Vittorio Hösle

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Vittorio Hösle (born June 25, 1960, in Milan, Italy) is a German philosopher. Having begun his academic career with extraordinary success, including the completion of his doctorate at age 21, he is the author of many distinguished works, including Hegels System (1987), Morals and Politics (1997, trans. 2004), and Der philosophische Dialog (2006). He advances an “objective idealist” theoretical philosophy, which attempts to revitalize Platonic and Hegelian thought, while also drawing from Karl-Otto Apel. His practical philosophy is a modified Kantianism, which also draws much from Hans Jonas.

Having been “alienated by the contemporary situation of his country’s university system,”[1] he has been in the United States since 1999, at the University of Notre Dame. There he is the Paul Kimball Professor of Arts and Letters (with concurrent appointments in the Departments of German, Philosophy, and Political Science). Since 2008, he has also served as the founding Director of the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study.[2]

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Overview of achievements[edit]

In Germany in the 1980s, he earned the titles of “Wunderkind”[3] and “the Boris Becker of philosophy,”[4] on account of completing his doctorate at age 21, and at 25 and earning his Habilitation (a postdoctoral degree qualifying one as University Lecturer, based in part on the Habilitationsschrift, a significant scholarly contribution exceeding the standards of a dissertation). Since the average age for completing the Habilitation is around 40, this feat immediately began comparisons of Hösle to Friedrich Nietzsche, who began his career as a Lecturer only slightly earlier than did Hösle. Both of his degrees were completed at Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. Hösle’s facility for languages is comparably impressive. As of 2009—in what is probably a conservative estimate—his CV lists knowledge of 17 languages: “Active knowledge of German, Italian, English, Spanish, Russian, Norwegian, and French; passive knowledge of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Pali, Avestan, Portuguese, Catalan, Modern Greek, Swedish, and Danish.”[5] As of July 2009, he has written or edited 32 books (which have appeared in at least 16 languages), and written over 125 articles. Since most of these works were originally written in German and have not been translated
Hösle’s writings might roughly be placed into three categories: (1) those intended for a more popular audience, (2) those dedicated to scholarly and often historical topics, and (3) those developing his own philosophical positions systematically. In category (1) we might place many opinion pieces on public policy written in German newspapers. In addition, The Dead Philosophers’ Café (trans. 2000) presents a series of letters between Hösle and “Nora K.,” an 11–12 year old daughter of some friends of Hösle. The two debate questions such as identity, free will, ethics, evil, and religion in various encounters with “Dead but ever Young Philosophers” such as Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Augustine, Al-Farabi, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

While many valuable books had been written about philosophizing with children or presenting philosophy to children, this book is distinctive in presenting the philosophy of a child. It has been translated into thirteen foreign languages.

(2) Hösle’s scholarly and historical studies span a broad range of topics, including Greek tragedy, Plato, Giambattista Vico, G. W. F. Hegel, aesthetics, sociobiology, ancient mathematics, the comedy of Woody Allen, the philosophical dialogue, and the philosophies of history and of natural science. Among many notable works, Hegels System (1987) offers a highly comprehensive analysis of the Hegelian encyclopedia. It defends the encyclopedia as a form of objective idealism, while suggesting some ways to improve its concept formation technique—understood as the essence of dialectic—by regarding intersubjectivity as a synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity. More recently, Der philosophische Dialog (2006) offers the most comprehensive analysis yet attempted of this literary genre. It offers new interpretations of many dialogues (especially but not only of Plato), and offers novel theories of hermeneutics (i.e., the correct interpretation of the intentions of the author of a dialogue).

(3) Hösle’s own philosophy combines “objective idealism” with a theory of intersubjectivity. In this way he seeks to unite the traditional idealistic philosophy of Plato and Hegel with the transcendental pragmatics developed by Karl-Otto Apel. Hösle writes of his attempt to revitalize “objective idealism”: “The conviction that we can have synthetic a priori knowledge, and that this knowledge discovers something that is independent of our mind, is of particular importance for practical philosophy. It grounds the position called ‘moral realism’: Albeit the moral law is neither a physical nor a mental nor a social fact, it is nevertheless: it belongs to an ideal sphere of being that partly determines the structures of real (physical, mental, social) being.” He is fully aware that this highly rationalistic and constructive approach runs counter to the dominant trends of Western philosophy following the rise of post-Hegelian philosophy in the 1830s, and especially amid “that ultra-critical thinking which…has swept over Europe like a great wave” beginning in the 1960s. A
useful introduction to the many grounds on which Hösle criticizes the often-unchallenged relativistic assumptions of our time is provided in "Foundational Issues of Objective Idealism," the opening essay of *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics* (1998). He establishes his positive position largely through reflexive or transcendental reasoning—that is, reflections upon the necessary presuppositions of all reason and speech. While the theoretical alternative Hösle provides is largely Platonic and Hegelian, his practical philosophy could be described as a modified Kantianism, and is developed in the same volume's second essay: "The Greatness and Limits of Kant's Practical Philosophy." There Hösle argues that the autonomous, rationalist, and universalist positions of Kant, based on the synthetic *a priori*, remain unsurpassed and indispensable achievements. However, Hösle does grant that Kant was mistaken in neglecting the need to cultivate the emotions, as well as in his overly formalist approach, which neglects the need for concrete knowledge of circumstances and wrongly denies the possibility of morally compelling exceptions to objective moral rules.\[11\]

Hösle's *magnum opus* is *Morals and Politics* (trans. 2004), an ambitious work of around 1,000 pages, which aims to present "a comprehensive vision of all the knowledge needed to answer the difficult question of what constitutes moral policies in the various fields of politics such as foreign policy domestic policy, economics, ecology and such."\[12\] To do so it offers a normative foundation of the relation between ethics and politics, a descriptive theory of the objects of political philosophy (including anthropology, sociobiology, the virtues, the principles of power, and the theory of the states), from both of which premises he derives "a concrete political ethics" appropriate for the twenty-first century.\[13\] Despite the size of the book, its analytical table of contents allows the reader to use it as a handbook on topics of interest. This may help explain the distinguished reception the original received in Germany (*Moral und Politik*, 1997), not only among academics, but in the news media and among politicians as well.\[14\]

Even a lengthy depiction could not adequately summarize the work, due not only to its length but also its scholarly breadth, philosophical rigor, and ideological subtlety. Here we will attempt to illustrate these qualities by offering a brief overview of one set of interlocking themes—namely, moral universalism, the modern state, and economics. As suggested by the title, *Morals and Politics* attempts to overcome the complete decoupling of politics from ethics which begins with Machiavelli, and finds its most horrifying ultimate expression in *Carl Schmitt*.\[15\] Against the typical modern views that politics has nothing to do with morals, that politics is a fully autonomous realm, or that morals prove tyrannical when allowed to enter the political sphere, Hösle argues that only objective moral reason itself can criticize excess moralism in politics. This is because "it is only a self-limitation of the moral that can be taken seriously, not a limitation of the moral by something external to it—for this something external would itself have to appear before the tribunal of moral judgment."\[16\] Hösle's political ethic is also strongly universalist. Although he immensely respects the ancients and finds their philosophies unsurpassed in many respects, he maintains that the increase of universalist ethical consciousness in Christianity is an undeniable form of moral progress.\[17\] Moral universalism, in turn, found its institutional expression "in the constitutional state founded on the rule..."
of law. My greatest concern is that in the historical cataclysms that face us, we will abandon not the self-destructive aspects of modernity, but rather precisely its universalism."[18] Carl Schmitt, like Friedrich Nietzsche before him and the related movement of National Socialism, all illustrate the “artificial atavism” of those who attempt to repudiate universalist ideas after their historical discovery. Such repudiations result in raw power-positivism, rather than the naïve identification with traditional, pre-modern culture which is the surface intention of such “counter-enlightenment” theories.[19] By contrast, Hösle defends ethical universalism and many recent achievements of the modern state, such as “the international codification of human rights.” Yet he also argues that the foundation of the worldview which supports human rights is “eroding with increasing speed,” and therefore the political cataclysms of the twentieth century are by no means “merely superficial phenomena that ultimately belong to the past.”[20] While attempting to provide a rational defense of the great moral achievements of the modern world, then, Hösle strongly challenges certain modern excesses, such as the loss of a transcendent horizon of consciousness,[21] and an excessive focus on economic growth and ever-expanding consumption. This economic excess increases perceived needs more quickly than it can meet them,[22] leads to self-absorption and lovelessness,[23] and demands more resources ecologically than can be sustained for future generations or universalized to all the people of the world.[24] On the other hand, the modern state’s (classical) liberal capitalism—as qualified by the late-modern welfare state—is itself a significant moral achievement, due to its highly efficient production and distribution of goods.[25] For such reasons, there are moral reasons to limit moralism in economics. For instance, Hösle argues that John Rawls’s difference principle cannot be unconditionally valid in economics, and that the technical expertise of economists is a necessary component in determining the proper means of preventing excessively large social oppositions from arising.[26]

Select publications[edit]


• "Vico’s Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford’s Film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" (co-authored with Mark Roche). Clio 23 (1994): 131-147.


References[edit]


2. http://ndias.nd.edu


5. A CV is available on Hösle’s professional website: http://www.nd.edu/~vhosle/


24. ^ Hösle, *Morals and Politics*, e.g. xii, 481-82, 602-18, 878-81.


**External links**

- [Hösle's professional website](http://www.hoealteaching.org/)
- [Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study](http://www.nd.edu/)
