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Vittorio Hösle: A Short History of German Philosophy

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Introduction

The task to write a short history of German philosophy is daunting. Hösle approaches this task with erudition, precision and admirable polemical style. Readers should note that Hösle's account is not meant to be a neutral encyclopaedic one which narrates the entire history of philosophical ideas in the German-speaking world. While his selection and evaluation of certain figures might appear questionable, it would be unfair if one judges it with an expectation of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness. Indeed, it is a specific account representing the German Spirit in a specific way. He gives four criteria for his selection of German philosophers: 1. quality of the philosophical work, 2. influence on subsequent developments in the history of philosophy, 3. whether the work paradigmatically expresses the basic ideas of the time and of German culture and 4. whether the philosopher helps us make sense of the developmental logic of the process of development. Along with the use of the German language, these make up the formal

necessary requirements of Höhle's historiography of German philosophy. On this basis of selection, he identifies a set of material features that characterize the German Spirit, and they are: 1. rationalist theology; 2. a commitment to synthetic a priori knowledge (trust that God created the world in a rational way); 3. a penchant for system-building; 4. grounding ethics in reason not in sentiment and 5. a combination of philosophy and philology. This review consists of two main parts. I will first sum up the line of ideological development given by Höhle, and then I will critique Höhle's account of the withering of German philosophy and its Spirit.

Part I

In Höhle's account, which consists of 16 chapters arranged by chronological order, German philosophy first started with Meister Eckhart and reached its climax in German idealism. Eckhart is not only the first medieval philosopher who expresses his original philosophical ideas in vernacular German language, his rationalist theology and mystic idea of an unmediated relationship to God are characteristic traits of the German Spirit. Nicholas of Cusa, though he did not write philosophical treatises in German, was influenced by Eckhart's rational theology and conceived the project of an a priori, theologically-grounded natural philosophy, which sees the universe (and human mind) as an image of the Trinitarian infinite God and critiques the Aristotelian geocentric worldview of finite cosmos. The reasons for Höhle to include him despite the fact that Nicholas did not write his works in German seem to be his use of the distinction between understanding and reason and his epistemological optimism about human mind's approximation to divine infinity. Paracelsus is a natural philosopher in the Spiritualist tradition that was partly inspired by the Reformation and partly broke with the dogmas of orthodox Lutheranism and biblical authority. His polemic against traditional medicine called for founding medicine in chemistry and mineralogy and he sees the forces of nature as God's manifestation and particular sciences as subordinated to theology.

But it is Jakob Böhme whom Höhle identifies as "the first epoch-making German philosopher of the modern period." Böhme considered himself a pious Lutheran and his experience of mystical visions brought him to provide a deeper theosophic foundation for Lutheranism. In his contemplation on the problem of evil and suffering, Böhme recognizes in God three principles: the positive (the "Yes"), the negative (the "No") and their synthesis. Devil and Hell are the expression of the negative divine principle, and it is through this opposition that God becomes knowable and apparent. The reunion of the

Yes and the No was found in Christ.

Leibniz must be included in any historical account of the emergence of German philosophy. Not only did he contribute to raising German to the rank of a language suitable for academic purposes and founding the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences (now the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities), his philosophical contributions also earned him a place among the greatest philosophers. Interestingly, Hösle understands modern philosophy as a competition between ontology-first and epistemology-first thinkers (or “ancientizers” and “modernizers” in Hösle’s own terms). The prime example of the former camp is Spinoza, and the leader of the latter is Descartes. Whereas Spinoza starts with an ontological proof of *natura naturans* with extension and thought being its two knowable attributes, Descartes starts from the undeniability of the *cogito*, with the physical and the mental being two different kinds of substances. Though Hösle did not clearly assign Leibniz to either side, Leibniz seems to be straddling both with a stronger sympathy for the modernizers. Despite Leibniz’s personal admiration for Spinoza and the partial agreement in their philosophical positions, Hösle is quite right in stressing their differences regarding the concept of necessity, the moral status of God and the notion of substance. The appropriation of possible worlds in Leibniz’s metaphysics is bound by the axiological view that the actual world must be the best possible world created by God if God exists, and Leibniz’s pluralistic view of substances is supplemented by the notion of pre-established harmony.

By tying God down to the actual world as the best possible world, Leibniz in effect exacerbated the theodicy problem. Not only did Kant uncover the problem by critically examining previous proofs of God and pointing out their implausibility, he is also a revolutionary in ethics because his practical philosophy detached the foundations of ethics entirely from any hopes of an after-world. The value of moral conduct no longer depends on God’s reward or on subjective feelings, but rather it lies within the act as an end in itself. Ethics so conceived is grounded on a categorical, unconditional imperative that is owed to practical reason’s self-determination and not to any heteronomous factors. This alignment with practical reason generates a stream of anti-eudaimonism in Kant’s ethics, in which human dignity consists in the capacity of sacrificing one’s own happiness for the fulfilment of obligation, and one’s relation to God is grounded internally through the compliance with moral obligation. Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal realm and the noumenal realm along with his epistemological distinction of the capacity of understanding and reason allow him to reserve a regulative role for the

idea of God while restricting its objective validity in accordance with his criterion of significance for the phenomenal realm.

The development of a new human science is another important achievement of the German eighteenth century alongside Kant's critical philosophy. The historical reliability of biblical narratives was challenged and the narrow-minded salvation history of Jews and Christians was discredited by the universalistic spirit of Enlightenment. But the Lutheran pathos of sincerity prevented the German intellectuals, many of whom came from a Lutheran parsonage, to adopt a detached attitude of irony. Instead, modern philology provided the means to reconstructing the meaning of the Scriptures in response to not just biblical criticism but also Enlightenment universalism. This led to the idea that understanding the word of God is not simply understanding the Bible (literally), but rather the whole history of the human spirit; and the establishment of human science became a religious duty. In this regard, Herder's contribution to German philosophy is unmistakable, for he gave it a new focus in philosophy of language, history, aesthetics and anthropology. Schiller's aesthetic theory attributes a moral function to the traditional aesthetic category of beauty, and aesthetic education was conceived as an apolitical alternative to political revolution for the realization of moral ideas and the unification of all spheres of life. Through the Schlegel brothers and Novalis philosophy and poetry achieved an integral and yet anti-systematic cohesion, which became an essential characteristic of early Romanticism. Schleiermacher's theology of feeling granted religion an autonomous status within human sciences, making it accessible via rational standards for those who had detached themselves from the dogmatic authority of tradition. Humboldt's linguistic works and his analysis of the relationship between thought and language constitute an important contribution to the German tradition of the philosophy of language. He also played a significant role in the institutionalization of human science in the modern blueprint of the research university.

German idealism is for Höhle the most ambitious philosophical school of thought in the history of German philosophy and he focuses on the three most prominent figures: Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. The philosophizing of each of the three philosophers manifests not just the essential character of religious seriousness that defines the German Spirit, but also the longing for a comprehensive metaphysical system that defies the current prevalent trend of specialization. Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is a reflexive transcendental philosophy that seeks to uncover (or "deduce") the implicit presuppositions, or the fundamental principles (and their implications), of the faculties of the mind assumed by Kant's philosophy. Fichte traces the foundation of the laws of

logic (identity and contradiction) in the I's self-positing and counter-positing act, and all theoretical knowledge is based on the mediation of the divisible I through the divisible not-I. His ethics, like Kant's, not only recognizes autonomy as the necessary condition for moral acts, but it represents a view more radical than Kant's in that it does not allow for morally neutral acts. The mutual recognition of the spheres of freedom among individuals is enacted by law; and it is with Fichte that intersubjectivity is deduced for the first time as a necessary condition of autonomous self-consciousness. Practical belief takes priority in his system, as it is the only way to avoid nihilism.

Schelling started out as a Fichtean philosopher but soon broke with Fichteanism by attributing to nature a much higher status than Fichte's *Wissnschaftslehre* allowed. Instead of deducing nature as the field of ethical striving for rational beings, Schelling's objective idealism sees nature and consciousness as manifestations of the Absolute, and the basic structures of reality are conceived as the results of the development of a polar structure. Built on a metaphysical view that seeks to accommodate the real and the ideal, Schelling took inspirations from the contemporary development of natural science and attributed metaphysical significance to its latest discovery. Schelling's view on religion is closer to traditional Christianity in that he does not content himself with a negative philosophy that postulates God as a logical abstratum but demands a positive account that affirms the vitality of a personal God.

Hegel started his philosophical career as a loyal follower of Schelling's absolute idealism, but he established it with much greater brilliance and systematic rigor than Schelling was ever able to do. His mature metaphysical system contains three parts: logic, nature and spirit. In contrast to what Hegel calls "the reflective philosophy of subjectivity," the a priori categories in Hegel's system are not to be understood as subjective concepts imposed on an objective reality. Instead, reality is conceptually structured, and the categorial structures of reality are not *ens rationis* from a transcendent realm, but dynamic moments in the teleological self-movement of the Absolute. Thus, the theological significance of Hegel's *Science of Logic* is prominent, since the entire system can be taken as an ontological proof of God. Hegel also places intrinsic value on social institutions and intersubjectively shared ways of life.

Schopenhauer is an essential key to understanding the transition from German idealism to Nietzsche. Clearly, his epistemology was influenced by Kant's subjectivism and the German idealists' wish to bring the thing-in-itself to light, and he reacted to them with an alternative, pessimistic worldview that parallels Indian Buddhism. His epistemology

adopts space, time and causality as our subjective constructions, and takes the will to live for the ultimate ground of reality. Prioritizing intuition over concept and the will over reason and understanding, Schopenhauer sees reality as a series of objectivizations of the will, which is fundamentally driven by unconscious biological drives for procreation and self-preservation. Reason is therefore nothing but a symptom of the will, and human knowing is in continuity with animal knowing. With great philosophical depth and eloquence Schopenhauer expressed Europe's hangover after the gradual flickering out of Christianity, anticipating Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

In the wake of Schopenhauer, two Hegelian philosophers emerged and determined the history of European consciousness. Feuerbach's investigation of the essence of Christianity uncovers contradictory ideas in Christian dogmas. He gives an anthropological explanation of religion, according to which God is the hypostatization of human understanding or moral experience. His critique of Christianity seeks to free humans from "religious alienation" which he sees detrimental to morality. Although Feuerbach was a member of Social-Democratic Workers' Party, he was not a political activist and the influence of his revolt against Christian dogmatics remained within the intellectual circle. On the other hand, with the goal of changing the world, Marx and Engels left the domain of philosophy. Marx's historical materialism is directed against German idealism and any metaphysical tradition in philosophy that stands on ideas. From a historical materialist point of view, morality, religion, metaphysics, and the rest of ideology are to be explained externally by social economic activities and conditions. Although Marx's critique of the modern state and his analysis of the effects of alienation are pioneering, he underestimated the influence the "superstructure" can have on material conditions, leaving human capacity for grasping truth incomprehensible. His claim to be scientific was indefensible, not only because his prediction of communist society did not accord with our experience, but also because his emphasis on the primacy of the economic is one-sided and prejudiced.

The prominence of Nietzsche's philosophy lies in its attempt to provide a philological explanation of the origin of Greek tragedy, in which he identifies and upholds the irrational element in ancient Greek culture represented by Dionysus. As the Antichrist in the history of German philosophy, Nietzsche is no less critical of metaphysics, morality, and Christianity. According to Hösl's judgment, Nietzsche's genealogical account of the emergence of religion and morality contributes to the "the German adventure of crushing the Christian order of values and the creation of an alternative value system that dripped with the desire to kill" (158). Against any universalist democratic ethics,

Nietzsche demands a higher culture of the noble and the strong. His doctrine of the superman and his theory of the will to power replace all theological or religious grounding of values and express his rejection of transcendence.

Contrary to Nietzsche's expressive language, Frege's concept script was a precision instrument that achieved not only absolute clarity in inference, but it also brought about a logical revolution by attempting to ground arithmetic in logic. Although Frege's new logic is incomplete and he was forced by Russell's paradox to abandon his logicistic program, the new logic, compared to the traditional logic, was a much better candidate for providing a foundation for the new science and for accommodating its results and methods. This led to the very fruitful contributions to philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of physics made by the Viennese and Berlin Circles of logical positivism. Characteristic of this movement is its deflationary or anti-realist approach to metaphysical as well as moral statements, such that it recognizes no synthetic a priori judgments. The most prominent figure from this tradition is Wittgenstein, who once claimed that the limits of one's language mean the limits of one's world. The logical and mathematical structures underlying our languages reflect the structures of the world. The late Wittgenstein moved away from his early position, but the boundary of philosophy remained for him to be that of our language. His reflections on rule-following led him to conclude that meaning consists in the concrete use of language and not in any inner image, hence also his rejection of the possibility of private language and his reluctance to recognize any individualistic transcendental grounds of language.

Parallel to the development of logical positivism and Wittgenstein, the enterprise of grounding human and social sciences in reaction to the emergence and domination of natural sciences was undertaken by the Neo-Kantian philosophers, Dilthey, Husserl, and others. Hermann Cohen, founder of the Marburg School, gives a rationalistic interpretation of Judaism as a kind of universalist ethics that preserves its originality and at the same time rejects Zionism. Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert from the Baden School were concerned with the status of the knowledge in human and social sciences in contrast to natural sciences and they made important contributions to the investigation of the role of values. Wilhelm Dilthey tries to ground human sciences in an understanding of psychology and offers a critique of historical reason that objectivizes human mind and philosophical systems on an historical dimension without any idealistic commitment to the validity of any single system. Having lost the religious consciousness characteristic of the Protestantism of traditional German philosophy, Dilthey's historical relativism loses at the same time the religious and ethical claim to

absolute truth. Husserl is the most loyal defender of the traditional concept of reason in the 20th century. Having taken up the influences of Brentano's and Frege's realism, Husserl's phenomenology is a scientific philosophy that seeks to determine the foundation of all the sciences without any theological ambitions. On this basis, his analysis of the phenomena of consciousness takes the relationship between meaning and expression seriously, investigates the dependency relation between contents and the laws that are the a priori conditions of meaningfulness. His phenomenology made not only advances in the investigation of the structure of subjectivity and intentionality, his concept of the life-world also offered a modern alternative to transcendental solipsism and a foundation for regional ontologies of essences. Although Husserl himself was not keen on building a comprehensive system, his phenomenology inspired some of his best students to apply it in new domains, e.g. aesthetics and practical philosophy.

Hösle then ponders in chapter 13 the question whether ideas in German philosophy play any role in the rise of National Socialism or in the hindrance of the opposition to it. He sees in the central figures of the German tradition (i.e. Luther and Kant) the lack of a plausible theory of resistance. The recess of universalist ethics brought about by Nietzsche and logical positivism, coupled with the rise of an anti-democratic right after the First World War in response to the threats of communism and British hegemony, contributes to the weakening of the binding power of an ethical order, paving the way to the emergence of a totalitarian regime. In this light, Hösle offers a critical assessment of Heidegger, whose philosophy redefines and undermines the traditional moral sense of terms such as conscience and guilt. His empty notion of resoluteness, even though it does not necessarily lead to National Socialism, is said to have encouraged the radicalization of irrational convictions.

For the Third Reich period, Arnold Gehlen and Carl Schmitt are picked as the determining figures of German philosophy. Gehlen's pragmatist anthropology, taking into account a broad range of results from various sciences as well as the influence of Fichte but without any transcendental reflection, centers on action and the stabilizing function of social institutions, which are necessary for the constitution of consciousness. However, Gehlen fails to ascribe any moral significance to questioning unjust institutions. Despite the moral repulsiveness of Schmitt's refusal of denazification after the Second World War, the influence of his political philosophy has to be acknowledged. His competence of intellectual history is unusual for a jurist, which enables him to see the plausible continuity between legal and theological concepts. But Hösle points out that Schmitt's reference to the absolute decision as the ultimate ground

of law is as problematic as Heidegger's "resoluteness."

After the Second World War, Germany could no longer retain the special cultural status it enjoyed since Kant. Not only did several intellectuals leave the country, the occupation and integration the country underwent made it impossible to travel further with the especially German philosophical paths. Gadamer's attempt at breaking out of the aporias of historicism increased confusion in human sciences. Despite his concept of the anticipation of completeness that re-established some hermeneutic sense of truthfulness and his attempt at constructing an equivalent of first philosophy, he inspired the deconstructivist undermining of human sciences. The first Frankfurt School, for which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno are the best representatives, reacts against the progress-oriented philosophy of history as well as the culture industry, but carries the Marxist ideal of eliminating concrete suffering through a cooperation with empirical sciences. Its lack of a normative foundation following from a rejection of Kantian ethics becomes the main concern of the second Frankfurt School represented by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. They seek to ground normativity by a theory of intersubjectivity influenced by American pragmatism. Though much originality can be found in the two Frankfurt Schools' social critical stance and Hans Jonas' environmental concern, it becomes clear to Höhle that up to this stage the Spirit of German philosophy has lost much of its earlier appeal.

Part II

Höhle's account of the history of German philosophy shows an admirable intellectual capacity of synthesizing various materials and understanding them in a coherent, unifying manner that pieces together a pessimistic developmental picture. It is a pessimistic picture, because, as the title of the final chapter clearly suggests, it is likely that German philosophy will not exist in the future. Höhle points out sharply and accurately the current conditions of German philosophy that prevent it from having a bright future. The internet culture of our digital era has witnessed an explosion of information and it has become practically impossible to keep track of the works of all intellectuals. This phenomenon significantly dilutes the influence of any intellectual. The trend of specialization in the knowledge industry makes every attempt at system-building untimely and unattractive. And the institutional policy of German universities makes it hard for them to compete with Anglo-American universities, which in comparison offer much better financial support to junior researchers and systematically encourage the academic performance of professors. Given the global trend of technical

specialization and the dominance of English as the lingua franca in the academic world, Germany has now become a “second-rate scientific power,” as Hösle put it. It sounds as if German philosophy has already sung its swan song, and what is left for researchers in German philosophy to do is only preservation of this repertoire of valuable ideas, so that these can be carried by the ark of culture “to the salvific shore of a new beginning” when environmental problems force human civilization to start anew.

The diagnosis in the final chapter that German philosophy has come to a dead end is disputable even if one accepts the preceding account of its historical development. One cannot help but suspect that this lament over the withering of German philosophy is rather a consequence of sticking to the letter (viz. the German language), and not the Spirit, of German philosophy. It is not necessary to restrict the domain of German philosophy to only those works written in German. Although most of the canonical works in German philosophy were written in German, making a logically necessary condition out of a genetic factor is a confusion. When the academic lingua franca in Europe was Latin and German philosophy was still in a nascent stage, tracking the intellectuals who first composed philosophical works in German is the philologically reasonable thing to do in recording how German philosophy came into existence. But over the course of development, it has gained worldwide attention and multilingual contributions. One might argue that contributions in foreign languages are not works *in* German philosophy, but *about* it. For instance, there are numerous careful and sophisticated exegeses on Kant and Hegel in English and although many of them are excellent scholarly works that are useful to readers of German philosophy, they do not extend the scope of German philosophy nor do they determine its course of further development by adding original insights. And when they do, they count as original works in foreign culture. British idealism and French phenomenology can be seen as prime examples of such cases. However, not every case is as clear. For example, as long as one cares not only about the historical *genesis* of Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophy but also their *validity*, ignoring the related works of Peter Strawson, John McDowell, Robert Brandom and others on the ground that they are not German philosophers and their works are not written in German and hence fall outside of the relevant scope, is counterproductive for the prosperity of German idealism. Here we need not draw a rigid line to settle the question whether original, non-German works that take positive reference to German philosophy should be counted as canonical works in German philosophy. Hösle’s historical account informatively and polemically demonstrated what kind of *Sonderweg* the German spirit has travelled, but this path is not an isolated (*abgesondert*) one, instead it has many crosses and sometimes even merges with other

paths. Perhaps it is not Höhle's intention to announce the death of German philosophy when he warns of its extinction, and philosophers in this field should heed the warning; but Höhle gives no advice as to how the withering of German philosophy can be avoided (one even has the impression that it is not avoidable at all).

If Höhle were not so insistent on abstracting from his historiography all Anglophone and Francophone influences, he should observe that, in recent years, the porous spirit (now with a small "s") of German philosophy has crossed other paths, from which it has found new inspirations and directions. Phenomenology and German idealism, two outstanding branches of German philosophy, have seen important transformations after encountering foreign influences. The encounter with speculative realism, neuroscience and cognitive psychology forced phenomenology to defend against naturalistic criticisms or to reconcile them by broadening its own conceptual space. The encounter with American pragmatism, contemporary philosophy of mind and analytic philosophy of language brought idealist philosophers to incorporate ideas from external sources in order to generate a broader and more cogent foundation that would require a conceptual reorientation in epistemology, philosophy of mind, as well as other fields of philosophy. But all these cannot happen without philosophers, who seek not only to study the past history of German philosophy but also to participate in its future course of development, writing and engaging others in English (or other non-German languages), even though it is reasonable to require from them a robust knowledge of the German language. More generally speaking, the institutional structures of philosophy faculties in Germany have become much more diversified, new chairs and institutes that encourage applied ethics and interdisciplinary co-operations on research have been established, to mention only a few; a focus on the interaction of contemporary philosophy of mind and language in Bochum; pioneering works on philosophy of mathematics and science in Munich; analytic German idealism in Leipzig; an interdisciplinary approach to mind and brain in Berlin, etc. Just as it is too early to register these occurrences in any account of the history of German philosophy, it would be premature, too, to say that they evidence its disappearance. German philosophy is no natural object, and as a cultural enterprise undertaken by finite rational beings who do not just think but also feel and will, its essence cannot be the same as that of natural entities.

29 de outubro de 2018 Plato Tse Resenhas German Philosophy, Hegel, History of Being, Husserl, Immanuel Kant, Leibniz, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Ontology, Paracelsus, Phenomenology, political philosophy, Schopenhauer

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