

Metaphysics and Postmetaphysics

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Political scientists often study things that can be examined, measured, and compared, such as human beings, political regimes, or international organizations. Political philosophers often think about things that cannot, as such, be empirically observed, such as human nature, moral codes, and theories of justice. The most profound activity of philosophy is metaphysics. Metaphysics, according to Aristotle, is first philosophy, the study of being *qua* being. In general, a metaphysics grounds and delimits what a philosopher thinks that political affairs are and can be. In other words, a metaphysics helps a philosopher explain actual political affairs and envision new political possibilities. This entry considers how several of the most important figures in the history of Euro-American political theory conceptualize being, the privileged interpreters of being, and the political principles that accord with being.

Here are definitions of a few key terms in this entry. Physics describes the study of things that move and change (in Greek, *ta physika*). Metaphysics, or ontology, describes the science of that which lies beyond physical things (*meta ta physika*; in Latin, *ontologia*). A transcendent metaphysics holds that the deepest layer of reality resides on a different plane of being than physical things. An immanent metaphysics, by contrast, maintains that there is one plane of being though human perception may not (yet) be able to grasp all of it. Postmetaphysics is the notion that political theory ought to focus on questions of real-world justice instead of debates about whether there is or is not another world. Pluralists argue that all political theories express some conception of metaphysics and the pressing task is to negotiate, not suppress, differences between metaphysical visions.

One may see a trajectory in the history of Euro-American political philosophy regarding the relationship between metaphysics and politics. For the ancients, only a few people are capable of grasping the deepest level of reality and those few are by nature supposed to govern. As a rule, transcendent metaphysics supports an elitist politics. In modernity, philosophers often posit an immanent metaphysics that discredits traditional claims to theoretical wisdom or political superiority. Many Enlightenment philosophers support liberal and democratic claims that individuals and societies should govern themselves. Over time, however, political tensions have festered between metaphysical partisans, most notably between those who view God at the base of reality and those who do not. Postmetaphysicians seek to reduce this tension by arguing that philosophers may ground political theories on shared cultural resources rather than controversial metaphysical doctrines. Pluralists respond that postmetaphysicians underestimate both their own philosophical commitments and the depth of disagreement among global constituencies. For pluralists, the task today is to construct political orders where multiple existential faiths – including ones that originate outside of Europe or North America – may collaborate for common ends.

To best enter contemporary debates about politics and metaphysics, it is necessary to survey their historical backdrop.

Classical Metaphysics

The Euro-American conversation about metaphysics began in the sixth century BCE when Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaximander, and Anaxagoras pondered the mysteries embedded in the word “being” (*ousia*). Unlike Homer, the Presocratic philosophers doubted that deities such as Zeus and Athena directly intervened in human

affairs; at the same time, their work avoids political themes and evinces an oracular, poetic quality that does not express the philosophic aspiration to pursue knowledge using only reason. The first person to bring philosophy from heaven to earth, according to the Roman philosopher Cicero, was Socrates (469–399 BCE). Socrates used to go to a public space (*agora*) and debate with people about the meaning of such words as justice, piety, beauty, science, and the good. He did not want to know whether this or that object is beautiful; he wanted to know what is beauty in itself, a question that compels an investigation beyond appearances. Socrates was condemned for corrupting youth and making new gods and not believing in the old ones. Socrates' legacy is primarily preserved in the dialogues of Plato (429–347 BCE).

One of these dialogues, the *Republic*, is widely considered to be the first book of political philosophy. The *Republic* begins with Socrates asking several men for their definitions of justice and then showing that each definition is flawed. To discover the nature of justice, Socrates proposes to create a city in speech so that he may see on a larger scale what he wishes to know for the single human being. Socrates argues that a just city will have harmony between its philosophical, spirited, and industrious constituencies. Socrates' conversation partners ask what makes philosophers fit to rule. Using perhaps the most famous metaphor in the history of political philosophy, Socrates explains that most people live, as it were, in a cave of ignorance and that only a few are able to reach the sunlight of knowledge. In other words, most people form opinions based on what they sense in the visible realm (*to horaton*) but only the naturally gifted acquire knowledge of the intelligible realm (*to noeton*). Just as navigators take their bearings by the North Star, politicians should steer the ship of state by the Idea of the Good. "Unless the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place ... there is no rest from ills for the cities" (Plato 1991: 153). Plato

posits a two-world metaphysics and a pyramidal political structure whereby philosophers discover the truth, politicians enforce the truth as taught to them by philosophers, and the ignorant masses work and farm.

In *The Politics*, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) criticizes his teacher Plato's political vision for being unrealistic and irresponsible. Plato argues that a just society will possess all things, including children, in common; Aristotle responds that parents will only care for children whom they recognize as their own. Aristotle reverses Plato's method: rather than start with philosophical abstractions that can then be applied to experience, Aristotle collects evidence from Greek constitutions to determine what preserves and destroys states and keeps them well or ill administered. "As in other departments of science, so in politics, the compound should always be resolved into the simple elements or least parts of the whole" (Aristotle 1996: 11). Aristotle argues that human beings naturally progress from being alone, to being married, to having slaves, to inhabiting villages, and then living in a polis. The city has a purpose (*telos*) in the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of human beings. Aristotle does maintain that philosophical contemplation is one of the few things that human beings enjoy for its own sake; and in the work now known to us as *The Metaphysics*, Aristotle commends the study of "being *qua* being," including the Prime Mover that sets matter in motion. Yet Aristotle's political theory does not maintain that metaphysical knowledge grants one a privilege to rule. Kings, aristocrats, and citizens in a *politeia* (mixed regime) govern for the common advantage; tyrants, oligarchs, and democrats rule for their own particular well-being. In the "School of Athens," the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael (1483–1520) depicts Plato and Aristotle at the center of the painting with the former pointing to the heavens and the latter keeping his hand out flat to the earth. This picture conveys the debate that the two philosophers bequeathed posterity regarding the source of normative political judgments.

Medieval Metaphysics

In the history of western political thought, the conversation about the relationship between transcendence and immanence moved from Athens to Jerusalem, so to speak, with the rise of Christianity. Jesus declared that he was the Son of God and preached “you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “you must love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–9). In the secular realm, Jesus counseled his followers to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). The apostle Paul (ca. 5–67 CE) helped transform Jesus’ moral teaching into a political doctrine in his letter to the Christian community in Rome. Paul states “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Romans 8:5–6). Though Paul tells the Romans to become slaves to God, he also counsels them to “let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1). One of the great debates in medieval political thought is how to draw the boundaries between heaven and earth, the realms of God and Caesar.

The North African bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430) made a profound contribution to this debate in *The City of God*. Augustine argues that Plato is the philosopher who came nearest to the truth of the Christian faith in his doctrine that “there is one God, the Author of this universe” who “is our first principle, our light and our good” (Augustine 1998: 326). Rather than distinguish the intelligible and the visible realms, however, Augustine differentiates the city of God and the city of man, both of which are physically intermingled. The heavenly city is composed of people who live by faith and look forward to the blessings of eternal life; the earthly city is made up of people who enjoy the trappings of this world. The inhabitants of the earthly city may establish

civic orders that keep the peace; when that happens, pilgrims of the heavenly city can and should maintain the social order. Still, it is better that the king be a Christian rather than a pagan:

when those who are gifted with true godliness and live good lives also know the art of governing peoples, nothing could be more fortunate for human affairs than that, by the mercy of God, they should also have the power to do so. (Augustine 1998: 225)

Augustine advises a Christian king to rule justly, be humble, love and worship God, be slow to punish and quick to forgive, and use his majesty to “spread His worship to the greatest possible extent” (Augustine 1998: 232). Many medieval political thinkers – including Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) and Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) – would operate within an Augustinian framework in delineating the spheres of the king and the pope, secular and religious authority.

Thomas Aquinas (1225?–74), a Dominican priest teaching at the University of Paris, enacted a shift in medieval political philosophy by integrating Christian theology with Aristotle rather than, as in Augustine’s case, Plato. According to Aquinas, philosophy and theology provide different routes to the same destination: just as Aristotle shows that the Prime Mover is necessary to set matter in motion, divine revelation proves that God created the world. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas differentiates four kinds of law that operate in the universe. Eternal law is God’s plan of governance of the world. God places natural law in human beings that they may discern through their reason. Human beings posit human law to regulate their affairs. And God reveals divine law to supplement natural law and direct human beings in their actions. “Both the spiritual power and the secular power derive from God’s power” – the spiritual power of the church pertains to men’s souls, and the secular power of the king concerns civic welfare. Like Augustine, Aquinas thinks that the “temporal sword should be unsheathed at the church’s bidding” (Aquinas 2002: 196). Unlike Augustine,

however, Aquinas views philosophy as coequal with theology and shares Aristotle's view that a mixed form of government is best. In his qualified respect for philosophical autonomy and popular government, Aquinas helped Europe transition out of what the Italian scholar Petrarch (1330–74) called the Dark Ages (*saeculum obscurum*).

The Realist Critique of Metaphysics

The emergence of cities, capitalism, and technologies such as the compass facilitating long-distance travel contributed to the decline of medieval metaphysics. Yet philosophers shape the mental vessels in which people pour their thoughts, passions, and interests, and no philosopher did more to discredit medieval metaphysics than Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). As a young man, Machiavelli transcribed *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius (ca. 99 BCE–ca. 55 BCE), a Roman poet who extolled the Epicurean doctrine that the universe is composed of swerving atoms in the void and nothing else. Like Lucretius, Machiavelli builds a political theory on an immanent metaphysics or, as he would probably prefer to call it, a physics. *The Prince* is ostensibly a guide for political executives on how to acquire, maintain, and potentially lose a principality. Students know from reading ancient histories and observing current events that human beings desire power, glory, and riches. Rather than imagine principalities based on philosophical and theological conceptions of human nature, political scientists should “go after the effective truth of the things (*la verità effettuale della cosa*)” by studying human behavior (Machiavelli 1997: 57). Machiavelli praises bold, ruthless executives who seize power, including Cesare Borgia, whose cruelty had brought more peace and stability to Romagna than did the merciful behavior of the Florentines. There is no mention of souls or God in *The Prince*. Machiavelli states that fortune constrains human virtue (or power), but fortune is not so much a god as a catch-all term for factors that elude human control. Aristotelian

political science is guided by the idea that one cannot talk or think intelligibly about politics without normative criteria about the purpose (*telos*) of human life. Machiavelli initiates modern political science by focusing on who gets what, when, and how.

The Enlightenment(s)

Many early modern European philosophers shared Machiavelli's critique of classical and medieval metaphysics but disagreed with his thesis that power and cunning decide political questions. The Enlightenment philosophers wrote after the Scientific Revolution and the Thirty Years War (1618–48). In the former, naturalist scientists and philosophers presented a case for a mechanical conception of the universe in which all bodies move according to mathematically determined laws. The scientific method is inductive rather than deductive; focuses on physical causes of things rather than final causes; and eschews analysis of invisible, unmeasurable things such as souls or spirits. In other words, modern science focuses on what can be studied in this world rather than found in the Platonic realm of ideas; looks for real and physical causes of phenomena rather than Aristotelian “specious and shadowy causes,” in the words of the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626); and does not concern itself with theological debates about, for instance, free will. Furthermore, the Thirty Years War, fought largely between Catholics and Protestants, led to the death of approximately one fifth of the population of the Holy Roman Empire. The Enlightenment philosophers sought to justify a moral politics that was both scientifically plausible and bypassed the theological disputes that had contributed to Europe's recent tragedy.

The Scot David Hume (1711–76) and the Prussian Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) were leading figures in, respectively, the sentimentalist and rationalist branches of the Enlightenment. Hume's goal in *A Treatise of Human Nature* is to use the scientific method to study human nature. The only solid foundation we can give to the science of human nature is “experience and

observation,” or more precisely, “careful and exact experiments” on how the mind responds to “different circumstances and situations” (Hume 2000: 5). In the *Treatise*, Hume argues that human beings can follow abstract reasoning about mathematics and can perform experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact, but he denies that human beings can acquire knowledge of metaphysics. In book 3 of the *Treatise*, Hume presents a naturalistic, or immanent, account of the origin of justice. Justice originates as families bond together to reap the benefits of society such as physical safety and material prosperity. The human propensity to be partial to family and friends, however, elevates the possibility of injustice and civil war. Nature “provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections” (Hume 2000: 314). That is to say, human beings, by employing their intellect to design social institutions, can regulate human partiality in productive, rather than destructive, ways – an argument that would influence the Scottish economist Adam Smith (1723–90) and the drafter of the US constitution James Madison (1751–1836). Hume’s philosophy would also influence later philosophers such as the logical positivists who wanted to purge philosophy of its metaphysical – on their view, mystical and extremist – tendencies.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant both criticized one version of metaphysics and proposed a modern version that would become enormously influential. Kant chastised Plato for trying to abandon the world of the senses in order to acquire knowledge: “he did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which could he could stiffen himself (Kant 1998: 140). Plato’s transcendent metaphysics does not deserve the name of a science. Rather than dispose of metaphysics entirely, however, Kant redefines metaphysics as the conceptual scheme that makes possible experience. “The proud name of an ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general in a systematic doctrine ... must give

way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding” (Kant 1998: 345). A metaphysics of nature, for instance, does not describe features of nature in itself; rather, such a metaphysics describes and justifies a system of categories that make possible human investigations of nature. Likewise, in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant does not describe and justify a moral law that is woven into the fabric of reality but rather one that the practical faculty of reason makes or finds within itself. After formulating the supreme principle of morality, the categorical imperative, Kant explains how it applies to a rational being in a Newtonian universe: “The moral ‘ought’ is ... his own necessary ‘will’ as a member of an intelligible world, and is thought by him as ‘ought’ only insofar as he regards himself at the same time as a member of the world of sense” (Kant 1996: 101). Scholars disagree on how to interpret Kant’s account of the intelligible and the sensible worlds: some argue that Kant modernizes a medieval two-world metaphysics; others argue that Kant presents a “two perspective” metaphysics that offers a reasonable defense of the practical presupposition of freedom. Regardless, Kant’s metaphysics of morals – including the basic principles of a moral doctrine of virtue (*Tugendlehre*) and a political doctrine of right (*Rechtslehre*) – has influenced many liberals, democrats, socialists, and others who defend an idealistic politics against political realism.

Post-Enlightenment Metaphysics

Kant’s earliest readers identified a problem with his reconceptualization of metaphysics: it posits a gap between the mind and reality, the thinking subject and the thing in itself. Kant himself, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), recognized this gap and explored how art, biology, and theology could bridge it. Ironically, Kant, a paradigmatic Enlightenment philosopher, planted the seed of the romantic movement that would try to bring humanity back into contact with reality or nature. Early romantics – including Friedrich Hölderlin

(1770–1843) and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) – thought that poetry, or an aestheticized politics, could bring humans back into contact with the great current of life. But it was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) who set the terms of much post-Kantian philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel posits a metaphysics grounded on mind or spirit (*Geist*). “That the True is actual only as system, or that Substance is essentially Subject, is expressed in the representation of the Absolute as *Spirit* – the most sublime notion and the one which belongs to the modern age and its religion” (Hegel 1977: 14). According to Charles Taylor, Hegel tried to reconcile Kant’s account of freedom and Spinoza’s account of substance. Hegel argued that human beings act autonomously when they express the cosmic spirit (*Geist*) at the center of their being. To say that “the substance is essentially subject” is to assert that *Geist*, in its unfolding in history, has reached a point where human beings are not estranged from the universe. Hegel’s philosophy explains how *Geist* manifests in modern politics, philosophy, art, and the ethical life of the community (*Sittlichkeit*). More recently, philosophers have articulated a nonmetaphysical reading of Hegel that denies that *Geist* is a pantheistic notion. Rather, Hegel explains the way in which modern subjects arrive at their judgments through rational introspection and intersubjective debate. *Geist* is not a metaphysical entity but the structure of the community’s understanding of what it is to be a person. The nonmetaphysical reading may provide a coherent and compelling account of Hegel’s philosophy – particularly its account of the modern state in *The Philosophy of Right* – but it departs from how most Anglo-American and Continental philosophers in the past two centuries have read Hegel.

Hegel’s reception has been shaped by his most influential reader, Karl Marx (1818–83). Marx’s critique of Hegelian metaphysics takes its cue from Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72): “Thought arises from being – being does not arise from thought” (cited in Marx 2000: 6–7). In his own estimation, Marx inverted and thus

corrected Hegel’s philosophy by arguing that the clash of material forces, rather than a dialectic of ideas, determines the course of history. In the *Phenomenology*, for instance, Hegel describes a fight between a lord and a bondsman whereby the lord prevails over the bondsman in a fight to the death. In so doing, the lord empowers the bondsman who does the actual work, thereby setting the stage for the bondsman to overcome the master. Hegel may have viewed this narrative as about the structure of self-conscious subjectivity; in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx retells the story as one of a necessary dynamic at work in concrete history. “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx 2000: 246). In capitalism, the bourgeoisie, owners of the means of production, hire the proletariat, wage earners, to work in the factories. In so doing, the bourgeoisie increase the power, size, and communication networks of the proletariat, setting the stage for when the proletariat seize control of the means of production and exchange. Philosophy’s role in this process is not to think about irrelevant matters (e.g., metaphysics) in ways that comfort the ruling class or pacify the people. Rather, philosophy’s job is to change history by helping people see, and thereby complete, the progress of history from capitalism to communism, a social order without economic classes.

Like Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a materialist who tried to place humanity on a new track toward a new destination. Nietzsche criticized Plato for slandering life, that is, judging all things as inferior specimens of a supposed realm of Forms. On the other hand, Nietzsche appreciated Plato for bringing the ascetic ideal into history, a disciplined search for reality behind appearances. Nietzsche calls the deepest layer of reality the will to power. According to this notion, every animal “instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions in which to fully release his power and achieve his maximum of power-sensation” (Nietzsche 2007: 76). In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche uses the doctrine of the will to power to explain history’s

path from the premoral period, to the moral period we currently inhabit, to the extra-moral (*aussermoralische*) era on the horizon. In the premoral period, warriors such as Homeric heroes, Scandinavian Vikings, and Germanic Goths discharged their power on the weak. Nobles tended to show respect to other nobles and institute rules of justice to control the existential anger (*ressentiment*) of the base. In the moral period, however, priests and philosophers exercise their will to power to drain the warriors' confidence that they should inhabit the highest rung of society's ladder of values. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato demotes warriors to gentlemen in the service of philosophers who know the truth; and in the New Testament, St. Paul transforms Judaism into Christianity, a populist religion. For Nietzsche, modern liberals, democrats, and socialists are leading humanity on a path toward nihilism, a worldview and way of life that believes in nothing higher than pleasure and tranquility. Nietzsche writes his books to awaken a new nobility to recognize its destiny and assert control over the rest of humanity. In the extra-moral period, philosophers of the future – combining the life-affirming instincts of Homer and the ascetic ideal of Plato – will govern. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrote in his journal that Nietzsche provides a philosophic veneer to the hero-worship of Alexandre Dumas' novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Rather than his political theory per se, Nietzsche's main contribution to contemporary thinking is a genealogical method that reveals the contingency of moral and political values and a philosophical vocabulary to describe the inner dynamics of nature.

Martin Heidegger (1899–1976) thought that Nietzsche did not go far enough in his critique of Platonic metaphysics. Nietzsche said in *The Twilight of the Idols* that Being is “the final wisp of evaporating reality,” a meaningless concept. Heidegger replies, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, that Nietzsche is the terminus of a long tradition that focuses on beings (*Das Seiende*) rather than Being (*Das Sein*). “We encounter beings everywhere; they surround us, carry and control us,

enchant and fulfill us, elevate and disappoint us, but where in all this is the Being of beings, and what does it consist in” (Heidegger 2000: 34). The human being's vocation as *Dasein* is to disclose Being through poetry and philosophy; instead, modern humans occlude the question of Being and control beings through metaphysics and technology. Heidegger's diagnosis of the plight of modernity, its forgetfulness of Being and its drive to dominate nature (*physis*), would resonate with many twentieth-century critical theorists. Alas, Heidegger's alternative – the spiritual revival of the German people (*Volk*) – has struck many political theorists as either naive or sinister. Heidegger's importance for contemporary political theory is primarily in how others respond to his diagnosis of how metaphysics has contributed to the destruction of the planet.

Take Leo Strauss (1899–1973) and Hannah Arendt (1906–75). On one interpretation, Strauss's most important book, *Natural Right and History*, seeks to refute Heidegger's most important book, *Being and Time*. According to Strauss, Heidegger attributes an essentially historical character to society and human thought, which partly explains why Heidegger supported the Nazis in the 1930s. Strauss's remedy for historicism is a recuperation of classical political philosophy. “All natural right doctrines claim that the fundamentals of justice are, in principle, accessible to man as man” (Strauss 1953: 28). Strauss's task in *Natural Right and History* is to justify classical natural right after modern science has discredited many features of ancient physics and metaphysics. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt looks to the ancient Romans rather than the ancient Greeks for guidance on how to stop humanity's thoughtless use of technology. In particular, Arendt seeks to recover an appreciation of the *vita activa*, a life committed to doing great deeds and saying great words in public about public matters. Though Arendt values “pure thought culminating in contemplation,” she writes her book to valorize “active engagement in the things of this world” (Arendt 1998: 17). Arendt thinks that political theorists today must “think without banisters,” that is,

without the metaphysical assurances of older eras. Many contemporary political theorists, we shall see, agree with Arendt on this point.

Postmetaphysics and Pluralism

Metaphysics is the science of being, the invisible backdrop to physical things. Occasionally, people will argue that metaphysics is a medieval relic in the modern world. The theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, for instance, has said that “philosophy is dead” because it has not been able to keep up with modern science. And yet metaphysical philosophers from antiquity to the present argue that scientism fails to explain much of what gives human life meaning, including notions of morality and justice. Metaphysics, in Kant’s words, is the “queen of the sciences,” and to ignore it is to condemn human beings to the realm of the given. From another angle, it appears that modern societies are rife with metaphysical disagreements, especially if we include theoretical physics as a kind of existential faith. In the conclusion, this entry considers two paradigms for handling the fact that metaphysics seems both necessary for morality and the source of some of society’s deepest disagreements.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) has called for postmetaphysical thinking (*nachmetaphysisches Denken*). According to Habermas, the metaphysical tradition of Plato, Augustine, Kant, and Hegel has run its course. This tradition privileges the one over the many, geometrical deductions over poetic narratives, identity over difference, and theory over practice. Multiple factors render metaphysical claims suspect, including the autonomy of the natural and social sciences from the reign of philosophy, the awareness that historical developments and linguistic communities influence our thoughts, as well as that the faculty of reason has emerged naturally and contingently. Philosophers at the beginning of the twenty-first century are in the same boat as Hegel’s first readers who protested against metaphysical worldviews that judge the singular in the name of the universal. Still,

Habermas disagrees with antimodernists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Theodor Adorno (1903–69) who simply reject Enlightenment metaphysics. According to Habermas, philosophers need a way to criticize present-day practices, such as environmental degradation or corrupt elections, that deform the lifeworld. Habermas extends “the Kantian tradition by seeking to use the philosophy of language to save a concept of reason that is skeptical and postmetaphysical, yet not defeatist” (Habermas 1992: 116). Communicative reason is immanent insofar as it emerges naturally and permeates language games and institutions. Communicative reason is also transcendent insofar as it enables linguistic actors to consider their moral norms from the perspective of people affected by such norms. Habermas’s conceptions of discourse ethics and deliberative democracy are Kantian in that moral and political agents must act on principles that could be validated by other participants in rational discourse. Habermas’s thinking is postmetaphysical, however, in that it relies upon the universal pragmatic presuppositions of communicative action rather than a dubious account of another world. Similarly to Habermas, the American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) contends that his theory of justice is “political not metaphysical” insofar as it abstains from metaphysical investigations to perform the more mundane task of reconstructing ideas from the public political culture to facilitate political agreement about constitutional matters.

The American political theorist William E. Connolly (b. 1938) argues, in *The Ethos of Pluralization*, that there is no such thing as a nonmetaphysical or postmetaphysical theory: “every political interpretation invokes a set of fundamentals about the necessities and possibilities of human being” (Connolly 1995: 1). The political assignment today is to find a way for different existential faiths, or metaphysical constituencies, to collaborate and compete in mutually beneficial ways. Connolly adopts a theme from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Most Euro-American political philosophy is arboreal, that

is, it assumes that constituencies (branches) should converge on a set of basic principles (a trunk). The problem with trees, however, is that they make minorities suffer. Deleuze and Guattari propose, instead, that politics should organize themselves as gardens in which multiple existential faiths (or flowers) flourish and cooperate with other faiths for the well-being of the garden. On this image of democratic politics, the assignment is not to keep metaphysics out of politics – an impossible task – but rather to cultivate an ethos of engagement among diverse political actors and bodies. *The Ethos of Pluralization* promotes several virtues to sustain garden politics, including *agonistic respect* between constituencies that have roughly similar standing in society, *critical responsiveness* whereby powerful constituencies carefully welcome minorities into the political arena, and *studied indifference* where political actors ignore harmless groups that get under their skin. In his own writings, Connolly develops an ontology that draws upon Spinoza's account of substance, Lucretius' conception of the swerve in nature, and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. To flag the contestability of his existential faith, Connolly calls it an *ontopolitics*.

This entry has considered how Euro-American political philosophers have conceptualized the deepest stratum of the universe as the Idea of the Good, the Prime Mover, the Christian God, swerving atoms, the world of understanding, Spirit, will to power, and Being. In the near future, if not already, political theorists will need to learn more about accounts of the substance of being that have originated outside of the west. One benefit of the pluralistic approach is that it looks forward to respectful, contentious dialogues about such matters.

SEE ALSO: Aristotle (384–322 BCE); Augustine of Hippo: Aurelius Augustinus (354–430); Connolly, William E. (1938–); Habermas, Jürgen (1929–); Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–1831); Heidegger, Martin (1889–1976); Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804); Machiavelli, Niccolò (1469–1527); Marx, Karl (1818–83); Natural Law; Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1844–1900); Plato (429–347 BCE); Rationalism

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