

A Short History
of German Philosophy



A Short History of German Philosophy



Vittorio Hösle

TRANSLATED BY STEVEN RENDALL

Princeton University Press
Princeton & Oxford

Originally published as *Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie* by
Vittorio Hösle

© Verlag C.H.Beck oHG, München 2013

English translation © 2017 by Princeton University Press

Preface to the English translation © 2017

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New
Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

This publication has been generously supported by the Institute for
Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at the University of Notre Dame.

Jacket art courtesy of Lebrecht Music and Arts Photo Library/Alamy

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hösle, Vittorio, 1960- author. | Rendall, Steven, translator.

Title: A short history of German philosophy / Vittorio Hosle ; Translated by
Steven Rendall.

Other titles: Kurze Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie. English

Description: Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2016. | "Originally
published as *Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie* by Vittorio
Hösle (c) Verlag C.H.Beck oHG, Munchen 2013." | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016007315 | ISBN 9780691167190 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy, German--History.

Classification: LCC B2521 .H67 2016 | DDC 193--dc23 LC record available
at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016007315>

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Garamond Premier Pro and Aldus LT Std

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF MY MOTHER,
CARLA GRONDA HÖSLE (1929-2015), WHO FOR
HER HUSBAND AND HER CHILDREN'S SAKE
LIVED FAR AWAY FROM HER BELOVED ITALY

CONTENTS

- Translator's Note* ix
Preface to the English Translation xi
- 1 Does German Philosophy Have a History? And Has There Ever Been a "German Spirit"? 1
 - 2 The Birth of God in the Soul: The Beginnings of German-language Philosophizing in the Middle Ages in the Work of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa's Consummation and Demolition of Medieval Thought 13
 - 3 The Change in the Philosophical Situation Brought about by the Reformation: Paracelsus's New Natural Philosophy and the "No" in Jakob Böhme's God 29
 - 4 Only the Best Is Good Enough for God: Leibniz's Synthesis of Scholasticism and the New Science 39
 - 5 The German Ethical Revolution: Immanuel Kant 57
 - 6 The Human Sciences as a Religious Duty: Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, the Early Romantics, and Wilhelm von Humboldt 82
 - 7 The Longing for a System: German Idealism 97
 - 8 The Revolt against Christian Dogmatics: Schopenhauer's Discovery of the Indian World 129
 - 9 The Revolt against the Bourgeois World: Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx 139

- 10 The Revolt against Universalistic Morals: Friedrich Nietzsche 156
 - 11 The Exact Sciences as a Challenge and the Rise of Analytic Philosophy: Frege, the Viennese and Berlin Circles, Wittgenstein 176
 - 12 The Search for a Foundation of the Human Sciences and the Social Sciences in Neo-Kantianism and Dilthey, and Husserl's Exploration of Consciousness 193
 - 13 Is Philosophy Partly to Blame for the German Catastrophe? Heidegger between Fundamental Ontology and the History of Being 217
 - 14 National Socialist Anthropology and Political Philosophy: Arnold Gehlen and Carl Schmitt 232
 - 15 The Federal Republic's Adaptation to Western European Normality: Gadamer, the Two Frankfurt Schools, and Hans Jonas 241
 - 16 Why We Cannot Assume That There Will Continue to Be a German Philosophy 263
- Index of Names* 269

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Translations of texts quoted in this book have been taken from the following:

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Scribner's, 1958, 1986.

Ludwig Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian [sic] Evans. 2nd ed., London, 1890.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter L. Heath. University of Virginia Press, 1993.

———, *The Way towards the Blessed Life*, trans. W. Smith, 1849.

Gottlob Frege, "Concept Script: A Formal Language of Pure Thought Modelled on That of Arithmetic," trans. S. Bauer-Mengelberg. In *From Frege to Gödel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879–1931*. Harvard University Press, 1967.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Anticipation of Completeness." In Georgia Warnke, *The Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason*, Stanford University Press, 1987.

———, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford University Press, 1967; trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," trans. in Craig Hanks, ed., *Technology and Values*, Chichester UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. E. Paul and C. Paul. London: Routledge, 1933.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck. New York: Liberal Arts, 1956.

- , *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, trans. John Ladd. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.
- , *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, trans. Salo Ryazanskaya. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- , *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- , *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- , *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1996.
- , *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1997.
- Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *A History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. A. Bowie. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- , *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953.
- , *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and Brian McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- All other translations are by Steven Rendall.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

It is with pleasure and pride that I welcome the English translation of this short history of German philosophy, coming out of such a distinguished American university press only a few years after the original, which was published in 2013. (The only earlier translation is a Korean one, which appeared in 2015.) In Germany, the book has already had a remarkable impact, as the various reviews, both in newspapers¹ and in academic journals,² show—reviews of various length, various quality, and originating from various backgrounds. Since not everybody correctly understood the aim of this book, I want to use the occasion of this preface to clarify my purposes, which are even more in need of articulation for an Anglophone public that is probably less familiar than a German audience with certain basic traits of German philosophy, a

¹ I name only some of the reviews that I have seen: Achim Vesper in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* 2013–03–09, L 15; Johannes Saltzwedel in *KulturSPIEGEL* 2013–02–25; Felix Dirsch in *Junge Freiheit* 2013–05–10; Thomas Brose in *Christ in der Gegenwart* 64 (2013), 238; Stefan Diebitz in *literaturkritik.de*, no. 5, 2013; Pierfrancesco Basile in *Tagesanzeiger* 2013–08–07; Thomas Meyer in *Die Zeit* 2014–6–22; Anna-Verena Rosthoff in *Der blaue Reiter* 36 (2015). Shortly before the publication of the book, Carsten Dutt interviewed me about it: “Zur Lage der Philosophie,” in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* VI/3 (2012), 58–72.

² Again, I offer a selection: Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer in *Philosophische Rundschau* 60 (2013), 241–242; Jörg Noller in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 120 (2013), 448–451; Jens Petersen in *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 99 (2013), 434–438; Josef Schmidt in *Theologie und Philosophie* 88 (2013), 585–590; Gregor Sans in *Stimmen der Zeit* 138 (2013), 713–714; Detlef Horster in *Zeitschrift für Individualpsychologie* 38 (2013), 327–329; Reinhard Mehring in *Philosophischer Literaturanzeiger* 67 (2014), 146–152; Ulrich Arnswald in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 62 (2014), 843–845. Among non-German reviewers, I mention Robert Puzia in *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 62 (2014), 87–90, and Emma Fleury in *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 1/2014, 185–187. In the following, I respond also to objections in personal letters that I received.

philosophy so markedly different from what the discipline has become, particularly in the United States.

1. The main questions asked by the reviewers have of course been: How is “German philosophy” defined? And: Is it a reasonable enterprise to write about it? Since the definition of a term is to a large degree arbitrary, it is the second question that has to be tackled first, for German philosophy has to be defined in such a way that narrating its history makes sense. But whatever definition is proposed, can it ever make sense? Is it not obvious that German philosophers were influenced by non-German thinkers, both from Antiquity and from the more recent past? And does not focusing on German thought alone discriminate against the two other major modern European philosophical traditions, the French and the British, to which one can add, even if its influence was on a somewhat lesser level, the Italian?

The answer can only be that of course German philosophy is not an isolated part of world philosophy—no more than any other national philosophical tradition. It would be indeed far more satisfying to write a global history of philosophy, rendering due attention to all the connections that exist between the thinkers of the past. (Such connections are both causal and structural—for certain patterns of thought recur in the history of philosophy, independently of causal connections.³) And since philosophy is part of a general culture, the history of philosophy should be written in the context of a comprehensive history of ideas, which encompasses also the history of the sciences and of the arts.⁴ The problem, however, is

³ I myself have dealt with the macrostructures of the history of Western philosophy in my book *Wahrheit und Geschichte. Studien zur Struktur der Philosophiegeschichte unter paradigmatischer Analyse der Entwicklung von Parmenides bis Platon*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1984. The third part of the book on philosophy after Plato, however, is far too sketchy; but I still think that the theory captures some basic structures.

⁴ James Turner has recently shown in his masterful *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, 2014) how the fragmentation of a unitarian project of philology produced the modern humanities.

that there are not many people who could tackle such a project. The author of this book at least recognizes that it is beyond his forces. For most people, it is necessary and generally acknowledged as legitimate to focus on a segment of the history of philosophy, whether on a single author or on a single epoch, such as the philosophy of the seventeenth century.

But why focus on a single culture? Is this not anachronistic in an age of increasing globalization, and—worse—does it not surreptitiously support nationalistic thinking? I think the last chapter of this book will suffice to answer this charge.⁵ We live indeed in an age of increasing cosmopolitanism, and nationalism was perhaps a necessary but certainly an unfortunate episode in human history. However, it remains true that, after the common European identity of the Middle Ages, early modernity led to the formation of separate national cultures in Europe; and these cultures (which now are becoming increasingly permeable to each other thanks to the European Union and the more general process of globalization) were in the late eighteenth, the nineteenth, and the early twentieth century characterized by nationalistic passions. It is this historical fact on which I base my demarcation: I do indeed claim that between 1750 and 1945 German philosophers read, certainly not exclusively, but in large measure, the work of colleagues writing in German and that these frequent interactions explain why certain philosophical traditions could develop within Germany that are distinguishable from the philosophical styles in neighboring countries. Nothing in the book denies the enormous impact of foreign authors on some of the most creative German philosophers of the classical age. As I state several times, Kant's originality, to name only one example, is inexplicable without Hume and Rousseau. While he could read French, Kant had to rely on transla-

⁵ Anyone interested in my own normative attitude toward nationalism as a political principle may look up my work *Morals and Politics* (Notre Dame, 2004), 476ff., 590f., 766ff.

tions to gain access to Hume, but fortunately even in the era of national cultures the work of translators bridged the divides between the various cultures. Still, the influence of these two thinkers led only to a transformation, not a rejection of Kant's early Leibnizianism; Kant's mature system retained quite a few of the traits of his Leibnizianism, and these radically distinguish it from contemporary British empiricism.

At least for the two hundred years between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-twentieth century there existed a German culture quite different from its neighbors; and German philosophy was part of this culture, perhaps even its center. This is the relatively uncontroversial—or “weak,” as one reviewer put it, thesis of the book. While I do not at all hold that this difference has survived into the twenty-first century, I advance arguments in favor of the stronger thesis that the formation of a special German spirit begins long before the eighteenth-century cultural revolution, and that it has its roots in German mysticism and particularly in Lutheranism. On this issue there will be less consensus, for even if I can point to continuities between Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, and Jakob Böhme on the one hand, and German idealism on the other, there is little doubt that in these earlier centuries there existed also much thinking that did not deviate in any striking way from mainstream European philosophy.

2. It is the intensity of reciprocal influence that justifies my demarcation of a special area within the larger field of the history of philosophy. This explains why the only criterion I use for considering something as “German” is the use of the German language, for after the loss of Latin as an academic lingua franca and before the rise of English to serve a similar function, people's reading was preferentially shaped by texts in their own language. Neither ethnic, nor political, nor geographical categories play any role whatsoever in my definition of “German.” Austrians and German-speaking Swiss thus fall under my definition of “German,” even if this may not

be politically correct, and, conversely, medieval and early modern German philosophers who wrote exclusively in Latin do not belong to the German philosophy that I am studying here. As long as someone writes in German, he is potentially a subject of this history, and when he ceases to write in German, he is no longer a candidate for inclusion. This is the reason why I include György Lukács and Roman Ingarden, even though some Hungarian or Polish readers may not appreciate my decision, and this is why the book, while dedicating several pages to both Frege and Wittgenstein, mentions only briefly Carnap and Popper, and ignores almost completely authors like Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss. For they all switched to the English language after their emigration. From that moment on, they ceased to belong to German philosophy as here defined.

A fortiori I had to exclude Søren Kierkegaard from this book, for he did not write even a single essay in German.⁶ But, one may ask, is he not deeply rooted in German culture, in Lutheranism and, philosophically, in Kant and Hegel? He is, certainly, but so were many others, and this is not a book about philosophers influenced by classical German thought. While I do claim that there are some traits common to most German philosophers that distinguish them from most philosophers of the other European nations, this is an empirical thesis that can only be verified after one's concepts are defined. And, again, my defining criterion for "German" is the German language. Needless to say, a history of Lutheran philosophy would be a worthwhile project, and while there would be quite an overlap with my own history, several of my heroes, such as Hermann Cohen and Max Scheler, would have no place in it, while various Scandinavian philosophers would have to be included. But as interesting as this project may be, it is not the one pursued in this book.

⁶ A colleague lamented the absence of Spinoza. But while certainly Dutch as a Low Franconian language blends into Low German, Spinoza wrote in Latin—like other German authors ignored in this book. The Dutch *Korte Verhandeling* was a translation made by Spinoza's friends, not by himself, of a Latin original.

3. I have provoked some irritation by using the term *Sonderweg* (special path) to point to the specific differences of German philosophy from other traditions. The term, as is well known, was already used in the late nineteenth century in an affirmative sense to point to the intermediate position of Germany between the liberal West and the autocratic East; after 1945, however, the term gained a negative connotation and was mainly employed by historians who claimed that there was a strong continuity between earlier German history and the rise of National Socialism. In the last decades, criticism of the *Sonderweg* thesis has become prevalent both among German and foreign scholars—I mention only David Blackbourne and Geoff Eley's *The Peculiarities of German History* of 1984. The two crucial arguments have been, first, that the differences between Germany on the one hand and France and Britain on the other have not been so deep as to justify the term (although Germany never became a parliamentary monarchy, the nineteenth century brought a far-reaching embourgeoisement) and, second, that there is no reason to regard the British or the French way as the standard course of development leading to modernization. While I agree with both criticisms, I do not think that they are relevant to my use of the term. For I simply maintain that German philosophy, already with Meister Eckhart and increasingly with Leibniz and Kant, became quite different from the neighboring traditions.

This implies neither that British or French philosophy are superior to German (in fact, I suggest the enduring attractiveness of the specific German approach), nor am I committed to some version of the thesis “From Bismarck to Hitler” or even “From Luther to Hitler.” With regard to Hegel, for example, I explicitly argue that his political thought belongs to constitutional liberalism and has absolutely nothing to do with totalitarianism. What I do claim, however, is that a robust theory of resistance is lacking in German political thought, and it is only on this level—the last of the three levels that I distinguish while discussing the contribution of German thought to

the rise of National Socialism—that I see a connection with classical German philosophy. Given the Holocaust, I have also dutifully mentioned instances of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism among German philosophers, but I have never averred that they are more frequent than, say, among French philosophers. If the *Sonderweg* thesis is constructed to mean that there was an inexorable causal connection between the mindset of Germany in the nineteenth century and the rise of National Socialism—without taking into account a huge number of individual events, such as the defeat of 1918—then the thesis seems to me no less than absurd. What I do agree with, however, is that both Nietzsche and Wagner contributed considerably to the formation of the National Socialist Weltanschauung, even if this inevitably irritates both the postmodern admirers of the philosopher and fans of German opera.

4. Despite all the remarkable variety among German philosophers, I do indeed maintain that there are certain features that are common to many of them and that had an enduring impact on the German spirit. What are they? To my mind, the most striking are rationalist theology, a commitment to synthetic *a priori* knowledge (ultimately based on the trust that God has created the world in a rational way), a penchant for system building, the foundation of ethics in reason and not in sentiment, and the combination of philosophy and philology. Kant's revolution in ethics is a fascinating example of how the German "spirit" (if I may use an easily misunderstood word) builds on common European developments but gives them a new turn. For Kant's revolution shares much with the general universalistic transformation of ethics that occurred all over eighteenth-century Europe but still differs from it thanks to his abrupt turn against the eudaemonist tradition and thus against empiricism. Needless to say, not all features mentioned are instantiated in every philosopher—for example, there is not much of a rationalist theology in Nietzsche, but there is quite a lot of philosophical sensibility toward the challenge of philology

and history. And the radicality of Nietzsche's thought is distinctly German and ultimately Lutheran. The great key to success for Britain, on the other hand, has always been its openness to substantial innovation while maintaining old traditions: Anglicanism is dogmatically Calvinist, but its liturgy remains Catholic; and the country that first beheaded a king, introduced parliamentary monarchy, and initiated the Industrial Revolution has been able to maintain one of the world's most stable monarchies.

My interest in the German tradition is not simply historical. I do think that German philosophy was the most productive and original philosophical tradition of modern Europe and that many of its foundational ideas remain valid. What I particularly admire in this philosophical tradition is the way it permeated culture at large, and thus my book often draws connections to other German developments, especially in literature, but occasionally also in the other arts, in science, and in politics. I have now lived long enough in the United States to say that such an interpenetration of general culture and philosophy is quite alien to this great country. Here, philosophers understand themselves mainly as smart puzzle solvers—which is indeed noble work, but rarely inspires society at large or even other disciplines or the arts. Philosophy as a *Weltanschauung* was more than that, and even when it did not meet the necessary standards of rigor, its cultural impact was huge, and it contributed to the almost religious awe in which Germans have held products of high culture. It was particularly the specific German version of objective idealism that inspired a philosophical religiosity alien to American culture, where religion is often anti-intellectual and philosophy anti-religious (the short period of Transcendentalism excepted). For many Europeans, two of the most striking features of the contemporary political debate in the US are, on the one hand, the entanglement of political and cultural wars (which render it difficult to reach compromise even in such practical matters as establishing a budget) and, on the other hand, the unhealthy polarization between “religious”

and “secular” culture. The secular culture presents itself in two versions: the naturalist one (often based on a specific reading of Darwin) and the constructivist one (which dominates the humanities). Both reject transcendent ideal norms, and while naturalism at least adheres to some objectivity, it offers quite a reductive concept of objectivity. The religious culture, on the other hand, is largely rooted in philologically and theologically naïve conceptions, which in Germany had already become impossible in the nineteenth century, no doubt due in large part to the rigorous study of the classical languages in the *Gymnasium*. The lack of an intellectually sophisticated religiosity is, I believe, one of the main reasons for the level of the general culture in the US, which contrasts considerably with the exceptionally good institutions of higher learning of which the country rightly boasts.

5. Clarifying the concept of “German” that I utilize is one of the prerequisites for embarking upon the project of narrating the history of German philosophy. The other is the elucidation of the concept of philosophy. This is a much more arduous task, for philosophy is not as clearly demarcated as, say, mathematics. I understand philosophy—admittedly in a vague way—as the intellectual endeavor that tackles the ultimate principles of the various disciplines, whether they are general categories such as truth, goodness, and beauty, or more limited to regional areas, such as the nature of time or life. This explains why I have not hesitated to touch upon authors who were not philosophers but whose work in specialist disciplines caused important changes in philosophical reflection, such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Max Weber, and Albert Einstein. However, I only touch upon them; and to the complaint of some reviewers that Weber or Freud would have deserved many pages, I can only answer that the elaboration of their specific sociological or psychological theories transcends the task of a history of philosophy.

Another reproach has been that I do not mention at all certain philosophers who deserve at least an honorable

mention, such as Hans Blumenberg (whom I consider more a historian of ideas than a philosopher), and treated others far too quickly, such as Karl Jaspers or Ernst Bloch (who in my eyes were important in their time but did not leave classic works behind). At least no reviewer has complained of the absence of any really great name. It was my explicit desire to focus on the most important figures and to avoid as much as possible mere name-dropping; and—an added difficulty—I had to write this history within the three hundred pages granted to me by the German publisher. This inevitably meant that I could not write as much on secondary figures as I would have loved to—it is in fact often harder to write a book of three hundred than of five hundred pages. That my choice of secondary authors as well as of the amount of words dedicated to each of them is partly subjective I do not deny; and the indefinite article used in the title of my book already pleads guilty to this charge. I am aware that my history is only one possible account. Still, I want to mention some of the criteria that determined my selection.

As a negative criterion, I decided to avoid living figures. The jury is still out on them (I personally believe that some figures still unknown internationally may gain more attention after their deaths than others who have already garnered acclaim), and the inclusion of some at the expense of others is always invidious. I made, however, two exceptions, namely for an octogenarian and a nonagenarian philosopher. Jürgen Habermas has for more than a half century been such an important figure in the intellectual life not only of the Federal Republic of Germany, but also worldwide, that his exclusion would have deprived the penultimate chapter of one of its most forceful presences. Habermas, however, is unintelligible without Karl-Otto Apel, whose inclusion is a simple matter of fairness when dealing with Habermas.

My positive criteria have been four: first, the pure quality of the philosophical work; second, its impact on the