate any sort of philosophical argument without resorting to them. What is then to do? Flikschuh (2000) argues that political philosophers have tackled the metaphysical in two ways that she refers to as the *positive* and *negative* defences of metaphysics (*ibid*).

The positive defence of metaphysics states what metaphysics and ontology are not just unavoidable, but are indispensable if one wants to give weight to its normative arguments. In

other words, if one wishes to give a substantial account of what justice ought to be, she must make sure to state explicitly what her metaphysical system consists of. The substance of the theory depends entirely on its metaphysical underlying structure, and therefore rendering explicit such commitments is a crucial part of theory building (*ibid*). The negative defence, on the other hand, is concerned with keeping such claims at a strict minimum. It is aware of the unavoidability of metaphysics, but sees it as a burden that ought to be minimized, requiring theorists to stay on the philosophical surface when arguing about justice in order to remain practical and avoid unnecessary controversy (*ibid*). Such a line of thought immediately reminds one of Rawls in *Political not Metaphysical* and his later works, which has also been defended by Kai Nielsen as the anti-philosophical way of inquiring about justice (Nielsen, 1991). I will come back to Nielsen's point soon as I will argue that this position is untenable.

This distinction made by Flikschuh is only informative here and it is not my intent to argue against these two categories ; they are indeed analytically useful. My aim here is to show that Rawls, and the liberal tradition he influenced, is to be placed in the category of the negative defence of metaphysics, as Flikschuh herself stated. I will then argue that the negative defence, as it is expressed by Rawls, is untenable and cannot be coherently articulated with what it claims to accomplish. My strategy is the following: First, I present Rawls' view on metaphysics as stated in *Political, not Metaphysical* and show why his view is not anti-metaphysical, but ametaphysical, which leads to different issues than the ones usually encountered in the literature about the subject. Secondly, I render explicit some of the metaphysical and ontological assumptions in Rawls' theory, showing a first inconsistency between his view on metaphysics and the substance of his theory of justice. Finally, I will make an argument against Rawls' ametaphysical view by looking at the problem through the lens of logical positivism, and specifically the later works of Rudolf Carnap. My argument aims at cutting at the deepest in Rawls' claims to show why his theory actually rests on metaphysical assumptions that he cannot hold along with his quest for metaphysical neutrality. I however wish to stress one thing here. This argument, which I call the *definitional* argument will seem far-fetched from our main concern here, that is the ontological conceptions of the self in political theory. There are two reasons why I proceed in this fashion. First, my argument is built around the unexpected links between Rawls and the logical positivists, and it thus allows me to introduce a key concept from Rudolf Carnap, namely the *principle of tolerance* or *ontological pluralism*⁸. As I have said, I will

⁸ Note that Carnap himself spoke of *logical pluralism*. The term of *ontological pluralism* and its link to Carnap is established by Matti Eklund (2009) in the edited volume *Metametaphysics*, and I borrow it from him.

argue that Rawls' position is actually ametaphysical and close to the later ideas of Carnap. Ontological pluralism is the cornerstone of the second part of this paper, and I can then show why it is not concerned with the case I make against Rawls. Secondly, recall how I have defined ontology as a sub-field of broader metaphysical inquiry. If I manage to show that metaphysical neutrality is impossible, then it logically follows that ontological neutrality is also impossible. This then gives me a starting point for my argument in favour of ontological pluralism, which lies on the positive side of Flikschuh's defences.

POLITICAL YET METAPHYSICAL: RAWLS, CARNAP AND METAPHYSICS

Political, not Metaphysical: Rawls' View on Metaphysics in Political Philosophy

So let us start by presenting Rawls' view on metaphysics and what ought to be done regarding the matter in normative political theory. I take Rawls' view to be a classic illustration of the negative defence of metaphysics as I have stated above; indeed Flikschuh herself is pointing towards Rawls when defining this defence. Rawls' account has also been fairly influential in liberal political theory and there seems to be some sort of tacit consensus amongst theorists emerging from this paradigm to follow his guidelines regarding metaphysical matters. Nevertheless, while Rawls has been of huge influence concerning the role of metaphysics in liberal political theory, it would be a mistake to believe that his critique is to be understood within the framework of liberal political theory alone. As I have shown earlier, similar skepticism regarding metaphysics has also emerged from feminist and critical theorists, as illustrated by Haslanger's *Resisting Reality*. Indeed, the point I wish to make goes beyond liberal political theory as I am concerned with the epistemology of political theory in the broad sense. I turn to Rawls for two reasons. First, I argue that there are illuminating points to discover through arguing against his ideas. Second, he still up to this day represents one of the only systematic and direct critique of metaphysics in political theory. As Rosenthal (2018) shows, it is even difficult to find scholarly that engaged directly with Rawls' points in *Political not Metaphysical*⁹. There is a very important point that I shall want to make regarding this issue before starting to expose the hereby mentioned views. There has been some confusion regarding the term *metaphysical* as used by Rawls, even he himself states in *Political, not*

⁹ Rosenthal says that only Hampton (1989) ought to be considered as a proper response to Rawls. Despite the fact that I believe that there are a few more than this sole article, her point remains valid: the literature engaging with Rawls' ideas on metaphysics is surprisingly scarce.

Metaphysical that « (...) there is no accepted understanding of what a metaphysical doctrine is. » (Rawls, 1985). This lack of clear understanding of the term has led to diverging interpretations of the paper. I classify them in two categories, moral and epistemic.

The first interpretation, the moral one, has been understanding metaphysical as *metaphysically neutral towards the good*. It is perhaps the most common interpretation found within the liberal scholarly. It asks whether political liberalism incarnates a comprehensive doctrine regarding what the good is or not, a comprehensive doctrine being equal to a metaphysical one in this sense. This moral interpretation has been debated in the field for the past two decades, arguing whether neutrality towards the good is possible at all or if not, whether it is a bad thing or not (Arneson, 2014 ; De Marneffe, 2006 ; 2014 ; Merrill, 2017). I am not concerned with this moral interpretation here as one will have guessed from my definition of metaphysics and ontology.

The second interpretation I shall call epistemic. On this interpretation, scholars have been concerned with metaphysics as *metaphysical truth*. Rawls insists on both *Political, not Metaphysical* and *Political Liberalism* that truth holds no place in a theory of justice for it can only bring about controversy and would forbid us from ever reaching any sort of consensus (Rawls, 1985 ; 1993). Rawls is not however totally closed off to the concept of truth, he even says regarding metaphysical doctrines that one might actually be true, but as we are not able to distinguish it from a false one, it is pointless to get ourselves on a quest for such a doctrine (*ibid*). Criticism of this view has come in the writings of Cohen (2009) which states that the concept of truth is necessary and unavoidable in public reasoning. Rawls' view on truth has also drawn heavy criticism from the pragmatists, the most systematic critique on this matter belonging to Misak (2000) in which she also states the notion of truth is indispensable in politics, following a long-running tradition established by John Dewey.

Here, one will understand that I am closer to the latter interpretation rather than the former. While I will be slightly concerned with the notion of truth, it is not a central point in my argument; I do not understand Rawls' metaphysics as only reducible to the concept of truth as put forward by the pragmatists¹⁰. My analysis aims to be strictly metaphysical in the bounded sense I have defined at the beginning of this paper. I however do not say that those two interpretations are misguided. Rawls is remarkably unclear in *Political, not Metaphysical* and it is fairly difficult to get a definitive grasp of what he is arguing about. For instance, on p. 230, he says:

¹⁰ While I am not focusing on an interpretation of the idea of truth in Rawls, the concept of truth is of course central to my own argument as I will show later when presenting the model-based approach.

« Philosophy as the search for truth about an independent metaphysical and moral order cannot, I believe, provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society. » (Rawls, 1985, pp. 230)

Such a sentence makes all interpretations sound valid. It could be about the nature of the good, the epistemic status of metaphysical assumptions or the use of metaphysical assumptions itself. A point which is important to keep in mind is that according to Rawls, a reason why political philosophers must avoid metaphysics is that a political conception of justice ought to be political and not epistemological or metaphysical if it aims at being *practical* (*ibid*). I believe this to be the bulk of Rawls' thought concerning metaphysics. Its use is impractical due to its speculative and controversial nature, it belongs to a vision of philosophy as the pursuit of truth, which is not what normative political philosophy should be pursuing. This view of philosophy, sometimes called *anti-philosophical*, has been used to describe Rawls' theory according to Kai Nielsen (1991)¹¹. On this view, philosophy should step away from useless abstract debates about the speculated existence of certain entities and their functionings, and should focus on practical issues. While it does seem like this relates to Rawls, especially after taking into consideration the quote I have mentioned just earlier, associating his thought as being anti-metaphysical is, I believe, mistaken. As Boran (2005) has shown, Rawls' view on metaphysics is best reflected through his method of avoidance which is closer to metaphysical agnosticism than Nielsen's anti-philosophical stance or the early logical positivist anti-metaphysical view. There are two reasons for this. First, as I have said, Rawls is not against the idea of there being one true metaphysical doctrine, he chooses to remain neutral on the question; he does not choose to discard it as nonsensical. Second, his method of avoidance is analogous to Carnap's principle of tolerance as he established in his 1937 *Logical Syntax of Language*. In this work, Carnap sought to build a system that would allow for different logical systems to cohabit within a broader framework that would be neutral towards their epistemic values. In other words, he tried to build a system that was metaphysically agnostic; in the same way, the method of avoidance strives to be a standpoint from which one could arbitrate between the competing metaphysical doctrines, therefore being agnostic. I will come back on the similarities between the method of avoidance and the principle of tolerance in due time.

¹¹ According to Boran (2005) commenting on Nielsen (1991), the contemporary champion of the anti-philosophical stance is Richard Rorty. For an in-depth illustration, see Rorty, (1991 ; 1999).

Remember that my concern here is with ontological claims regarding the nature of the self. I believe that using Political, not Metaphysical as a starting point for that matter is valid, as Rawls himself refers to this matter in the text. At p.231, Rawls says:

« (...) as we shall see (in Section V), a conception of the person in a political view, for a example, the conception of citizens as free and equal persons, need not involve, so I believe, questions of philosophical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine of the nature of the self. » (Rawls, 1985, pp. 231)

Many times throughout the paper, Rawls makes use of the terms « nature of persons », « nature of the self », « metaphysical doctrine of the self » and so on. He mostly uses these terms to stress one particular aspect of his argument, namely that his original position does not presuppose a particular conception of the self. Justice as fairness resting upon a particular ontological conception of the self would indeed put Rawls in a very bad spot if it were to be true. Rawls' intention behind the writing of *Political, not Metaphysical* is clear when one looks at some of the most famous challenges that have been addressed to his 1971 *A Theory of Justice*. Perhaps one of the most famous criticism that has emerged towards his magnum opus is Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, in which Sandel directly attacks Rawls on his « metaphysics of the self » (Sandel, 1982). According to Sandel, justice as fairness presupposes a self that is capable of detaching itself from real world experiences and ties to its social and communal links. A similar point has been made extensively by Taylor in his monumental 1989 *Sources of the Self*, in which he takes the exact opposite strategy from Rawls as he dives straight into the metaphysical and aims at giving a full account of what the human self is made of (implying that Taylor would be a fair representative of the positive defence of metaphysics as defined by Flikschuh).

We should by now be well aware of the reasons why Rawls came to his view on metaphysics, and why it makes intuitive sense that metaphysics and ontology put liberal theorists at unease. Let us now take a closer look of some of the hidden metaphysical assumptions that rest behind justice as fairness.

Self-refutation? Methodological, not Epistemological

« I just remarked that the idea of the original position and the description of the parties may tempt us to think that a metaphysical doctrine of the person is presupposed. While I said that this interpretation is mistaken, it is not enough simply to disavow reliance on metaphysical doctrines, for despite one's intent they may still be involved. To rebut claims of this nature requires discussing them in detail and showing that they have no foothold. I cannot do that here. » (Rawls, 1985, pp. 239-240)

And this is exactly what I will be doing here. Before we get started, I wish to stress that despite the subject matter of my paper, I do not have much interest in the conception of the self behind Rawls' theory. This is for two reasons. First, as I have said earlier on, my goal is not to make a contribution to liberal political theory or political liberalism but rather to the broader epistemological debate about ontology in political theory. My use of Rawls here is thus strictly instrumental, as I use it as a good illustration of the point I want to make, and this point is not only about Rawls, but as I have said he is the one that tackled this issue in the most frontal and direct issue amongst political theorists. My objective is merely to show that there is no metaphysical neutrality to be found in Rawls, and therefore no ontological neutrality either ; which is what I need to get my argument going. Second, critics of Rawls' ontological conception are numerous and thorough¹². I do not claim to bring anything new to the table on this matter, and thus prefer to remain silent on the issue. As far as this paper is concerned, the arguments tackling Rawls' ontology may disprove the lack of ontological neutrality in justice as fairness, but I want to go deeper and show that neither justice as fairness nor any other theory can be metaphysically neutral at all.

So let us begin by taking a look at Rawls' own words as a starting point, where he expresses some concern regarding his position on metaphysics. On a footnote of p.240 of *Political, not Metaphysical* commenting on the introductory quote I have just used he says :

« Part of the difficulty is that there is no accepted understanding of what a metaphysical doctrine is. One might say, as Paul Hoffman has suggested to me, that

¹² Such accounts include Sandel (1982) or Taylor (1989) that I have cited above. For a recent and comprehensive work regarding Rawls' ontology, see Hinton, T. (2015). *The Original Position*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

to develop a political conception of justice without presupposing, or explicitly using, a metaphysical doctrine, for example, some particular metaphysical conception of the person, is already to presuppose a metaphysical thesis: namely, that no particular metaphysical doctrine is required for this purpose. » (Rawls, 1985, pp .240)

This passage does sound bizarre in the overall context of the article. Despite the fact that Rawls vehemently denies the presence of metaphysics throughout his argument, this paragraph and footnote seem to cast doubt on his thesis. Let me clarify one thing which I believe is misleading from Rawls' words. While he is right to state that there is no consensus over the definition of « *metaphysical doctrine* », no such definition is actually needed for there is no need to use the term metaphysical doctrine here, « *metaphysical assumptions* » does the job very well. What we want to know is whether or not Rawls makes claims about the ultimate structure of reality as we perceive it or not, and this is tautological to saying that we want to know whether Rawls makes metaphysical assumptions or not. So with that in mind, let us address the elephant in the room here : is Rawls really making a metaphysical assumption when he says that political philosophy ought to be done without metaphysics ?

Such a question should ring a bell in the reader's mind. Indeed, the issue that Rawls is facing here is the well-known problem of self-refutation. If his worries were to be true, then his metaphysical posture would have to exclude itself from itself, his theory thus being contradictory and doomed. We have seen this problem of self-refutation before, with the logical positivists' principle of verification. Recall that the principle, if true, would be unverifiable by its own standards and thus discarded as metaphysical non-sense (Quine, 1971). Is saying that no metaphysical assumptions are required to engage in normative political philosophy reasoning bound to encounter the same fate? Boran (2005) shows that this is not the case for one very simple reason: Rawls' claim is *methodological*, not epistemological. Unlike the principle of verification, it is not concerned with the truth-value of its subject. The principle of verification does make a very real claim about the ultimate structure of reality, namely that knowledge is discovered one way or the other; it is hard-built into the structure of the world. Rawls' claim, that I shall now refer to as his *method of avoidance*, does not actually do any of that. Affirming that no metaphysics is required for political philosophy is not different from affirming that you do not need mustard when you are cooking rice ; if you still choose to do it, you just haven't followed the recipe and maybe the end result won't be particularly delicious, but you can still do it, there is no rule built into the universe that forbids you to do it. The same

goes for metaphysics as long as Rawls' statement is concerned. The key word in the paragraph is *required*. While no metaphysics is required, it does not follow that it is forbidden for the task. The method of avoidance therefore does not refute itself, it is methodological, not metaphysical.

But what exactly is then the nature of this method of avoidance? It would surely seem that if it were anti-metaphysical/philosophical as Nielsen (1991) put it, then it would be bound to self-refute, yet it does not. As Boran (2005) says, it is actually mistaken of Nielsen to believe that the method of avoidance falls into the anti-philosophical category. The confusion comes from Rawls' unclear definition of his method, as it is one of two things. It is either a philosophical view, or a meta-philosophical one. If it were a mere philosophical, or first-order view (Boran, 2005), then it would fall in the trap of self-refutation due to its particularistic nature. If it however is a meta-philosophical, or higher-order view (*ibid*), then the outcome takes a different form. A higher-order view seeks to arbitrate between a pluralism of doctrines while refusing to take part in the debate (*ibid*). Rawls is very clearly in that second category, the proof being in the very first page of *Political, not Metaphysical* where he states that to arrive at his conception of justice, « *we apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself* » (Rawls, 1985, pp. 223). Rawls also directly addresses the question of metaphysical agnosticism. In both *Political, not Metaphysical* and *Political Liberalism* he affirms that he simply chooses not to pick any side regarding the truth-value of particularistic metaphysical systems. This however does not mean that one of them cannot actually be true, we just would not know it if it were the case (Rawls, 1985 ; 1993). Also, to add some more weight to the methodological point I have made, he never says that metaphysics should be thrown away as a field of inquiry or that people should not form opinions regarding metaphysical issues ; only that this is not the role of the political philosopher. It does thus seem that Rawls, from his higher-order view, is truly holding an ametaphysical position that is merely methodological (Boran, 2005).

Carnap's Principle of Tolerance and Rawls' Method of Avoidance

As Boran says, the method of avoidance is meant to be understood as being a higher-order view, or meta-philosophical. In her paper, Boran draws a seemingly unlikely connection between Rawls' method and the principle of tolerance as elaborated by Rudolf Carnap in his 1937 *Logical Syntax of Language*. A brief detour to his philosophy is needed to fully grasp the importance of his principle. By the time of the writing of the *Logical Syntax*, Carnap was no longer endorsing the simplistic verification principle as established by his colleagues of the

Vienna Circle which Quine would crush two decades later. He instead sought another way of doing philosophy without metaphysics, and he thus developed a way heavily inspired by Gödel's incompleteness theorems. For a ridiculously short summary, the incompleteness theorems stated that no logical system could coherently serve as the only foundation of mathematics¹³. This put an end to the hope of the logical positivists to establish one true logical system from which true statements could be derived (Schilpp, 1963 ; Boran, 2005). Carnap thus changed his views and started advocating for his principle of tolerance that states that the idea of correctness is misguided when talking about logic. The principle entailed a form of logical pluralism, saying that any given problem could be solved by using any sort of logical systems, as long as it worked and that the system's user clarified his logic's rules and made them explicit so that all could understand them (Carnap, 1967). To put it in Carnap's own words:

« Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language as he wishes. All that is required to from him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly. » (Carnap, 1967, p.52)

Here we can clearly see the difference between the first-order and the higher-order view. Taking the principle as a higher-order view was meant to avoid involving any metaphysics with his philosophical views ; the metaphysics would be reserved for first-order views.

This is illuminating when drawing a comparison with Rawls. I however wish to make one thing very clear here in order to avoid any misguided criticism : I am in no way saying that Rawls was a radical empiricist of any sort or that he could have been a part of the Vienna Circle. Following the description I have made of the Vienna Circle earlier on and their views on normative ethics, this would be nonsensical from my part. What I say is that (1) Rawls was most likely sensitive to the philosophical context of its time when developing justice as fairness, and this context involves the rampant positivist views, and (2) that despite their subjects being radically different, both Carnap and Rawls were on a quest for the same thing, namely an ametaphysical meta-philosophical view that would be void of unnecessary controversies (this being the main point of Boran). This common wish to do philosophy

¹³ I do not have the time or space to go in-depth about Gödel's incompleteness theorems, and it would be irrelevant here as I am only concerned with its consequence, namely that it is hopeless to seek to obtain a true and complete foundational logic. Accounts of the theorem can be found at Gödel, K. (1951). « Some Basic Theorems on the Foundations of Mathematics and Their Implications », in *Kurt Gödel Collected Works*, Vol. III (ed. Solomon Feferman), pp. 304-323. Oxford : Oxford University Press. and over at the excellent SEP Gödel entry : <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goedel/> (accessed on 25.10.2018).

without metaphysics is enough ground to justify a parallel analysis of those two philosophers. As Boran puts it, what Carnap seeks for logical analysis, Rawls seeks for moral theory, they both wish to attain a neutral view through a liberal meta-philosophical point of view (Boran, 2005). By remaining agnostic on metaphysics in their higher-order principles, they can successfully remain neutral regarding the metaphysical assumptions of their respective logical systems and conceptions of the human self or comprehensive doctrines. But can they ?

The Definitional Argument or the Meta-language Problem

What I have attempted to demonstrate in the preceding paragraphs is that Rawls' claim that political philosophy must be done without metaphysics is methodological and not metaphysical, and that his method of avoidance effectively acts as a higher-order principle that is indeed metaphysically neutral, or so it seems. I have argued this point through a comparison with Carnap's principle of tolerance, following the links established by Boran. I have also argued that Quine's argument against the logical positivists does not do enough to crush Carnap's view, and thus cannot be turned against Rawls either. We must however be left with some skepticism regarding those claims, it indeed seems odd to propose a defense of Rawlsian metaphysical neutrality through the lens of logical positivism, which is largely considered to be a dead school of thought despite some occasional efforts¹⁴. What are we missing then ? I will start by showing why Carnap's pluralism is not neutral and then transpose this argument over to Rawls.

As I have said earlier on, Carnap was influenced by Gödel's incompleteness theorems when designing his principle of tolerance. Following Gödel, any language that makes use of logical rules must, at some point, equip itself with a meta-language that draws the line between the physical rules and the logical rules (Friedman, 1999). This meta-language is where neutrality finds its demise. In order to accommodate the plurality of logics, Carnap's principle must still rest on a meta-language that will give definitions that draw the lines between the different domains of inquiry. This does not change the fact that the principle of tolerance does not in fact produce metaphysical claims per se. The problem lies much deeper than that: it is that the principle has a metaphysical assumption built into its very core precisely because of this meta-language. Such a meta-language in the principle is indeed making a claim about the ultimate structure of reality, and it is hopeless to wish for a pluralist system that aims at accommodating

¹⁴ See for instance Friedman, F. (1999) *Reconsidering Logical Positivism*. New York : Cambridge University Press and (2001). *Dynamics of Reason*. Stanford : CSLI Publications.

the different logical systems while resting on a definition that separates the analytical from the empirical or the physical from the metaphysical. It simply is not possible to articulate these two thoughts coherently. According to Friedman (1999), this is where one must look if he wishes to find the ultimate reason for the failure of logical positivism.

Now, how does it translate to Rawls? Actually, quite the literal same can be said about the method of avoidance. In order for the method of avoidance to not make any metaphysical claims, it seems that it is bound to rest on a meta-language that draws the line between the physical and the metaphysical. And by drawing this line, giving us a definition of what the physical and the metaphysical consist of, Rawls has already stepped too far and lost the neutrality of his method. The devil lies in these definitional claims which render the whole enterprise incoherent by building metaphysical claims about the world in the core of the higher-order principles. Rawls is thus wrong in his footnote, his claim remains methodological, it's just that his methodology is based on assertions about the structure of the world, namely what is part of the physical or the metaphysical. While this is a discussion for another thesis, such a dichotomy has tremendous implications further down Rawls' theory, mainly on matters of public reasoning. I unfortunately do not have the time nor space to dive into this dimension here.

The situation now looks extremely grim if we take seriously the worries we had at heart when considering the possible effects of metaphysics in political philosophy. It seems like even the philosopher who tackled this issue in the most direct way still cannot escape making metaphysical assertions. We are then left with two paths that we can follow. The first is to continue chasing an ideal of neutrality by remaining in Flikschuh's negative defense of metaphysics and try to subtract all metaphysical assertions from our theories one by one through extreme care. If I have managed to make my point clearly in the last pages, the reader might have guessed that I do not hold much faith in such an endeavour. The second path demands that we change our perspective regarding this issue. Perhaps it is possible to develop a pluralist system that is aware of the epistemological constraints required by the risks of injustice, and that can also go beyond the matter of non-neutrality by remaining silent regarding definitions about the ultimate structure of reality. This is the kind of ontological pluralism I seek to defend in the second half of my thesis. Before going any further, I wish to make a quick reminder. Recall that in the beginning of this paper, I have made sure to differentiate between metaphysics and ontology, defining the latter as a sub-domain of the former. My argument here was mostly concerned with the overarching metaphysical system of Rawls and Carnap, the meta-language I have made explicit clearly belonging to this aforementioned category. As I

have said, showing that metaphysical neutrality is unattainable is enough to disprove ontological neutrality if one accepts my definitions. My goal in the following second half of this paper is not to simply shift away from metaphysics and focus on ontology, but rather to attempt to give a sound metaphysical basis to my alternative of ontological pluralism, for if one forgets to do so, one is bound to fall in the same traps that I have mentioned just here. Let us now dive into the theoretical system I want to defend.

SECTION II: ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM AND THE MODEL-BASED APPROACH

ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

Bypassing the Meta-language : Political Philosophy as Practical Philosophy

Let us summarize what we want from the theoretical (or meta-ontological) system that I will attempt to sketch out here. Essentially, there are three features that we require it possesses, these are the following¹⁵ :

- 1) A theoretical system that can accommodate the plurality of ontological views because of the essentially uncertain nature of metaphysical inquiry.
- 2) A theoretical system that can take into the account the moral risks of metaphysical assertions in the social and political spheres and thus constraint itself accordingly.
- 3) A theoretical system which coherently articulates pluralism and its own meta-language in order to avoid unexpected exclusion or dogma.

These three points pretty much sum up what I have said so far about what the problems with ontology are. I believe that (1) must be taken as a basis from which we build upon, hence the argument for pluralism. The real job is to show that (1) is compatible with both (2) and (3). I

¹⁵ Note that the system I aim to describe here is strictly concerned with ontology in so far as it is covered within debates in political philosophy. I certainly do not have pretend that my analysis goes any further than that, and the debates amongst metaphysicians regarding this subject are fierce and very much alive. For a contemporary example of such debates, see Benner, A. (2018). « Easy Ontology, Application Conditions and Infinite Regress », in *Analysis*, Vol. 74, N°4, pp. 605-614.

will start by arguing for the compatibility between (1) and (3), and in doing so I will explain why I distance myself from Rawls and his definitional/meta-language problem.

I have argued that Rawls fails at his ideal of neutrality because of the meta-language his theory rests on, which incarnates nothing more than a particular metaphysical perspective. Now I want to make something very clear from the beginning: I do not think nor wish to argue for the possibility of freeing ourselves from the idea of a meta-language, for I believe that such a task is simply impossible. What I want to argue for is that perhaps this meta-language issue can be bypassed by looking at this metaphysical conundrum through a different lens. Let us take a closer look at how Rawls builds his theory. He wishes to avoid metaphysics for a number of reasons, and in this endeavour tries to exclude what he counts as metaphysical according to a dichotomy between the physical and the metaphysical (Rawls, 1985 ; 1993). The problem here, albeit not necessarily obvious, is fairly straightforward : it is in the *nature* of this dichotomy, in its *epistemic weight*. Rawls spends plenty of time in both *Political, not Metaphysical* and *Political Liberalism* arguing that the role of political philosophy is not the pursuit of truth but rather the pursuit of justice and stability (*ibid*). And yet, his exclusion of the metaphysical is done upon a dichotomy that holds a truth value in his theory, for Rawls this dichotomy just happens to be the case, a factual truth about the world, and this is where things go south as they become incoherent. Now one must let go of one of two things here: either the role of political philosophy is not the pursuit of justice but indeed the pursuit of truth, or the dichotomy must be abandoned. I agree with Rawls that political philosophy must not be understood as truth-seeking due to its *practical* nature, in the same way as the philosophy of law or normative economics for that matter. It is philosophy that seeks to give real-world directions and it is thus free from the burden of truth. We want to find out what is *just* and what *works*, not what is *true*¹⁶. It is thus the dichotomy that is problematic, or more precisely the role it serves in the theory. If one is to attempt to draw a definitive line between the physical and the metaphysical, one will be facing the same troubles I have brought up when talking about the meta-language difficulty.

There is however a way out of this. As I said, I do not believe it is possible to lay a theoretical system upon a meta-language free basis. What is possible though is to diminish the weight of this meta-language in order to allow for a real pluralism. Doing so requires us to take insight from Hilary Putnam's thoughts on the analytic/synthetic dichotomy that I have

¹⁶ In this sense, I whole-heartedly agree with Rawls' words on the role of political philosophy in his 2001 *Justice as Fairness : A Restatement*.

explained near the beginning of this paper. Recall that what Putnam criticizes is the dichotomy itself and the differences in epistemological treatment that follows from it. Putnam however never said that keeping a *distinction* between the two domains was a bad thing, indeed he even found it useful, we only were to make sure not to give a definite and true answer regarding what category consists of what (Putnam, 2002). The same can be applied to the physical/metaphysical divide in political philosophy. It is indeed useful to make a distinction between the two, but at the minute we attempt to draw a definitive line between the two, we have made a step too far and have committed ourselves to a certain metaphysical view of the ultimate structure of reality. By taking this point of view, we manage to take off the epistemic weight that rests upon Rawls' dichotomy and transform it into a mere distinction or even convention.

Now one must be wondering: what good does that do ? It is actually a crucial starting point of articulating a coherent pluralism. If the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical is not fixed and is only a matter of convention, and if this distinction serves as the meta-language in which our pluralism rests, then the variety of metaphysical views that are contained within our pluralism are in no way binded by our meta-language. The meta-language we use of is so thin and flexible that it allows for metaphysical systems that do not fit our typical definition of metaphysics, it allows these systems to overcome the limits we otherwise impose upon them. In this way, understanding the divide between the physical and the metaphysical as a distinction allows us not to overstep and contradict our pluralistic intentions. We do not give fixed definitions : only conventions which one is free to use however he sees fit to accommodate his metaphysical system.

Pluralism, not Anarchism

It is easy to go down the slippery slope here and push my argument to its limits by saying that the metaphysical basis upon which my ontological pluralism rests is so thin that it is equivalent to ontological anarchism, an epistemological anarchism *à la* Feyerabend. This is not the case, and I need to clarify exactly why. The kind of ontological pluralism I advocate for is constrained on two aspects : first by moral concerns, second by epistemological concerns. I will tackle the moral concerns in the next sections as I am here rather concerned with the epistemological limits that we must bestow upon our pluralism. The question at stake here is the following : does anything go when we speak of ontology ? Is our pluralism virtually

limitless? And how should we debate our different ontologies? In answering these questions, I turn back to some more subtle elements of Carnap's pluralism.

In his 2009 article « Carnap and Ontological Pluralism », Matti Eklund did an amazing work of reporting some of Carnap's ideas, mostly elaborated in his 1950 *Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology*, and applying them to ontology. The most notable perhaps being the different analytical categories that Carnap created in order to impose rules on logical and ontological disputes. According to Eklund, questions regarding ontology can be separated between three categories: (1) Internal questions, (2) Pragmatic-External questions and (3) Factual-External questions (Eklund, 2009). Internal questions are the ones that are addressed to the inside of a given framework; they seek to determine whether a given framework produces or does not produce certain results. They question their respective framework from within. Pragmatic-External questions take a step back, and are concerned with what framework is the best to use given a certain problem to solve. They are indeed outside of a framework, but seek to pragmatically determine which one should be used at a given time. Factual-External questions are also on the outside of a framework, but questions whether or not a certain framework factually exists in the world. According to Carnap, while (1) and (2) are entirely valid kinds of questions, (3) lacks any cognitive content, to requote Carnap's favourite expression (*ibid*).

It is useful to take a little time to explain this idea of framework as it is used by Carnap. It is indeed rather unclear what he meant by the term, as Eklund puts it himself (*ibid*). Perhaps the best guess, and indeed the one most fitting here, is to understand framework as « system », or « language fragment » to quote Eklund. In order to properly understand this plurality of ontological systems, we need to stop on a very specific analytical point that differentiates ontological monism, which is unfortunately rampant in contemporary political philosophy, and ontological pluralism. To illustrate this difference, let us go back to the light bit of formalized expression I have used when describing Quine's ontological commitment:

$$\exists x F(x)$$

Which is the simple expression of the existence of an object ; there exists an object x such that x has F property. Now what the pluralist wants to say is that existential quantifiers look more like something like this :

$$\exists_1 x F(x), \exists_2 x F(x), \exists_3 x F(x), \dots \exists_n x F(x)$$

Which expresses the different modes of existence who cohabit simultaneously. This is the kind of pluralism Carnap refers to, and this is also what I am defending here. However, for the ontological monist, these different modes of existence can be understood differently, through what has been dubbed the « disjunctive quantifier argument » (Turner, 2010) :

$$\exists^* x F(x) = \exists_1 x F(x) \vee \exists_2 x F(x)$$

This is illustrated by two quantifiers but the same holds for any n number of them. For the monist, \exists_1 and \exists_2 must be understood as restrictions of \exists^* , which incarnates the one true mode of existence and thus the only true ontological system. The two other quantifiers are only here to guide us in attaining this \exists^* (*ibid*). This is exactly where Carnap's Factual-External questions come into play, and where it meets with my definition of political philosophy as practical philosophy that should not seek the pursuit of truth. The monist view forces us to try to discard x or y ontology based on its respective truth-value. Carnap argues that doing this is to ask whether the entire ontological system or framework actually exists, and that asking so has no cognitive content and is thus pointless (Eklund, 2009). So while we are free to propose any ontology that we might find useful to solve a given problem, the terms in which we debate them are restricted and regulated, pluralism does not entail an anarchist chaotic mess. This stands for the way we *debate* ontologies, not the *content* of ontologies. I will address this issue from a moral perspective in the next section.

To summarize what I have said here, I argue that a sound ontological pluralism must be rest on a thinner meta-language that is free of an unbearable epistemic weight, and that this meta-language can be attained by making use of Putnam's insights regarding the analytical difference between a dichotomy and a distinction. I then have argued that through Carnap's Internal/External and Pragmatic/Factual divide, we can reach a sound theoretical framework through which we can establish the ways we are allowed to debate our ontological systems. Carnap's divides help both in escaping ontological monism, which political philosophy should flee from, and help secure an inclusive framework that enables a global discussion on such contested matters. I now turn to the content of ontologies, and in what ways these must be regulated to avoid crashing into the moral dangers I have listed in the first half of this thesis.

Morality and the Content of Ontologies

After this brief epistemological detour, we can now return to some literature better known to the political theorist. After having hopefully defending ontological pluralism on an epistemological level in a convincing manner, we are left with the problem raised by (2), namely the fact that ontological claims can potentially be harmful in the sense that they can be used for domination purposes and may create disagreements that are impossible to overcome in our quest for consensus reaching ; two problems that, as I have said, constitute typical concerns of both critical and liberal theorists respectively. Although thin, the literature on this matter makes up for a solid basis upon which it is possible to build an ontological pluralism that fits the three features I have listed above. In doing so, I turn to a scholar that would be classified on the « positive » side of Flikschuh's dichotomy and who is fairly close to the point of view I am defending here, namely Stephen K. White. White's thought on ontology for liberal theory and his theory of « weak ontology » prove very valuable for my defending my argument. I will thus give a description of it, explain on how it can inform the ontological pluralism I argue for, and then try to sketch some enhancements that could be made to his theory so it suits the needs of mine.

Assessing and Enhancing Stephen K. White's « Weak Ontology »

Along with Rawls, although in a very different manner, Stephen K. White is certainly one of the few scholars of political philosophy who have gave a deeper thought about ontological questions within our domain. White started his ontological reflections in 1997 and concretized them in his 2000 book *Sustaining Affirmation*. As this latter work incorporate the former and extends on it, I will only refer to this one when reporting White's ideas.

Despite the fact that he never states it explicitly, White most likely defends a form of ontological pluralism similar to what I argue for here. Let me illustrate this point by his own words in the preface of *Sustaining Affirmation* which I believe are illuminating for both my point and his :

« Imagine yourself standing by a vacant lot watching children play. Debris lies about, for a building once stood here, until its foundation gave way. Chunks of the building remain here and there, as does the gaping hole left from the foundation. As the children clamber over the remains and jump in and out of the hole, you being to think that they are playing a game, but it is one with which you are unfamiliar. In

fact, the rules still seem to be emerging, and the children themselves are sometimes uncertain how to proceed. It would be pretty difficult, accordingly, to give a decent account of this game.

Despite your doubts, you venture a speculation about the rules. But immediately your uncertainty increases again when another adult passes and, with an air of authority, informs you, « That's not really a game. Not enough coherence. » A second passerby curtly announces that the children ought not, in any case, to be playing in such a dangerous lot. A third passerby eyes you with impatience before offering the rebuke, « Must one always try to foist some underlying structure onto what should be simply free play ? » (White, 2000)

The clever reader will realize that what White highlights in these short paragraphs sums up what I have tried to say in the last dozens of pages. Ontological investigation is both epistemologically thin and dangerous. In this mess, White suggests that we turn away from these irresolvable problems and embrace our ontological disputes, endorsing a positive defense of metaphysics as stated by Flikschuh. However, what he suggests is not mere « free play » unlike what could be hinted by the aforementioned paragraph. White makes a distinction between two different kinds of ontological claims, ones that belong to what he calls *strong* ontology and ones that belong to *weak* ontology (*ibid*). He is well aware of the problems caused by metaphysical claims in political theory, and considers that these problems only arise when theorists make strong ontological claims, that is claims that attempt to tell us how the world is on a metaphysical scale from which we can directly derive political and moral guidance; moral principles may simply be derived from this universal-reaching and immovable ground (*ibid*). According to White, this kind of claims is problematic and dives head first in the issues that are typical of metaphysics. Although he does not mention it, such claims are also fairly dubious on a moral standpoint, as we have seen with Haslanger : « strong » ontological claims typically seem to be the most essentializing ones and make the best tools for domination purposes. Against that, White recommends the use of « weak » ontology, that is ontological claims that remain contestable, are ever-changing and leave a greater spot for the « *stickier subject* », a subject bound by history and context (*ibid*). But what exactly does that mean? According to White, it means two things. First, that weak ontological account are contextual and refuse the notion of a « *disengaged self* » as Taylor would put it, White is in fact a great admirer of Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, which is as he puts it a great illustration of weak ontology (*ibid*). Second, it seeks to leave a greater space for existential accounts of ontology. Here we go back to the very beginning of my thesis where I

spoke of Heidegger and continental philosophy: White tries to bring those considerations in the analytical account of ontology. White argues that in order to defend himself against strong ontology, he needs to set up some rules regarding what weak ontology is and what it is not. He proceeds to work out four « existential realities » that apply to all human beings, and which must be taken into account in any given ontological account.

- 1) Human beings are creatures entangled with language.
- 2) Human beings are creatures with a consciousness that they will die.
- 3) Human beings are creatures that, despite their entanglement and limitedness, have the capacity for radical novelty.
- 4) Human beings are creatures that give a definition of themselves against some ultimate background.

These four realities illustrate White's « *stickier subject* » (*ibid*), and he believes gives us enough securities to avoid cornering ourselves with metaphysically-heavy ontological accounts of the self which are impossible to overcome. Ontology must remain essentially contestable, and the use of weak ontology is the best way to ensure that. And by remaining essentially contestable, they lose their potential for domination along the way. A similar point has recently been made by Irina Rosenthal who argued for a politicization of ontology from an agonistic point of view in order to overcome power relations (Rosenthal, 2016 ; 2018).

While I agree with White on his concept of strong ontology, I disagree with the endpoint he wishes to reach and the means he uses to get there, that is to say weak ontology. Both White and Rosenthal seem to be wishing to avoid essentialization at all costs, as it is perhaps the greatest danger that arose from ontology. While they are right concerning the danger, it does not follow that the solution is to go all the way against any form of essentialism. This anti-essentialism paradigm is not new, as even thinkers of the Enlightenment saw it as a danger and tried to act accordingly against it (Groff, 2013). White himself acknowledges that metaphysics are unavoidable in political philosophy, and with this unavoidability comes a certain dose of essentialization. It could be argued that, albeit thin, White's weak ontology possesses quite a share of essentialization in its core as well. This is however not the point I want to stress. What I wish to point out as problematic with White's theory is its obvious lack of neutrality. Now do not misunderstand me, for I have explicitly said that because of the definitional argument, total neutrality is unattainable in these matters. What I say must be understood as White's theory belonging to an explicit *particularistic* doctrine, which is caused by his Heidegger-influenced

views. I agree with White on three key points : fixed ontological accounts are dangerous and unfit for public and theoretical debate, there must be space for discussion about ontology, and said-ontologies must rest on a common basis that must be accepted to all, however thin it may be. It is with this latter point that I get in conflict with weak ontology, for there is no reason to think that White's four existential realities would be accepted by all in any situation. His account most definitely works on an euro-centric point of view where the definition of death fits his theory, but one could reasonably imagine wide cultural differences that would cause the people belonging to said-culture to envision death in a very different manner than Heidegger. The issue with such existentialist terms is the same one that had been brought up by Carnap against Heidegger almost a century ago : they have no clear definitions. One may counter-argue that I am taking a stretch here, for « death » seems to be a pretty straightforward term, and that following my argument, pretty much all language is uncertain, philosophy is thus just a linguistic confusion and we can leave it at that. That is of course not what I mean. The issue here is that « death » does not carry with it the strictly empirical meaning that could be considered straightforward, namely the cessation of life, it carries with it a much deeper and heavier take on human nature and its relation to death. Otherwise, why would White be able to say that an existential reality of human beings is our consciousness of our impending death and not, for example, instead that an existential reality of human beings is our inevitable need to eat food ? The reason why is precisely what I said just earlier, White's account of weak ontology rests on existentialist premises inspired by Heidegger and thus incarnate a very particularistic vision of human nature and the world (or a very particularistic metaphysics). I therefore believe his account to ultimately fail at his job of being thin enough to encompass a wide range of ontological beliefs within itself, at least from a liberal perspective.

THE COMMON BASIS AND THE MODEL-BASED APPROACH

So what we need is a common basis upon which we can start discussion, and some moral constraints to control those discussions. Regarding the constraints, one can safely turn to White and his account of strong ontology: ontological debates should not allow ontological systems that claim to be truthful and absolute, or in other words, that claim to carry too much of an epistemic weight. Regarding the basis, I believe that the job can be done by narrowing White's key points to only two : (1) human beings have the power to be creators of causes in the world and (2) that the phenomenon of the human self exists, or at least the illusion of it is good enough to believe that it does.

Let me elaborate here. One may believe at first sight that these two assumptions are arbitrary and thus fall prey to the same critique I have just addressed to White, but this is not the case : both of these points are *necessary*, in its metaphysical sense, if one accepts my argument so far. For instance, take a look at (1), the fact that human beings are capable of doing things in the world and have the power to create causes¹⁷. If that were not the case, if we were actually not capable of taking actions and making our choices in the world (as a Humean determinist or a hardcore post-structuralist would say), then one must accept to give up all ideas of normativity and morality entirely, and I insist, entirely. There would be no point, and indeed no way, of talking of how the world should be and how people should act if we did not have causal powers in the world. This is not to say that this is an ultimate truth about the fundamental structure of the world, but it is a necessity created by our system of inquiry, as political philosophers, and a necessity that we must take into account if we are to continue issuing normative guidances. This first presupposition actually encompasses fairly well the worries that White raised with his talks of strong ontology. Recall that one of White's main worry with strong ontology and fixed accounts of the self is the fact that we can derive political and moral principles directly from such an account, as if there was some sort of natural law that was bound with strong ontologies. Asserting that human beings are capable of causal powers just happens to shift the focus away from such « natural order » concerns (concerns which are shared by Haslanger as we have seen). Indeed, my account of ontological pluralism suggests that talks of morality may only be based in our capacity for moral reasoning and not on some out-of-this-world fixed morality that we ought to follow.

At the time of the writing of this thesis, I was faced with an objection that claimed my ontological pluralism amounted to moral pluralism¹⁸. As I have said in the very preceding lines, this is not the case, for my ontological pluralism explicitly forbids moral claims that are based in metaphysical accounts of the person. Moral inquiry remains a separate inquiry, one that must not entangle with ontology, for it would run the risk of transforming morality into a tool of domination just as Haslanger and others were worried about. That is to say, admitting the form of ontological pluralism I recommend does not amount to admitting moral pluralism, nor

¹⁷ I owe much of this Aristotelian view to Ruth Groff and her 2013 *Ontology Revisited*, where she thoroughly argues for powers in political and social theory. This first point is largely inspired by her work.

¹⁸ My thanks to Victor Sanchez-Mazas for raising this issue.

relativism¹⁹. Speaking of relativism, the fact that I use the word ontological *pluralism* and not ontological *relativism* is not random: a relativist account would be hopeless in trying to ground debates in a common base acceptable to all, and would not allow for the claim I make with assertion (2).

Now regarding (2) the situation is slightly different, although similar, and may also come as a surprise to the reader²⁰. The reason for it is actually fairly simple, and it has to do with how the pluralism I defend unfolds in reality. As I have said, a viable kind of pluralism must get rid of truth-claims coming from agents who partake in the debate, and it must also be free of an insidious meta-language that betrays a superficial neutrality. In such a pluralism, ontological systems must be understood as *models*, or *models of the self*. Think of the way economists pursue their inquiries: they build models of reality and test them against it in order to assess the models' validity and soundness. But at no point the economist will say that his model is *true* in its absolute sense, it remains a model, more or less trustworthy according to empirical facts and statistical analysis (Morgan, 1999). We can draw inspiration from this approach in our ontological disputes. By using a model-based approach, we finally give up on the truth-values of our ontological systems and can link them to the empirical findings of political scientists, sociologists and whatnot, while discussing our models with other fellow theorists, enhance them and correct them. This, I believe, provides the correct framework for an ontological pluralism in political philosophy to take off the ground.

But back to my (2) assertion, what makes me say that those models necessary imply the existence, or a good enough illusion, of the phenomenon of the self? That is because a model-based approach, in order to avoid falling in the trap of epistemological anarchism I have stated above, must admit a form of *realism* (Giere, 2012). That is, for a model-based approach to be viable at all, it needs to be able to be the model of *something that actually exists*. If there was no self, there would be no possibility to even build a model of it. What I wish to say by the use of the word « illusion » is that, as some scholars in the philosophy of mind such as Daniel Dennett have pointed out, the self perhaps is just a « narrative illusion », a useful fiction we tell ourselves

¹⁹ In fact, I would argue that the moral premises upon which my argument rests are *ad hoc* to the discussion held here. A moral realist would certainly agree with my definition of metaphysics, but it does not follow that my definition is entangled with moral realism. Unfortunately, arguing for the disconnection between my vision of metaphysics and the moral premises upon which it is built is way beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁰ Although less salient, this point about the self has also been made by Groff (2013) on her chapter regarding political liberalism and the capabilities approach. Here again I am grateful to her work for the inspiration.

to get on with our daily lives and create meaning out of the world²¹, something that Buddhists would most likely agree with. Therefore, I do not intend to suppose the existence of the self *per se*, but rather the existence of an object that either is or acts like the self, as both would suit a model-based approach of ontology²².

Why Models?

I have so far tried to show what a model-based approach implies for ontological pluralism, but I have not yet said a word about *why* we should adopt such an approach, and if this approach actually fits within the rest of argument. Let me address this latter issue first.

It is helpful to take a step back and look at my overall argument to assess this question. What I have said so far is that we should adopt a form of ontological pluralism that does not fall prey to criticism regarding its meta-language and that is self-aware of its danger morality-wise. What was lacking so far, was the very pragmatic question of *how*, in our theorizing, should this pluralism be endorsed. This is where I recommend a model-based approach: we can construct different models of the human self, according to the minimal basis, and use them in our arguments and theories. Before addressing the question of why we should favour this approach instead of another, let me make one clarification first. One could argue that there is a tension between admitting ontological pluralism (or admitting that ontological monism does not work or isn't fit for political theorizing) and claiming that we can, and should, build models of the human self instead. As I have said, part of the minimal basis is constituted by a commitment in the existence of the phenomenon of the human self, doesn't this phenomenon resembles the ontological monism I have criticized throughout this paper? The answer is fairly straightforward: it does not. There is indeed *a* phenomenon, but this does not imply that this phenomenon can be explained by a *single* model. This phenomenon of the self is actually nothing more than the ontological commitment we saw with Quine at the very beginning of this thesis, we must admit that it exists, but we do not make a claim about the *way* it exists. In this sense, the commitment remains coherent with the pluralism described by Turner that we saw earlier.

²¹ For an account of Dennett's view, see Dennett, D. (2014). « The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity », in *Self and Consciousness : Multiple Perspectives* (ed. Kessel, F., Cole, P., Johnson, D.). Psychology Press : New York.

²² I need to be clear here. While remaining agnostic regarding the existence of the self as a sort of absolute metaphysical object and instead focusing on the phenomenon of the thing, I cannot honestly say that I have freed myself entirely from truth-value. My argument indeed adopts a certain empiricist point of view, hence the importance of a phenomenon that we *experience*. I however do not believe such a view to be a point of controversy, given the light degree to which it is used in the approach I sketch.

Now on to the most important question, why models ? Ideally, the answer would start by a proper definition of what a model is. Unfortunately, the literature remains divided on this matter and there is no common agreement regarding what a model actually is (Leatherdale, 1975). Yet, this is not such a problematic issue in the present case, it will suffice to give a description of what models should accomplish to serve our purposes. There are three main points to consider here. First, models are always representations, in the sense that they stand for something else (Barberousse & Ludwig, 2009). Second, they all possess intentional content (*ibid*). Third, they are all experiment-driven, in the sense that they have implications, empirical or theoretical, that we can verify or experiment with, and those experiments will in turn inform us on how we should adapt our models (Peschard, 2012). Note that there is no mention here of the predictive goal of models. This view is indeed very popular, perhaps the most popular, as it was put forward by famous economist Milton Friedman back in 1953. There is however much more to models than this, and the predictive view seems to be strictly restricted to empirical investigations. Our models do not aim at predict behaviour, they aim at being useful representations that we can use in our theories, which is a fundamental difference. Now that this is clarified, let us explore these three dimensions and show why they make the model-based approach useful for theorists.

The Representational Nature of Models, Intentional Content and Experimentation

Through Barberousse & Ludwig we learn that models are always representations insofar as they always stand for something else. This something else, as I have said, is in our case the phenomenon of the human self. How is this representational nature good or useful for political theorists ? Recall that one of the main problems I identified both with Rawls and with scholars who hold particularistic metaphysical views is the epistemic weight of their assumptions, it seems like the weight of truth is inescapable in their arguments. Models manage to escape from this problem just fine, for the only truth-bearing assertion they need in order to take off the ground is the claim that the phenomenon exists, and that is it. The representational nature of models is forcing us to admit a certain epistemological humility, indeed as it has been said, all models are « wrong » by definition (Mäki, 2012). That is not to say that they are mistaken, but rather that they do not bear any truth-value in themselves. This is exactly what is needed for ontological disputes and the use of ontological arguments in political theory: by admitting that our ontologies are mere models, we strip them from their epistemic values and thus avoid the trap of making « true » metaphysical assertions even we did not want them in the first place.

I have also talked about the intentional content of models. What is meant by that is that models are always built according to how the theorist builds them. As trivial as it sounds, this not a point to consider lightly. Acknowledging that theorists put their intentions in models might sound like a grim fact at first sight: indeed then an ontological system within a given theory will solely be a reflection of the author's own worldviews and we can call it a day. But there is more than that : while this is true, the fact that models do not bear any epistemic weight counters this risk of subjectivity ; the author will not be able to hide his own views behind the so-called truthfulness of his assertions. What must be considered with this feature of intentional content is that this intentionality actually leaves some leeway for theorists. We are only bound by the minimal basis but other than that we are free to present any alternative models of the self that we'd like. This ensures that everyone gets to speak when sitting at the ontology table. Intentionality leaves language open for alternative and under-represented ontological systems.

Lastly, there is the experimental feature of models. As I have said, we build models which we incorporate in our theories and test against the real world. But the real world also informs and influences our model-building. Acknowledging the experimental nature of models forces us to be intellectually honest and responsible of what we build. Perhaps our model does not work too good with the empirical situation in x or y situation, and thus we can adjust it to be more coherent alongside reality. Experimentation allows us to correct our models and therefore develop theories with better assumptions; it is the self-correcting aspect of the model-based approach²³.

Political Theory, Carnap and the External Criterion Problem

Recall that we have seen how Carnap said we should be going after our questions regarding pluralism, we identified three different analytical categories: internal, pragmatic-external and factual-external. This classification fits our model-based approach perfectly. We are free to interrogate our models regarding their content and their inner coherence, as we are free to ask whether we should use this or that model in x or y situation. But we are not permitted to take a further back stance and question whether a model is true or not outside of its framework. This has been illustrated by expressing the different features of models in the very preceding paragraphs. We are however left with a problem I unfortunately do not have the time nor space

²³ The last paragraphs have certainly betrayed my fairly Rawlsian point of view on the matter : what I am searching for is indeed a form of consensus, as thin as it gets but thick enough to carry the logical device I seek to develop. My argument is thus not Rawlsian *per se*, but indeed draws inspiration from a certain Rawlsian ideal.

to address here but which is in my opinion crucial to the model-based approach of ontological pluralism as based on Carnap's pluralism, and that is a problem regarding pragmatic-external questions. Let me elaborate.

The model-based approach forces us to take a more pragmatic stance towards our philosophical problems as political theorists. This pragmatism is good for numerous reasons. It allows for a fair share of different views in theoretical debates, and it forces us to take a more empirically-driven approach to philosophical investigations regarding the political and social domain. Pluralism allows us two main things: (1) To render obvious problems that we would not be able to see with a single and « true » view of ontology. Pluralism gives minorities and under-represented groups the possibility and space to add their point of view, which might give us a fuller understanding of the complex social reality that we are faced with everyday. In a way, this falls back on the classical debate between liberal and critical theories: while liberal theories possess a strong theoretical grounding, it lacks the subtlety of critical approaches regarding the inner workings of the social and political world. Pluralism allows for such subtlety to be incorporated in the debate while retaining the strong theoretical basis of more « traditional » approaches²⁴. (2) To give us a more accurate look at the social world for we have forced to take into account its richness in building our models through its influence. Refining our models forces us to see what works in the real world, what is illuminating or useful and what is not. It makes theorists engage more seriously with social scientists in model-building. This helps to create better theories which can be better incorporated as public policies for instance. And this is exactly what Rawls put forward in his restatement of Justice as Fairness regarding the public role of political philosophy (Rawls, 2001). All of this while avoiding the risks and dangers of using metaphysics and ontology while engaging with normative political inquiry.

There is however one problem as I have said, or rather missing point, in my analysis. Models encourage us to discuss situations from a variety of point of views, and this discussion should ultimately lead to normative recommendations. How should we go on about this when faced with multiple models making interpretations of the same situation? This typically belongs to the pragmatic-external questions that Carnap identified. Ultimately, we require a criterion to help us decide which model is better suited for a given situation than another one. Perhaps the decision process does not need to be so exclusive, some have for instance pointed out that in economic theories we may sometimes combine two models which might seem incompatible to give us an

²⁴ Note that this point has been very similarly made by Rosenthal (2016 ; 2018). I however disagree with her recommendation of politicizing ontology which is too close to critical theory in my understanding. Pluralism does not equal a politicization of ontology, it rather aims at giving us a clearer and more « detached » view of the problem.

optimal understanding of a phenomenon (Morgan, 1999). But still, if we follow Carnap, we are going to require an external criterion to help us pick between various competing models in order to give the best normative guidance we can. All I can do in the scope of this thesis is to render this problem explicit and leave it up for further research. The criterion will have to meet all the constraints I have identified here, be them moral or epistemological, in order to be coherent with the aims and goals of model-based ontological pluralism. Carnap was silent on this question, perhaps for a good reason. At the present moment, all I can hope for is that there is a way to establish such a criterion in a way that does not contradict the various points I have made here.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to argue for many, seemingly disconnected elements and tried to tie them up together through the lens of ontological pluralism. I have first identified how and why metaphysical and ontological assumptions challenge our practice of political philosophy. I have then shown that Rawls, who tried to face the problem directly, ultimately fails at his goal of doing political philosophy without metaphysics. I have then proposed an alternative, based on insights from Rudolf Carnap, that admits its metaphysical grounding but allows for a plurality of views while being epistemologically sound and morally self-aware of its dangers. I have then argued that this is best obtained through a model-based approach of ontology, using insights from works in the philosophy of science. One may object that I have an hidden agenda of naturalizing political philosophy, *à la* Quine. If by that one means to draw inspiration from scientific methods in order to produce better theory, then I am guilty on all counts.

All of these steps have hopefully managed to give my research question, namely how should we go about ontological claims in normative political theory, an answer or at least the outline of one. The core of this thesis being ultimately methodological, my argument has deep implications about how normative political theory should be conducted and what its objectives should be. The political philosophy I present here is one concerns with reality and its practical use, while acknowledging that it needs to look at its metaphysical foundations right in the eyes and take them seriously. This is crucial in being able to give clear and coherent guidelines about how the political world should be shaped. Ironically, it is through this very abstract and seemingly pointless reasoning that we can show how political philosophy ought to be closer to reality, and more concerned with its issues. A role that some political philosophers sometimes seem to have

forgotten and which we can only hope to make a much needed come back in our troubled contemporary political world. Some may be skeptic regarding the usefulness of tackling such an abstract and foundational issue as I have attempted to do here. As an answer, I can only stress the importance of Ruth Groff's words again, which were also concerned with metaphysics in political philosophy: « *Lack of clarity about underlying philosophical commitments leads to lack of clarity at other levels of analysis.* » (Groff, 2017). It is on these other levels of analysis that we often encounter feuds between the various paradigms of political theory, feuds that include the classic liberal vs communitarian debate, but also more recently the clash between critical theories and liberalism. Through a deep analysis of those underlying philosophical commitments, and a method fit to tackle such abstract ideas, perhaps we will be able to come to the conclusion that some conflicts between the different schools of thought may be misguided, and that those conflicts may hinder us from making use of our political theories in the real world. There is certainly much to gain for everyone in attempting to build bridge between conflicting ideas rather than arguing over which one is best for the political world, especially if quandaries are resting over metaphysical issues over which we may never find agreement. This is what I have attempted to do here.

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