

INTRODUCING...VITTORIO HÖSLE

An interview conducted by Pamela J. Reeve (St. Augustine's Seminary, Toronto School of Theology) and Antonio Calcagno (King's University College at UWO, Editor of Symposium)

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Professor Vittorio Hösle, welcome to Symposium! We are very grateful that you agreed to this interview. Your reputation has grown immensely over the past few years, especially outside of the German-speaking world. You managed to secure *Habilitation* and a professorship at a remarkably young age, and your work, especially *Morals and Politics*, has caused quite a stir in Germany and abroad. We are pleased to be able to introduce you and your ideas to our readership.

1. Professor Hösle, could you tell us a bit about your life, where you were born, what you studied and the general foci of your work?

Autobiographical remarks often sound vain, but since they help to understand the underlying motivations of a philosopher, they may be justifiable. I was born in 1960 in Milan, Italy; I am the son of an Italian mother and a German father. My father was director of the Goethe Institute of Milan, but later he decided to become a professor and so we moved to Germany: First Tübingen, then Regensburg, where he taught Romance literatures at the University. We maintained Italian as our language at home—we were more an Italian family, living abroad and returning at every possible occasion to Italy, than true Germans. I learned German with great difficulties at the age of six and felt as a child always more Italian, even if I only had German citizenship, for Germany did not allow dual citizenship at that time. Today it is different: Now I am both a U.S. and a German citizen.

I received my *Abitur* at the *Humanistisches Gymnasium* at the age of not yet seventeen, two years younger than my fellow students. The education was strict and good: We already studied Latin every day of the week by the fifth grade; and at the age of eleven, unwilling to wait three more years for Ancient Greek to start, I taught it to myself. I began to study at the University of Regensburg in the fall of 1977 and got my PhD in philosophy from the University of Tübingen in the spring 1982 at twenty-one years of age. I also studied at the Universities of Bochum and Freiburg— one of the advantages of the German system was that tuition was free and credits were easily transferred; so you could study at various places and become familiar with very different schools. Excellent also was the institution of *Vorlesung*, in which an expert gave you an overview of his/her knowledge of a certain field—you did not have to write a paper, so you remained merely reproductive, but you achieved a good general education not too frequent among intellectuals today. My major was always philosophy; my minors were first history of science and Latin, then Greek and Sanskrit. The German university at that time was still a paradise of true learning, and I was lucky enough to study with some of the best intellectuals: the extraordinarily broad analytical philosopher Franz von Kutschera, the brilliant Hegelian Dieter Wand-schneider, who has written some of the best works ever on Hegel's logic and philosophy of nature and has kept alive on a very high level the tradition of philosophy of nature and technology, the founder of the new interpretation of Plato and rigorous hermeneutical theorist Hans Krämer, the dedicated Kantian and historian of German Idealism Klaus Düsing, the well-known interpreter of Neo-Platonism and its impact on German Idealism Werner Beierwaltes, these were my philosophical teachers. Furthermore, I was able to learn from the original and witty historian of mathematics Imre Tóth, the thorough historian of medieval theology Charles Lohr, the famous constitutionalist and philosopher of law Ernst Böckenförde, the classical philologist and co-founder of the Plato Tübingen school Konrad Gaiser and particularly from the Sanskrit scholar Paul Thieme, up to date the greatest scholar I have ever met.

My main foci during my studies were Plato and Hegel. I was struck by their similarities and differences, and at the same time I was tormented by the question of whether the history of philosophy was more than a conglomeration of opinions that contradict each other. My dissertation and first book, *Wahrheit und Geschichte* (1984), is in its first part a

philosophy of the history of philosophy, in its second part an application of the general theory to the development of ancient philosophy from Parmenides to Plato. I interpret Parmenides, Anaxagoras and the Sophists as ancient equivalents of Spinoza, Leibniz and the modern Enlightenment, and I see the philosophies of Socrates and Plato as the attempts to re-found ethics and metaphysics on reason, showing many analogies to the philosophies of Kant and the German Idealists. I tried to combine the general approach of Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy with the new historiographical knowledge, and in my second book *Die Vollendung der Tragödie im Spätwerk des Sophokles* (1984) I offered an interpretation of the development of Greek tragedy inspired by Hegel's aesthetics. I returned to both topics later, to Plato in the collection of essays *Platon interpretieren* (2004) as well as in my book on the philosophical dialogue as a literary genre (*Der philosophische Dialog*, 2006), to the tragedians in my book *Die Rangordnung der drei griechischen Tragiker* (2009).

On German Philosophy and its Legacy

2. One of your great philosophical interests is German Idealism. You see in thinkers such as Hegel a means to think through the concrete and objective values of the life of *Geist* or spirit. Could you say a little more on why and what you see as valuable in German Idealism?

German Idealism was the last grand attempt at a unitary vision of reality. Since my first books were inspired by Hegel, I regarded it as my duty to render the guiding categories explicit, and so my *Habilitationsschrift* was dedicated to an analysis of the whole Hegelian system (*Hegels System*, 1987). What is so attractive in it, even if, of course, many details are untenable? First, Hegel believes that the world is in principle intelligible and thus conceptually structured. Concepts are for him not something only subjective, but, like Plato's and Aristotle's *eide*, the essence of reality. One of his major concerns is to develop a coherent system of concepts, and objective idealism means for him that these concepts are both developed *a priori* and able to grasp reality. Concept formation is a decisive task for philosophy, even if mostly neglected in our time. Analytical philosophy is mainly interested in sound arguments, i.e., in correct deductions of propositions. But propositions use concepts, and so the task

of justifying our system of concepts is anterior to the other one, no less important, of justifying our inferences. Hegel's dialectic remains one of the most fascinating methods of forming concepts. Second, Hegel continues Descartes' heritage: He is convinced that mind cannot be reduced to physical properties, but follows its own logic. He pursues this logic not only in the activities of the individual mind but also in the mind's social manifestations in the realms of what he calls objective and absolute spirit. His combination of a complex metaphysics of mentality that tries to render justice to mind's social dimension with the hermeneutical methods that in the 19th century gave German humanities their pre-eminence in the reconstruction of the historical world is something awe-inspiring. Third, Hegel continues Kant's ethics: For both, there is a universally valid moral law, and this law is at the same time grounded in the self-legislation of practical reason. Hegel's great progress beyond Kant consists in combining such a practical philosophy with a deeper understanding of the logic of the social world.

3. There has been a revived interest in German Idealism among Anglo-American philosophers, especially thinkers such as Robert Brandom. Do you see any significant differences between your approach to the rich legacy of German Idealist thought, including Hegel and Marx, and more recent work in the Anglo-American, analytic tradition?

One of the most impressive developments in recent American philosophy is indeed the work by John McDowell and Robert Brandom, inspired by Wilfrid Sellars. I have published on the three authors and acknowledged their enormous importance for a rational reconstruction of basic Hegelian ideas today, such as objective idealism. But there are also things that I miss in their approach. The problem of concept formation is almost absent from their work, which in general remains formalistic and does not try to shed light on concrete manifestations of mind in history.

4. Could you say more about your engagement with and maybe critique of the work of Karl-Otto Apel?

Gadamer, Apel and Habermas were the three most influential German philosophers of the last decades. I found Apel particularly fascinating because he attacked the radical historicism of the Heideggerians (includ-

ing Gadamer) and insisted on a rational foundation of ethics, even developing the concept of ultimate foundation rejected by his friend Habermas. Apel's idea of transforming Kant's transcendental philosophy into an intersubjective form is enormously attractive. My book *Die Krise der Gegenwart und die Verantwortung der Philosophie* (1990) recognises both Apel's lasting achievements and the limits of his approach. On the one hand, I do not believe that the consensus theory of truth is valid: Certainly, if something is true, in the long run it will be recognised as true by rational beings, but it is not the consensus that makes anything true. Even in the case of moral questions, the consensus is not always a necessary or a sufficient condition for the morality of an action. On the other hand, the philosophies of Habermas and Apel to a large degree exclude nature from philosophy, and this explains their difficulties in addressing the environmental issue.

5. Do you think that traditional 20th century phenomenology, maybe even the Realist phenomenological schools, have anything to contribute to understanding the social and political world as concrete, objective spirit?

Philosophy is a complex enterprise, and a good philosopher needs many capacities. Analysing arguments is an indispensable one, but no less being able to describe experiences: And no doubt phenomenology has schooled this capacity. The merit of Realist phenomenology was to overcome the solipsistic threat implicit in the Husserlian enterprise. Nevertheless, the danger of the later phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Sartre was to give up the idea of a plausible foundation; their ethical and political ideas suffered considerably from this weakness. I personally continue to regard Husserl as the unsurpassed master of phenomenology. Unfortunately, he did not do much in the field of ethics—here his congenial pupil is Max Scheler, in my eyes the most brilliant ethicist of the past century.

On Ethics and Our Contemporary Social and Political World

6. In *Morals and Politics*, you argue that contemporary society has ended up splitting ethics from politics, resulting in huge problems—problems

that severely affect our contemporary society and world.¹ I know this is a huge question, but perhaps you could briefly lead us through your thesis?

Clearly, modernity's enormous successes are partly due to granting a limited autonomy to various subsystems, such as erotic love, economy, art, etc. In this context we see also the formation of a new concept of politics as aiming at power, e.g., in Max Weber, even if its roots go back at least to Machiavelli. Now, I do not deny that power is one of the basic concepts of the social world (like force in physics) and that there should be a discipline dealing with the methods of maintaining and increasing power. I dedicate to such a discipline, which I call "cratology," the fifth chapter of my book *Moral und Politik* (1997). But I object to confusing cratology with politics, which must remain connected to the common good.

7. Thinkers such as Foucault or even Nietzsche would argue that there has never been a separation of ethics from politics, because they both fall under the logic and force of power. They would challenge your claim regarding the separation between ethics and politics. In fact, they would argue that perhaps they are identical. How would you respond to such a charge?

One of the more original parts of *Morals and Politics* is the theory, developed in the second chapter, of the complementarity of the moral and the cratic approach. As social fact, every moral theory is also an element in the social force field and, thus, can be analysed according to cratic categories, asking whose power is increased by the defence of a certain moral theory. But this does not answer the question of whether the moral theory is right or wrong—this question remains irreducible to the cratic one. And, of course, a social theory like Foucault's inevitably raises a truth claim, which subjects it to the realm of normativity.

¹ Vittorio Hösle, *Morals and Politics*, (tr.) S. Rendall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MP. Originally published as *Moral und Politik: Grundlagen einer Politischen Ethik für das 21. Jahrhundert* (München: Beck, 1997).

8. It seems that the moral virtue of justice has always been recognised as an integral part of political theory and practice. Nevertheless, your project is to overcome the separation between morals and politics, which you see as having come about in the modern period. But, has the theory and practice of politics been emptied even of considerations of justice and injustice?

Justice is doubtless the decisive normative link between morals and politics. But, first, indeed the decline of the idea of natural law has weakened the commitment of the moral and political order to principles of justice. And, secondly, I offer a much richer moral texture to the political world than mere justice. Even if my theory belongs to the large family of liberal theories and insists on a sharp demarcation between those norms that may be legally enforced and those that must not be enforced, I do believe that the political world can thrive only if it can appeal to norms that go beyond justice, including courage or charity. Thus, the state is well advised to foster rich religious background cultures, even if it can do so best by being formally separated from all churches.

9. In *Morals and Politics*, you refer to history having a certain “logic of development” (MP, 185) and also to the “secret rationality” (MP, 766) behind the course of events, specifically involving the diminution of the number of states through nationalism (e.g., conquest)—as part of a trajectory leading toward the establishment of a universal state or world government. When considering the course of events, especially where this involves social, political, economic and military situations, do you see events as falling into patterns that fit within the logic of the development of spirit (*Geist*)? Does everything potentially fit within this immanent logic, even wars and atrocities?

The whole idea of a philosophy of history presupposes that history is more than a collection of fortuitous events: Certain events can only occur after other structures have prepared them. Giambattista Vico, whose *New Science* I first completely translated, together with Christoph Jermann, into German, remains one of the most captivating theorists of human history. As is well known, his theory explains also the collapse of civilisations, which undoubtedly occurs again and again and may return in connection with ecological catastrophes in the 21st century. Despite the real-

ity of such declines, we are well advised not to give up the idea that moral and legal progress is a duty. It is, however, difficult to believe in such a duty if one does not recognise any progress in real development; thus, the normative theory of progress encourages us to look for evidence of progress on the descriptive level, too, at least at the macro-level and in the long run. And one can hardly deny that moral universalism has transformed human societies since the 18th century and is slowly reaching into the remotest pre-modern civilisations.

This however, does not yet entail that all events are meaningful, even if all of them probably have causes. I regard it as a reasonable strategy, for example, to try to understand the underlying reasons for phenomena like wars: They follow from the lack of a central authority, such as the United Nations or a hegemonic country, and it is hard to conceive how humankind could have moved toward building larger political units without the use of violence. Of course, such an interpretation becomes unacceptable if it is used to justify wars now, when there are other ways of forming a united political will among nations. And, certainly, the contribution of folly and malice to human misery has always been notable. But it is unsatisfying to reduce all catastrophes to them, refusing to look at the underlying structural constraints.

10. Regarding determinism, in *MP* you state (with reference to probabilities), “Since I do not exclude a thoroughgoing determinism, it may well be that how the die will fall is always predetermined.” (*MP*, 141) You later refer to the possibility that “every act, and even every idea, is predetermined.” (*MP*, 685) Do you hold a determinist view regarding human existence and action? How would determinism relate to the idea that the historical course of events has an inner logic of development?

I am certainly a compatibilist, i.e., I do believe that our normal understanding of freedom does not exclude that actions chosen by a person fit into a deterministic world. If we were sure that all actions are predetermined, this would hardly alter our behaviour toward other people (the main change would extend to ourselves and lead to a new interpretation of remorse). Also, from a theological point of view, I do not believe that the free will defence that we find, e.g., in Alvin Plantinga’s *Nature and Necessity*, is necessary for the solution of the theodicy problem. An

analogous solution can be reformulated within a deterministic world-view, as Leibniz has shown.

This being said, I am not sure that we live in a deterministic world. But I take this possibility very seriously and indeed see certain advantages connected to it: Certain axiologically desirable states could then be achieved by God without any intervention into the causal order, simply by determining the initial conditions and the system of the laws of nature.

11. Do you see the recent economic crisis as a direct result of present-day attitudes toward ethics and politics?

There is little doubt that the erroneous belief that profit is the only criterion that should guide economic activity has led to the partial crash of the banking system. We need changes both on the institutional side and on the individual moral level. It is naïve to appeal only to the latter because no one wants to play the role of the good-hearted fool—and so there is also a need for a legal framework that prevents socially harmful behaviour from being profitable. But it is no less naïve to believe that laws alone are sufficient—the inventiveness of finding ways of evading them is remarkable, and there must be a shared moral consensus that certain behaviour is despicable, even if it manages to avoid punishment by the law. At the same time, it is important to insist that the state's duties are limited to being a guardian of the market—it is false to believe that a state monopoly in an economic area will lead to less corruption.

12. Regarding the global financial crisis and consequent economic downturn: This has led to questions about the viability of capitalism and the market economy. You have written that “everyone can benefit from a capitalist economy, *if* the profits are appropriately distributed.” (MP, 706) Nevertheless, in light of growing inequality in the world, now further exacerbated by the economic downturn, is it possible that this condition of capitalism has been so compromised that an alternative economic system needs to be considered?

The search for alternative economic systems has not been very successful. But clearly the liberalisation of the last two decades has gone too far. On the one hand, the state must develop and enforce rules that prevent

the meltdown we have just witnessed, for example, by fixing higher amounts of the capital a bank must own itself, and by forbidding certain too-risky operations at the expense of clients who were often not well enough informed. On the other hand, we need a stronger moral education of economic actors, including consumers, who must be deterred from accumulating debts that are not investments but shackles and dangers for the rest of the economy.

13. One of your great concerns is the ecological crisis that we are undergoing. How do you see your own philosophy contributing to helping restore some kind of environmental balance?

I had my first tenured appointment at the New School for Social Research in New York, where I had the great honour to meet Hans Jonas. Even more than his eco-philosophical best-seller *The Imperative of Responsibility*, it was his splendid philosophy of biology in *The Phenomenon of Life* that overwhelmed me. Even if Jonas was a pupil of Heidegger, I saw a remarkable continuity with the tradition of German *Naturphilosophie*; and I understood that such a philosophy of nature could offer a basis for an ecological ethics that avoided both the extremes of naturalism and of strong anthropocentrism. If we are only parts of nature, there are no moral norms (after all, the extinction of species is quite a natural process). But if it is only humans who have an intrinsic value, we can appeal only to intergenerational justice and will have difficulties motivating people, who will hardly act for unknown persons' sake. The education of the capacity of feeling value in nature is in my eyes crucial in order to alter our behaviour, and various concepts of nature are impediments to this capacity. I published in my *Philosophie der ökologischen Krise* (1991) lectures I was invited to deliver in Moscow at the Academy of Sciences in the penultimate year of the Soviet Union. Here, I argue, among other reasons, the ecological crisis also has at its root misleading concepts of the nature of nature.

14. In *Morals and Politics*, as well as your recent essay comparing the U.S. and European Union published in this volume, you acknowledge the U.S. as “the only superpower” and the most powerful state on earth in military and economic terms. Nevertheless, the financial crisis has left the U.S. with a \$9 trillion deficit over the next decade (the most recent

estimate as of 25 August 2009), which raises the prospect of a certain tension between its domestic and military commitments. Even in *MP*, you recognise the conflict between the need of the U.S. to allocate resources to military expenditures while also building up the welfare state. It seems the latter is especially pressing right now with the economic downturn and additional funds needed to support universal health care. In a recent article, Chalmers Johnson maintains that the U.S. faces the likelihood of a collapse similar to that of the Soviet Union unless it liquidates its worldwide empire of almost nine hundred military bases.² At the same time, it seems that such a withdrawal could significantly change the balance of power in the world. What dangers and/or opportunities do you see for the U.S. and the world in these circumstances?

My view of the U.S.A. in 1997 when *Moral und Politik* came out was more positive than after eight years of the Bush presidency. It is profoundly disturbing how the moral credit of the U.S.A. was lost in an unjust war, how the budget deficit, which Bush's father had begun to fix, grew astronomically, and how cooperation with the United Nations was wilfully neglected. We all can only hope that Obama will find a way back to an intelligent and responsible multilateralism. And I say "we all," because I do think that the U.S.A.'s maintaining a position of primacy will render the international arena less unpredictable and dangerous. The rest of the world will be willing to accept such a hegemony for some time, if the U.S. government takes a leading role in addressing some of the pressing planetary problems, such as climate change. But it is clear that the American hegemony will come to an end soon, probably in a decade or so, with China and later also India coming into positions of economic parity. It is of utmost importance that the transition to the new equilibrium be done peacefully, and this means by strengthening the existing international institutions and forming new ones. Globalisation is the engine that drives the formation of a world civil society, and such a global society will need some form of global government within a few decades.

² Chalmers Johnson, "Three Good Reasons to Liquidate Our Empire," in *The Huffington Post*, 30 July 2009 [<http://www.webcitation.org/5n6hu9lsw>].

15. Simmel argued that money, especially as it plays itself out in large urban centres, all centres of economic and political power, helped produce and cultivate a blasé attitude toward values, maybe even objective values, deeply rooted in the life of *Geist*. Money made everything quantifiable and left very little room outside this flattening equation, as it changed our attitude toward life and things and people. Do you think money and materialism do quantify and flatten the life of Spirit? Can Marx offer anything to our present-day thinking on this issue?

No doubt Simmel's analysis is correct, and intelligent criticism of late modernity's cultural system remains a desideratum. One of the reasons why some old pupils of the First Frankfurt School dislike the Second Frankfurt School is that the latter did not prove able to continue the criticism of the former. Apel and Habermas were, and for good reasons, so busy with finding better foundations than Horkheimer and Adorno's neo-Marxism offered that they almost forgot the project of pointing to the questionable aspects of late modern culture—aspects which the aristocratic aesthete Adorno felt very acutely. I would certainly welcome an exhaustive phenomenology of vulgarity!

16. In *MP* you write that “the alternative major ideology of modernity, Marxism, has finally disintegrated in recent years, and the utopian upswing it inspired has evaporated.” (*MP*, 609) Nevertheless, there appears to be a resurgence of socialism in certain Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, where Hugo Chávez is proceeding to implement what he calls “Socialism for the 21st century.” What is your perspective on these developments?

I am very sceptical that Chavez' populism will lead to positive long-term results. The main problem with these Latin American populists is that they lack a basic respect for the separation of powers, without which an abuse of power is extremely likely to occur, no matter how well-intentioned the rulers are. This said, one cannot help admiring Cuba for its health system and the generosity with which Cuban doctors have helped in other developing countries.

On Philosophy

17. You are very critical of philosophy today. This is well known. What do you think is wrong-headed or lacking, and why?

My criticism of institutionalised philosophy is mainly directed against the enormous specialisation that has occurred in the last decades. On the one hand, this seems to be an inevitable result of further progress in the various sub-disciplines. On the other hand, the whole idea of philosophy is oriented toward an overview of the whole of being, and it is naïve to believe that one can, e.g., detach ethics from metaphysics, and vice versa. Another difficult issue is the relation to the history of philosophy. In the Continental tradition, it has almost replaced the search for truth *intentione recta*, but in the analytical tradition the ignorance of the greatest works of our tradition is sometimes disconcerting. I am a great admirer of the American university system, but the lack of basic disciplines such as hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology in this country's philosophy departments in my eyes is a serious problem. I am often shocked when I find philosophers who do not understand any foreign languages and have hardly read anything of Dante, Goethe or Tolstoy. You can hardly be a good philosopher if you are only a good philosopher. In any case, it is one of the peculiarities of our age that there are hardly any universally recognised master philosophers alive—if they still exist, they are very old.

18. According to your essay, “Foundational Issues of Objective Idealism,” your philosophical thought is founded on a non-hypothetical, presuppositionless starting point, consistent with the philosophies of Plato and Hegel.³ You use the phrase “absolute reason” to describe the conceptual thought that grasps ideal validities. Nevertheless, reason and inference seem to imply discursive thinking as opposed to intellectual intuition. Does the founding cognition in your objective idealism involve a discursive or non-discursive activity? Would you describe it as a participation in the divine mind?

³ Vittorio Hösle, “Foundational Issues of Objective Idealism,” in *Objective Idealism, Ethics, and Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 1–40. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FI.

The central idea behind the program of ultimate foundation is the desire to avoid the dualism between reason and intuition. Discursive activity is usually understood as proceeding through deduction from some axioms, which are themselves merely given to intuition. But this is unsatisfying, for in such a manner every person can appeal to her own intuitions and then with equal rigour come to very different conclusions. The idea of a transcendental foundation aims at finding a third way between intuition and deduction, namely by showing that certain principles are inevitably presupposed in any act that claims intersubjective validity. In grasping such principles we indeed participate in a mind that can be no longer understood as a mere result of biological or historical evolution, and this for the reason that it is the *conditio sine qua non* of forming any theory on biological and historical evolution.

19. In *FI*, you describe finite thinking as participating in something prior to itself, not merely as subjective, which is both ideal and exists entirely independently of finite consciousness: “the most hidden,” “the innermost, the center of thinking, underlying every being and presupposed in every thought.” (*FI*, 37) Nevertheless this ideal realm also “institutes intersubjectivity.” (*Ibid.*) You acknowledge that the absence of intersubjectivity is a “crucial defect” in the objective idealism of Plato and Hegel and indicate your view that “the thought of a subject-object identity, which is central for any objective idealism, immanently points to something like intersubjectivity.” (*FI*, 38) The phrase “immanently points to” seems to indicate a kind of implication. While there is no doubt about the reality of the “I think” within this radically reflective interiority, is the reality of the intersubjective “other” also immediately discerned or is it only implied? What is the nature of the metaphysical reality of intersubjectivity at this primordial level?

My argument is fundamentally axiological. The subject-subject-identification is a higher form of relation than the subject-object-identification, for it replaces the object by a subject. Thus, I do think that the aim of transcendental philosophy cannot simply be the formation of a world which is ultimately intelligible by a single mind, but a plurality of minds that approach each other and try to comprehend each others’ selves as well as their images of the objective world. This is the basic

structure of reality, and not simply the lonely *cogito* of Descartes and Husserl. True enough, in the fifth Cartesian Meditation, Husserl tries to articulate a theory of intersubjectivity, but it starts from the empirical fact that there are other objects given with a body similar to mine. I think that there is an axiological reason behind this empirical fact.

20. In your discussion of philosophical theology in your essay, “The Idea of a Rationalistic Philosophy of Religion,” you hint at the possibility of a form of rational mysticism similar to what one finds in Plato and the Neo-Platonists. At one point, you state that the interpretation of God as Reason “to be found inside our core...shows a surprising familiarity to one of the most important strand[s] in religious life—mysticism,” adding that “we get to God by trying to capture what forms the core of our self.”⁴ This seems to suggest the possibility of a practice of philosophical theology not only as an academic discipline, but an actual *itinerarium mentis in deum*. Do you see this as a legitimate path to God, arising perhaps from the predominance of an intellectual disposition, in contrast to the more affective and relational approach often emphasised in Christianity?

My own position regarding the question whether the access to God is intellectual or emotional is indeed synthetic. A merely emotional approach cannot be recognised as intersubjectively valid, but this does not mean that the intellectual approach must not be emotionally transformative. On the contrary, the insight into God clearly should cleanse our emotions. Thus, I defend the tradition of philosophical mysticism, so subtly proposed by Meister Eckhart. Eckhart uses complex arguments and is essentially a rationalist; he does not limit himself to describing religious experiences. But he shows how the insight into God reshapes our relation to the world, to other human beings, to our own self. Spinoza, albeit in a very different form, continues this tradition of philosophical mysticism.

21. A huge theme in your work is responsibility. Could you explain what you think responsibility is and its importance for philosophy in particular?

⁴ Vittorio Hösle, “The Idea of a Rationalistic Philosophy of Religion and Its Challenges,” in *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie*, Band 6 (2007), 168–69.

Philosophy must be more than a leisurely activity. It is an enormous privilege in a world in which many people have still to engage in hard physical work—and the other side of this privilege can only be that philosophers, and intellectuals in general, must try to give something back to society that finances them. Philosophy, in particular, must make a serious effort to answer ultimate normative questions such as: What is just? If one comes to the conclusion that such efforts are doomed to fail, it is more honest to give up philosophy and do something else.

22. Many feel that philosophy has come to a standstill, that it is incapable of dealing with the challenges faced by us today. Is this true? What can philosophers do to change this? What is their responsibility?

Clearly, the problems that vex us, such as the environmental one, presuppose a cooperation of philosophers with natural and social scientists. I sometimes think that the integration of philosophers into different departments may be a reasonable alternative to putting them in their own department. In any case, I am sure that the university of the future will work more and more around issues and not departments. Departments are important insofar as they check quality, but they can also strangle creative, often inevitably interdisciplinary, solutions.

23. You are also a Professor of Literature. What can literature and the study of literature contribute to philosophical understanding?

One of the most valid insights of Hegel's aesthetics is that art has a truth claim. It is different from the normal one: Paradoxically, it is the fictional nature of art that allows it to have insights into truths that philosophy grasps much later. I have three distinct interests in literature. First of all, it sheds light on ethical and political issues—Shakespeare's *Histories*, e.g., are an incredible repository of political insights, and thus they are often present in my book *Moral und Politik*. Secondly, I am interested in developing categories for the various forms of art, particularly general concepts such as the tragic and the comic (see my book *Woody Allen*, 2007). And, thirdly, in the last years I have employed literary forms for the expression of my thought, as the dialogue on the mind-body-problem *Encephalius*, the counter-aphorisms to the great Colombian reactionary Gómez Dávila, or the sarcastic *Apologie der Postmoderne*. It all began

with *Das Café der toten Philosophen* (1996), a book translated already into thirteen languages that contains a real exchange of letters with a girl, who at the beginning was eleven, at the end thirteen years old. Despite the reality of the letters, doubted by many reviewers, *within* the letters fictional dialogues in the dead philosophers' café are devised, the most beautiful always by the young girl, Nora.

24. Professor Hösle, where do you see your present work heading? Could you tell us more about your projects and future goals?

I am now writing a brief history of German philosophy for C.H. Beck. Having lived for more than a decade in the U.S.A., I am interested in the question of what is peculiar to the German philosophical tradition, what distinguishes it, for example, from the British and French traditions. But in the long run, I want to write a hermeneutic, i.e., a theory of what is a legitimate and what is an illegitimate interpretation. The normative stance will distinguish this work from Gadamer's and all his postmodern followers' stances.

25. What do you think is the state of contemporary German philosophy? Are there any figures in contemporary German philosophy that you think we as philosophers should be paying more attention to?

I have already mentioned my teachers Wandschneider, Krämer, Kutschera, who are not yet well known here. But also Manfred Wetzel or Heinrich Schmitz are enormously talented, encyclopaedic philosophers. Among the young ones I mention only Markus Gabriel, who, still in his twenties, recently became Full Professor in Bonn. And who knows what will become of Nora, now writing her dissertation...

26. Although you are critical of much contemporary philosophy, you also see the prospect that philosophy may play a role in the current crisis affecting humanity. In *MP* you write that philosophy has the potential to "discover a hidden meaning in the present situation" (*MP*, 620) and that it can critically accompany the formation of a new world ethos. Are there currently any philosophers besides yourself whose work you see as developing this project?

Of course, there are a great number of very interesting philosophers today! The problem that I see, however, is that our information system has become so diffuse that it takes far more time to discover persons with analogous intentions than in earlier times, when you quickly gained an overview of those working in the same field. We have now become so many that even after many years of publishing one often discovers fascinating books and articles by persons who pursue analogous ideas.

27. In *Morals and Politics*, you conclude the chapter on “The State and Its History” with a reflection on the “religious structural conditions” of the world political situation. (MP, 618–21) This seems just as relevant 12 years later—one could see, for example, in the current financial/economic crisis the inevitable outcome of “the neutralisation of theology, metaphysics, and increasingly, ethics in the program of quantitative economic growth.” (MP, 619) In this section, you refer to the need to address the lack of an orientation to the Absolute in the socio-economic and political situation of late modernity—not only theoretically but also involving the implementation of a motivational force that would have the power to change behaviour: “Without a substantial religious taming, modernity will...not survive.” (MP, 620) At the same time, you indicate further problems with such a programme, arising from the fact that historically the universal religions (of which there are more than one) have been prone to aggression, while at the same time merely human attempts to construct a new religion are doomed to fail. What is your current perspective on the religious structural conditions of world politics? What evidence do you see for advancement toward realising the “ultimate meaning of history?” (MP, 621)

What has become obvious to every unbiased observer is that the secularisation thesis does not work: Religion will remain with us. But it will be transformed, as it has changed throughout its history. Clearly, fundamentalism has to be defeated—but this will be possible only if a view is proposed that is intellectually more substantial than the mixture of naturalism and appeal to rational egoism that has become the least common denominator of the secular view. The elaboration of a philosophically purified interpretation of the various religious traditions will then also be the foundation of fruitful interreligious dialogue; otherwise people will either only maintain their own peculiar position and try to convert the other to

it, or an external stance will be proposed, which is neutral but in which the meaning of religion evaporates.

Regarding your second question, I am not a naïve optimist. I am afraid that the environmental problem will not only prevent the continuation of our lifestyle, but lead to a crash of many cherished moral, political, economic and religious beliefs. Such things usually do not happen smoothly, and, thus, the fear that the 21st century will be a bloody one is realistic. Still, as a metaphysical optimist I do believe that behind all the changes and suffering that we witness, the force of reason is operating. Globalisation is an awe-inspiring phenomenon, which translates into political reality the conviction that all humans are equal, a conviction that is incompatible with the concentration of power in Europe and North America. I welcome from the bottom of my heart the rise of Asia. Being married to a Korean, I am particularly fascinated by how South Korea has managed to develop economically and build up a stable democracy so quickly and by how vibrant Christianity is in this country. I do not doubt that humankind will be able in the long run to find a world ethos appropriate to its situation as differentiated into a magnificent web of various cultures and a vulnerable species within nature. But the way toward it will be torturous and philosophically challenging.

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