

PhD Thesis Evaluation Report

by dr. Hab. Jan F. Jacko, prof. UJ

Thesis title: *On Truth and Totalitarianism: Assessing Contemporary Relevance of Dietrich von Hildebrand's Political Philosophy*

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SUMMARY

The dissertation consists of 5 sections and 281 pages, with an extensive bibliography. Section 1 presents the historical context of Dietrich von Hildebrand's political struggle against national socialism, communism, nationalism and racism (the political situation in Germany and Austria before the second world war and his biography of this time). This section supposes some similarities between the political situation of that time and the present situation in Europe and Russia. The author maintains that the current war in Ukraine exemplifies this similarity. He argues that the ideology of liberalism is similar at some points to the ideology of National Socialism and communism. Section 2 discusses some philosophical inspirations of Hildebrand's thought, especially the project of philosophical investigations, according to "early" Edmund Husserl and the early Munich and Göttingen circles. This section presents some ideas of Husserl, Max Scheler, and Adolf Reinach, which Hildebrand shares. The section also presents his main points of disagreement with these philosophers. Section 3 introduces the main ontological, anthropological and ethical theses of Hildebrand's conception of persons and society. This presentation embraces his conception of values and value perception, person, love and community theory. Section 4 sums up Hildebrand's epistemological, anthropological, ethical, socio-political, cultural and religious arguments against national socialism and communism ("Bolshevism," "Leninism"). The study supposes that these ideologies share "the false anthropology that negates the spiritual sphere of the person, separates it from God and the world of values" (p. 162). The author maintains that

these ideologies carried out the "final consequences of anti-personalism," which is typical for contemporary liberal thought. In section 5, the author attempts to show the contemporary relevance of Hildebrand's political philosophy. This section recapitulates his critique of (epistemological and metaethical) relativism. In this context, the dissertation presents the idea of human dignity, fundamental human rights and moral responsibility according to the premises of Hildebrand, which section 3 introduced.

ADVANTAGES

In the thesis Abstract, the author sets two main goals:

- (1) "the main purpose of the dissertation is to thoroughly examine Hillebrand's philosophical arguments against National Socialism, communism and liberalism..."
- (2) "...to assess whether and to what extent they are still useful for understanding the modern political phenomena."

In the Introduction, the author mentions some sub-aims (which specify aim 2). The thesis is also:

- (3) "to investigate whether there are the same erroneous political ideas that Hillebrand recognised in his day are still present in today's society. More concretely ...whether and in which form today exists dethronement of truth, negation of objective morality, anti personalism, instrumentation of religion, omnipotence of the state and deification of the collective (p. 4).
- (4) "examine how the potential totalitarian tendencies relate to the modern liberal-democratic society" (p. 4)
- (5) to formulate a "judgment on whether Hildebrand's political philosophy sheds light on the complex situation we live today" (p. 5)

The structure of the study is correct and promises extremely interesting research, which embraces two research gaps. On the one hand, the text presents the logical compatibility of Hildebrand's political writings with his philosophical concepts. On the other hand, the thesis aims to explain how his philosophical critiques relate to contemporary political and social phenomena.

The dissertation presents some similarities between apparently opposite political doctrines – national socialism and communism on the one side and liberalism on the other. The dissertation's author sees their similarity "in using ideology to dethrone the truth and objective morality" (p. 3). As the author argues, their main similarity is in legitimating abuses of political power. These remarks are exciting because they outline a project of further investigation on the premises of these doctrines and their common operational meaning.

The study correctly presents the philosophical inspirations and ideas of Hildebrand. The study well covers the existing literature in the relevant field. The work offers a literature synthesis that is not just a summary. The text shows the conceptual unity of Hildebrand's philosophy and life. It is a sound study of his thought, contributing to the state of knowledge about the philosophy of Hildebrand. The biographical remarks outline events in his life and work, which elucidate the origin of his philosophical ideas. Historical and conceptual analyses of the thesis contribute to the study of his thought and life. This contribution is predominantly historical and analytical.

The study recapitulates Hildebrand's conception of philosophical prejudices (pp. 45-46). The dissertation orders the political intuitions of Hillebrand in the typology of "truth-like idols". It presents these idols' risks in internal and external politics (pp. 232 - 225). The study develops these intuitions in discussion with Karl Popper's idea of "fallibilist absolutism" and democracy as an "institutional framework" (p. 237-240, 254-255). The thesis presents Jacques Maritain's discussion of the "liberal" method to ground fundamental human rights (p. 241). The thesis adopts the psychological analysis of Erich Fromm to explain mental mechanisms that lead toward a social acceptance of political authoritarianism and totalitarianism (p. 243-244).

The dissertation embraces the state of research on Hildebrand's thought by presenting the development of his ideas by representatives of "realist phenomenology," who consider themselves the heirs of his philosophical thought. These analyses prove that the author can understand complex concepts and knows how to fittingly compare and present them in a comprehensible way.

SHORTCOMINGS

The author has not specified the methods of his investigation. Consequently, it is unclear how the author reaches the thesis goals specified above. The reader must guess the methods from the way they are applied.

There is a disproportion in accomplishing goal 1 and other work goals (2-5). This disproportion is remarkable in the quantity of the text. The author devotes 153 (72-225) pages to presenting Hildebrand's views and the critique of his time's national socialism, communism and liberalism (goal 1). Only 34 (226-260) pages present the use of his views in interpreting or evaluating contemporary phenomena (goals 2-5). However, the problem is not in the number of pages. It is a problem of methodology. The thesis's author mentions that Hildebrand's analyses "offer the quality method for interpreting the political phenomena of the present" (p. 2). One can use this method to reach goals 2-5. However, the thesis shows only some logical and practical incompatibilities of Hildebrand's theses with the theses of theories or ideologies, which he criticises. This comparison is not using this method. It is mainly a protocol of discrepancy between the theses. To use the method, one should phenomenologically investigate their justification to show why some ideas and practices are right or wrong.

The dissertation author criticises some current conceptions that he names "Marxism" and "liberalism" without presenting them carefully enough to identify their conceptual identity. For example, the following definition of liberalism does not much help to identify this conception and distinguish it from similar ones: "... a certain atheistic and materialistic worldview, and not a certain political system ... which is characterised by relativism, materialism, [the] negation of the free will, atheism etc." (p. 159-160) The author criticises some erroneous postulates and theorems that may follow conceptions of Marxism and liberalism. However, it is unclear whether these errors are the effects of some misinterpretation or whether these errors are essential characteristics of these conceptions.

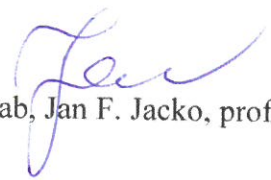
Perhaps to better present the actuality of Hildebrand's thought, one needs to go beyond the framework of Hildebrandology (the study of his thought) and consider the political ideas of thinkers who follow his ideas. For example, Rocco Buttigione's critique of some streams of contemporary neo-Marxism and (ethical, economic) liberalism may cast some light on the topicality of Hildebrand's political thought today. Especially his recent publications are worthy of consideration (the thesis refers to the only publication of this author, which is about Hildebrand's philosophy of history).

The text is in English. I have found only one spelling error in English ("from" instead of "form," p. 227, line 18) and German (p. 68, line 17: "fremdpesonal" should be "fremdpersonal"). The philosophical writing style can be improved by defining the essential terms of the study. For example, one can define the catchy slogan "dethronement of truth" in

terms of epistemology and metaethics. The same refers to the crucial term “relativism”, which may denote various positions in the literature. The author uses the term in several meanings (metaphysical, epistemological, normative relativism) without indicating their senses.

CONCLUSION

In my perception, the advantages overweight the disadvantages of the thesis. I evaluate the work positively for the following reasons: The study contributes to the study of Hildebrand's thought. The investigation identifies and deals with some gaps in this study. Although the thesis does not fully reach goals 2-5, the text outlines a research plan to reach them. This research design is also a contribution to the study of the ideas of Hildebrand. Consequently, in my opinion, The thesis of Hrvoje Vargić fulfils the requirements of obtaining the PhD, and I recommend the dissertation for further stages of the PhD procedure.


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