

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

into English, his reputation in the United States has yet to approach that in Europe. In Europe, though, he has become “something of a celebrity, the subject of two documentaries shown on [TV stations](#) throughout Europe and even Korea.”^[6]

Popular, scholarly, and philosophical writings^[edit]

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.^[7] 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.^[8] 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.”^[9] 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.^[10] A

useful introduction to the many grounds on which Höhle 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 Höhle 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 Höhle argues that the autonomous, rationalist, and universalist positions of Kant, based on the synthetic *a priori*, remain unsurpassed and indispensable achievements. However, Höhle 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]

Höhle'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, Höhle 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] Höhle'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, Höhle 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, Höhle 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, Höhle 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[\[edit\]](#)

- “Cicero’s Plato.” *Wiener Studien* 121 (2008): 145-170.
- *Darwinism and Philosophy* (co-edited with Christian Illies). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- “Did the Greeks Deliberately Use [the Golden Ratio](#) in an Artwork? A Hermeneutical Reflection.” *La Parola del Passato* 362 (2009): 415-26.
- “The Idea of a Rationalistic [Philosophy of Religion](#) and Its Challenges.” *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie* 6 (2007): 159-181.
- *Hegels System: Der Idealismus der Subjektivität und das Problem der Intersubjektivität. [Hegel’s System: The Idealism of Subjectivity and the Problem of Intersubjectivity.]* 2 volumes. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987. 2nd edition, 1998.
- “Interpreting Philosophical Dialogues.” *Antike und Abendland* 48 (2002): 68-90.
- “Is There Progress in the History of Philosophy?” In *Hegel’s History of Philosophy*, ed. D. A. Duquette, 185-204. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003.

- “The Lost Prodigal Son’s Corporal Works of Mercy and the Bridegroom’s Wedding: The Religious Subtext of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*.” *Anglia* 126 (2008): 477-502.
- "Moral und Politik: Grundlagen einer Politischen Ethik fuer das 21. Jahrhundert." Munich: Beck, 1997. "Morals and Politics," trans. Steven Rendall. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004.
- *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.
- *Platon interpretieren*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004.
- *Der philosophische Dialog: Eine Poetik und Hermeneutik*. [The Philosophical Dialogue: A Poetic and Hermeneutical Theory.] München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2006.
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- *Philosophie der ökologischen Krise: Moskauer Vorträge*. [Philosophy of the Ecological Crisis: Moscow Lectures.] München: C.H.Beck, 1991.
- “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.
- “Vico und die Idee der Kulturwissenschaft” [“Vico and the Idea of Cultural Science.”] Introduction to Giambattista Vico, *Prinzipien einer neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinsame Natur der Völker*[Principles of a New Science concerning the Common Nature of Peoples.] Ed. and trans. Höhle and Ch. Jermann. 2 volumes. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1990.
- *Woody Allen: An Essay on the Nature of the Comical*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

References[[edit](#)]

1. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, trans. Steven Rendall (Notre Dame: [University of Notre Dame](#) Press, 2004), Preface to the English Translation, xi.
2. [^](#) <http://ndias.nd.edu>
3. [^](#) See Hubertus Breuer, “Hegel kehrt zurück,” *Die Zeit* 33-12 (12 August 1994). Available online at <http://www.zeit.de/1994/33/Hegel-kehrt-zurueck>
4. [^](#) John Monczunski, “The Amazing World of Vittorio Höhle,” *Notre Dame Magazine* (Spring 2007), p. 58a. This essay provides a helpful introduction to Höhle’s life and work. It is also available online: <http://magazine.nd.edu/news/9885>
5. [^](#) A CV is available on Höhle’s professional website: <http://www.nd.edu/~vhosle/>
6. [^](#) Monczunski, “The Amazing World of Vittorio Höhle,” 58b.
7. [^](#) Höhle, *The Dead Philosophers’ Café: An Exchange of Letters for Children and Adults*, trans. Steven Rendall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 139-40.

8. [^](#) On Höhle's philosophy, see the German Wikipedia page: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vittorio_Höhle
9. [^](#) Höhle, *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), Preface, vii.
10. [^](#) Höhle, "Foundational Issues of Objective Idealism," in *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics*, 1-5.
11. [^](#) Höhle, "The Greatness and Limits of Kant's Practical Philosophy," in *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics*, esp. 41-44, 48-57.
12. [^](#) Monczunski, "The Amazing World of Vittorio Höhle," 58d.
13. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, xvi.
14. [^](#) For responses to *Moral und Politik*, see the edited volume dedicated to it: Bernd Goebel and Manfred Wetzel, ed., *Eine moralische Politik? Vittorio Höhles Politische Ethik in der Diskussion*(Würzburg : Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).
15. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, xv, 30-31, 58.
16. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 80.
17. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 26-27; more generally on [universalism](#) and a qualified theory of moral [evolutionism](#), see 107-21, 176-82.
18. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 180. For the defense of universalism, see 107-21.
19. [^](#) Cf. Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, e.g. 178, 596-98. See also "Moral Reflection and the Decay of Institutions: On the [Dialectic of Enlightenment](#) and [Counter-Enlightenment](#)," in *Objective Idealism, Ethics and Politics*. For a discussion of not only Nietzsche and Schmitt but also Heidegger in relation to National Socialism, see Höhle, "Die Irrtümer der Denker," *Der Spiegel* 29 (2001): 136-39. Also available online: <http://wissen.spiegel.de/wissen/image/show.html?did=19646211&aref=image025/E0128/SCSP200102901360139.pdf&thumb=false>
20. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 59.
21. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 588-98.
22. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, xiv, 665; see also 715.
23. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 179, 279.
24. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, e.g. xii, 481-82, 602-18, 878-81.
25. [^](#) Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 54-55.
26. [^](#) Cf. Höhle, *Morals and Politics*, 54-55, 110-11, 665-69.

External links^{[[edit](#)]}

- [Höhle's professional website](#)
- [Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study](#)
- [John Monczunski, "The Amazing World of Vittorio Höhle"](#)

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