CONCLUDING SUMMARY

This dissertation challenged the political liberalist strategy to dispel ontology from democratic theory and practice through an agonic encounter between political liberalism, Foucault, and psychoanalysis. The aim of this undertaking was to highlight the impact of controversial ontological pre-understandings on normative and social reflections about democratic politics, to present an alternative ontology of democracy to the political liberalist ontology, and to show that the democratic politicization of ontological claims has more critical and orienting potential than the political liberalist strategy of avoidance. Let me sum up my findings by revisiting the three research questions that I posed in the introduction.

**Politicizing the political liberalist ontology**

One of political liberalism’s most prominent claims is that it is able to present a consensus that is ‘freestanding’ of contentious ontological assumptions: the ontological ideas resident in political liberalism are assumed to be so general that they do not discriminate against ontological traditions nor affect the structure or content of a conception of justice. My first question asked whether this postulate could be maintained: how plausible is the political liberalist attempt to separate contentious ontological claims from an account of democratic politics? We have seen that political liberalism does not succeed in developing an ontologically uncontroversial theory of democratic justice. Not only do political liberals draw upon various contentious ontological claims, these assumptions also have a significant impact upon the way that they orient us in democratic politics.

My engagement with Rawls focused on the ontological partiality of two normative aspirations of political liberalism: political autonomy and a fair distribution of mutual respect (chapter two). I have shown that his account of autonomy departs from a controversial individualist ontology: it conceptualizes moral freedom as a mental capacity rather than as an intersubjective, historical practice. Rawls’ ontology has an important effect on the way that political liberalism construes justice: the basic outlines of Rawls’ normative scheme give much more priority to individual rights than
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collective goals such as the realization of contentious cultural ways of life. Rawls’ principle of mutual respect is also ontologically partial. While it is less individualist than his defense of freedom, its lack of attention to the role of the body in realizing practices of mutual respect renders it ontologically contentious. Rawls’ normative account about the essential features of a fair distribution of mutual respect mirrors this controversial ontological view: it gives no normative weight to the body.

I approached the ontological problems in the social theory of political liberalism by looking at Tomasi’s political liberalist account of a just democratic regime (chapter four). Tomasi claims that he can analyze the social implications of rights without taking part in ontological disputes. I have shown that this claim cannot be maintained because Tomasi’s social theory is permeated with two ontological controversies. Firstly, Tomasi’s theory of tradition neglects the presence of power and conflict in traditional practices. The disorienting consequence of this exclusionary effect is that Tomasi’s ontology blinds us to the struggles of citizens who challenge hegemonic traditional narratives. Secondly, I showed that Tomasi’s voluntarist ontology of political liberalist public culture neglects the impact of hegemonic traditions upon the interpretation of rights, and is thereby orienting us away from the problems that citizens who struggle with powerful traditions encounter when they try to make use of individual rights.

From the Foucaultian perspective that I reconstructed in chapters three and four, it comes as little surprise that the political liberalist ontologies were not able to secure a ‘freestanding’ consensus. Since ontologies are a product of social-historical power struggles, they usher in exclusionary effects. That is to say, they orient us in some normative aspirations and social consequences of democratic politics, but also draw our attention away from other possibilities and dimensions of democratic life. Ontologies cannot transcend this predicament: pace political liberalism, they are never so general that they can rise above political disputes, but remain an essential feature of political conflicts.

In light of their exclusionary effects, ontological assumptions merit the critical attention of the democratic public. I suggested that political philosophers can contribute to the democratic politicization of ontology by bringing into view the contestability and disorienting effects of ontological assumptions, and by laying out rules of discussion for democratic debate that might stimulate the democratic contestation of ontology. Such a critical
posture vis-à-vis ontology does not imply, however, that political philosophers should refrain from developing their own ontology. I wagered that ontological theory can also contribute to democracy by helping us to see new possibilities for democratic politics that remain invisible in hegemonic ontologies such as political liberalism. Put differently, I treated both the development as well as the critique of ontological assumptions as important tasks for political philosophers.

An alternative ontology of democratic politics

Which ontological conditions should we take into account when we seek to nourish democratic politics? Such was my second research question. I critically fleshed out Foucault’s contentious ontological regime and combined his insights with Winnicott’s contestable psychoanalytic ontology in order to arrive at an ontology of agonic democratic politics. I showed that this ontology brought into view social consequences and normative possibilities of democratic politics that remain invisible within political liberalism.

My reading of Foucault in chapter three provided the first step in developing an ontology of democratic politics. I explained that the individual subject is ontologically constituted by bodily forces and power relations. Subjectivity becomes possible in virtue of submission, that is, the capacities of human beings for consciousness and action are fundamentally dependent upon incessant attempts of social-historical power relations to subjugate the body by means of exclusionary, hierarchical norms and disciplinary techniques. This ontology does not preclude the possibility of individual freedom. We have seen that human beings are capable of contesting, resisting, and creatively reshaping the power relations that try to domesticate the body. This idea of agonic freedom understands autonomy as an inherently heteronomous struggle rather than the exercise of a mental capacity: critical thinking, resisting or experimenting with power remains situated in power-laden ethical practices that discipline individuals by means of ideals, techniques, and critical analyses of power.

While the exercise of agonic freedom is a possibility of social relations, agonism should not be mistaken for the teleological outcome of human interaction: agonic freedom can be undermined by the complete consolidation of power (domination) as well as the violent paralysis of social
interaction (antagonism). To sustain the possibility of agonic freedom individuals need to submit themselves to social forms that encourage agonic struggles, and exercise their possibility for contestation on a regular basis. An agonic democratic politics aspires to the enactment of practices that encourage and give form to the ontological possibilities for agonic freedom, while intending the weakening of opportunities for domination and antagonism.

I stressed that the ontology of agonic freedom makes visible a normative possibility for democracy that was entirely missing in political liberalism. In opposition to the political liberalist ontology, the ontology of agonic freedom shows that democratic regimes are in need of citizens who regularly expose themselves to social conflicts in order to train their capacity for contest and experiment. For instance, when schools are confronted with conflicts about bodily rituals, such as the handshake, an agonic ontology suggests that such a dispute could provide the participants with a promising opportunity to get acquainted with the contestation of, and experimentation with, power relations. Political liberalism, in contrast, does not account for the cultivation of contestatory skills and only identifies the cultivation of virtues that secure our allegiance to conceptions of justice as a normative aim of democracy and education. In this way, I argued, political liberalism belies its commitment to a vibrant contest over the ruling conceptions of justice within a society. A democratic politics that aims for such critical practices is dependent upon a citizenry that has become habituated to contestation.

We have also seen that Foucault’s ontology of power helps us to get a better understanding of the social consequences of individual rights than political liberalism. Foucault’s writings on governmentality make the ontology of power productive for the analysis of liberal statehood, suggesting that liberal states discipline the population by submitting citizens to various controversial exclusionary knowledge regimes. I have shown that this focus on the entanglement between liberal state power and knowledge production offers a fruitful starting-point for investigating the social effects of individual rights. It helps us see that liberal legal cultures, including political liberalism, contain a structural bias against citizens who challenge established knowledge regimes – an exclusionary effect that Tomasi fails to see.

I have also shown that Foucault’s ontology of agonic freedom opens up an alternative to the political liberalist ideal of democratic debate. The
ubiquity of power suggests that Rawls’ criterion of reciprocity for public reason is impossible: democratic debates cannot abolish the influence of power relations upon the exchange of arguments, but remain conditioned by disciplinary inequalities. In contrast to the political liberalist aim to extinguish power, Foucault’s ontology shows that democratic debates could make productive use of disciplinary power by submitting the participants in democratic debates to power-laden ethical techniques that stimulate agonic experiments with power – the so-called ‘game of reciprocal elucidation’. This game specifies several discussion rules that might support the enactment of agonic freedom, such as, among others, a duty to listen and to elucidate one’s discourse when introducing a proposal or critique in democratic debate. Unlike political liberalist public reason, this game includes a critical, experimental exploration of ‘settled’ convictions within public culture, including ontological regimes. Such a critical learning-process cannot yield a stable consensus but could pave the way for unstable, temporary coalitions that might initiate concerted actions.

While Foucault’s ontology offers promising insights about democratic politics, it obviously cannot escape its own predicament of issuing exclusionary effects. We have seen that one problematic limitation of Foucault’s ontology is that it says nothing about the affective challenges of participating in agonic contests. That is to say, it orients us in the indispensability of agonic struggles for democratic politics, but remains silent about the emotional effects of losing an agonic contest, such as a sense of failure or feelings of resentment that a democratic defeat might induce. This blind spot confronted my Foucaultian perspective of agonic democracy with a motivational deficit: a democratic regime can only remain vibrant if citizens are emotionally empowered enough to struggle for dissenting views or practices. Political liberalism, for that matter, is also vulnerable to this charge: although Rawls does not aim for as many democratic conflicts as Foucault does, he is committed to a lively democratic debate that makes some room for marginalized outlooks. Yet, like Foucault, Rawls does not explain how marginalized citizens might cope with losing a democratic dispute on an emotional level.

The explication of an ontology of the emotional challenges of democratic contest provided the second and final step in developing my ontology of democratic politics. In chapter five, I have shown that Winnicott’s psychoanalytic ontology of mourning offers crucial insights into
the emotional conditions of democratic resilience, and helped me identify a new normative aspiration for democratic regimes, the enactment of so-called ‘transitional networks’.

We have seen that Winnicott’s understanding of subjectivity bears crucial resemblances to Foucault’s ontology of agonic freedom. Like Foucault, Winnicott sees the subject as a heteronomous achievement which is constituted by expanding bodily forces as well as social-historical practices, and is capable of creatively transforming itself and the world. However, in opposition to Foucault, Winnicott’s ontology accounts for the affective dynamics of mourning and explains how social forms might cultivate an agonic response to loss. When facing a loss, such as a democratic defeat, human beings are confronted with the painful challenge of coping with narcissist injury: the awareness that the norms, demands, or possibilities in the external world are not identical to one’s wishes. I have shown that this painful experience opens up possibilities of realigning oneself to the world in an agonic manner, that is, by resisting, creatively transforming, and experimenting with the social conditions that shape the self. Such a playful attitude is crucially dependent, however, upon the availability of social forms that provide the mourner with a sense of comfort, and that teaches him how to make productive use of his aggressive impulses against social authority.

The ontological amendment offered by psychoanalysis has had significant consequences for the normative features of my understanding of agonic democracy. I argued that democratic politics is in need of a plurality of ‘transitional networks’: disciplinary, intersubjective emotional regimes that encourage the democratic resilience of marginalized citizens by offering a relatively safe haven to recover from democratic defeat, and by transmitting norms and techniques which help to face the challenges of democratic politics. Whereas the intimacy and comfort of such intersubjective forms assuages the painful feelings of isolation that often follow after a democratic defeat, numerous strategies, such as story-telling or skills that cultivate aggression, encourages the participants to persist in the enactment of dissenting ideals and practices.

At the same time, we have seen that my ontological thesis about the exclusionary effects of power-laden social forms also applies to transitional networks. That is to say, by producing important possibilities for democratic resilience, transitional networks are simultaneously undermining other crucial opportunities for democratic persistence. For instance, when a group
encourages the members to focus all their rage on the outside world, it could discourage the participants to politicize exclusions within the group. Such exclusionary effects of transitional networks, I argued, cannot be displaced entirely but can be fruitfully confronted by practices of ‘emotional boundary marking’: agonic provocations that experiment with the group’s emotional regime.

The democratic politicization of ontology

Both my endeavors to politicize political liberalism and to develop another, more orienting, alternative ontology of democratic politics were crucially dependent upon an ongoing critique of ontology. Throughout this dissertation, I critically confronted ontological assumptions with actual struggles taken from democratic politics, normative ideals, and competing ontological traditions, and I also took my cue from Foucault’s critique that traces ontology back to its contingent, exclusionary social-historical roots.

My attempt to explicate ontology as a site for democratic politicization is deeply at odds with political liberalist practices of critique. We have seen that political liberalism structurally excludes ontological premises from critical scrutiny: neither Rawls nor Tomasi treats ontology as a site of democratic contest in their attempts to arrive at a reflective equilibrium about democratic politics. By exploring the possibilities of a democratic politicization of ontology, I was able to address my final question: which practice of critique – the democratic politicization of ontology or the political liberalist strategy of avoidance – is more plausible, in light of the aim to stimulate the politicization of political philosophy, as well as of the goal to provide orientation on democratic politics?

I argued that the political liberalist strategy to exclude ontology from critical scrutiny hampers a much needed democratic politicization of political liberalism. Since political liberalism has no critical tools with which to render available its ontological commitments for democratic contestation, it leaves the exclusionary, disorienting consequences of its ontology intact. In this way, political liberalism works against its commitment to a democratic politicization of political philosophy and constrains its own potential for providing more orientation in democratic politics.

I have shown that the democratic politicization of ontology provides a better impetus to the democratic politicization of political philosophy and
the need for orientation than the political liberalist practice of critique. For instance, in chapter two, I politicized the political liberalist ontology with the assistance of a communitarian ontology of self and the example of the Dutch handshake dispute. These confrontations helped us see the lack of attention for, respectively, culture and the body in the political liberalist ontology. Foucault’s historicization of the ontological underpinnings of the social contract tradition (chapter three) offered another significant contribution to this politicization of political liberalism. It showed that the mentalist-individualist conception of self in social contract theory structurally orients us away from the influence of bodily discipline upon liberal democracies, signalling the need for an ontology that offers more orientation in the relation between culture, bodily discipline, and democratic politics. My critique of Tomasi’s political liberalist ontology of rights also employed critical strategies central to the democratic politicization of ontology. The mobilization of Foucault’s ontology and the dispute about religious freedom in the United States were important steps for bringing into view the disorienting effects of Tomasi’s voluntarist depiction of political liberalist legalism.

Importantly, my development of Foucault’s ontology also benefited from the democratic politicization of ontology. In chapter three, I read Foucault’s initial account of an ontology of power and body through the lens of his implicit normative commitment to democracy. This confrontation between ontological and normative assumptions highlighted the fact that Foucault originally underestimated the need for an ontology of critical agency and positive effects of self-discipline, and revealed the need to turn to his later writings on agonic freedom.

My mobilization of psychoanalysis for an ontology of democratic resilience also drew critical support from the democratic politicization of ontology. Both the normative aspiration for agonic freedom and Foucault’s historicization of Freud’s ontology of mourning helped to challenge Freud’s influential, but anti-agonic, account and paved the way for Winnicott’s more agonic alternative. And further, the critical confrontation between Winnicott’s ontology and Foucault’s ontological thesis about the ubiquity of power opened up space to conceive of transitional networks as potential sites of democratic resilience rather than, as Winnicott did, to reduce the formation of democratic resilience to the nuclear family.
The democratic politicization of ontology does not only seek to encourage a critical engagement with ontology among political philosophers, but also aims for the critical contestation of ontology in democratic practice. Unlike Rawls’ ideal of public reason, my agonic ethics of reciprocal elucidation opens up space for citizens to criticize ontological regimes and to introduce controversial ontological arguments. I argued that this conception of democratic debate is more conducive to the democratic politicization of political philosophy than political liberalist public reason. Provided that participants accept critique of their own ontological postulates, they can introduce their ontology to criticize hegemonic democratic ideals such as political liberalism, including its ontological commitments.

In short, I have shown that a critical engagement with ontology provides an impetus to our understanding of democratic politics and stimulates the ongoing critique of democratic theory. Instead of seeking to dispel controversial ontological claims from democratic thought and fundamental democratic debates, as political liberalism urges us to do, I argue that ontological investigations open up agonic possibilities for democratic life. Much more, of course, could and needs to be investigated in order to further evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my perspective. For instance, the critical comparison between political liberalist public reason and my proposal for reciprocal elucidation of ontology could benefit from empirical research into the functioning of dissenting ontological arguments in historical or contemporary democratic struggles, such as those carried out by feminist or ecological movements or by groups that challenge neo-liberalism. Such studies might also look at the emotional dynamics within such groups, in order to critically investigate to a greater degree my ontological thesis about the dependence of democratic resilience upon emotional techniques. I hope that this dissertation encourages such future research and opens up the possibility of new provocations to political liberalism as well as to the agonic perspective that I have presented in this book.