

Opole, 12.09.2022

dr hab. Włodzimierz Julian Korab-Karpowicz, Prof. UO
Katedra myśli politycznej i filozofii polityki
Instytut Nauk Politycznych i Administracji
Uniwersytet Opolski
ul. Katowicka 89
45-061 Opole

RECENZJA

pracy doktorskiej mgra Hrvoje Vargić

**nt. „On Truth and Totalitarianism: Assessing Contemporary Relevance of
Dietrich von Hildebrand’s Political Philosophy”**

Promotor: ks. dr hab. Alfred Marek Wierzbicki

1. GENERAL OPINION

The doctoral dissertation submitted to me for review, prepared by Hrvoje Vargić is a research work that should be assessed positively. In this work the author proves his abilities to analyze philosophical text, collect information about a topic, review that information and draw conclusions. The main research topic of assessing contemporary relevance of Hildebrand’s political philosophy is intellectually stimulating and important to the contemporary theory of politics. In view of the above undertaking by the PhD student, Mr. Vargić, I consider his work justified and contributing to the development of knowledge.

2. ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTENT

2.1. The importance of the issues raised in the reviewed dissertation

The research issues raised in the dissertation are important to the contemporary theory of politics. First, there are potential totalitarian tendencies in today’s liberal-democratic societies. As Mr. Vargić rightly notes, Dietrich von Hildebrand perceived the danger of totalitarianism not only in Nazism and communism, but also, which is less frequently observed, in liberalism. He believed that there are deep and fundamental philosophical similarities between all these ideologies. Although in his political writings, written in 1930s, he concentrated mainly on the totalitarian challenge coming from National Socialism, he was also critical of communist and liberal ideas, especially, insofar as they would be related to the dethronement of truth, negation of objective morality, acceptance of anti-personalism or deification of the state. Hence, the second issue is the defense of truth, freedom, moral goodness and other key values that can be related to the development of the Western civilization. The main purpose of the dissertation is, according to Ph.D. student, not only thoroughly examine Hildebrand’s philosophical arguments against Nazism, communism and liberalism, but also assess whether they are still useful for understanding the modern political phenomena. Concerning the latter task, this is indeed the most important and truly innovative part of his work, as it is suggested by its title. This vital task, so pertinent to the assessment of today’s liberal politics, is completed at least in part and perhaps could be developed by Mr. Vargić in his future studies. The dissertation tries indeed to address important current political

issues, such as the question of abortion, but there are other issues, such as political correctness or disinformation by the mass media that are not adequately addressed in it. The subject matter of the dissertation is extremely important, for political theory and practice, as the danger of totalitarianism still hovers over Europe and requires a bold response.

2.2. Research methodology (assumptions, goals, methods)

The reviewed dissertation is an interdisciplinary work that encompasses philosophy and politics. Dietrich von Hildebrand was a distinguished phenomenologist. The dissertation initially provides an exposition of his realist phenomenological approach to philosophy and introduces some of his philosophical concepts, especially those that relate to his realism and personalism. Aside of its philosophical content, the dissertation represents the traditional, normative approach to political theory based on the assumption that the values cannot be separated from public life. While interpreting the philosophical and political ideas of Hildebrand, it addresses the problems of the functions of the state, of the best political regime and of the danger of ideologies that can lead to such negative phenomena as conflict, prejudice, intolerance, violence and injustice. The main goal of the dissertation is to “thoroughly examine Hildebrand’s philosophical arguments against national socialism, communism and liberalism, and then assess whether and to what extent they are useful for understanding modern political phenomena” (p. 3). In addition, the PhD student also set himself three specific goals, namely, to investigate, first, “whether there are some erroneous political ideas that Hildebrand recognized in his day still present in today’s society”; second, “whether and in which form today exists the dethronement of truth, negation of objective morality, anti-personalism, instrumentalization of religion, omnipotence of the state and deification of the collective”, and third, “how the potential totalitarian tendencies relate to the modern liberal-democratic society in which we live in” (s. 4). The later goals are related to the “most important contribution of this dissertation”, which is “to assess the contemporary relevance of Hildebrand’s philosophy” and to apply its insights to “the analysis of the political situation of today” (s. 4), and this contribution is presented in the last chapter.

In my opinion, the assumed main goal and three specific goals have partially been achieved by the PhD student. While I believe, as it shall still be explained, that Mr. Vargić’s work should be in general assessed positively, the last chapter, which is his novel and original contribution to research, could be better developed. While other chapters are divided in some thematic sections, in this chapter there are none. It seems that the Ph.D. student has devoted a big effort to provide historical and philosophical background to the thought of Dietrich von Hildebrand. Also, in the fourth chapter, he has thoroughly examined “Hildebrand’s philosophical arguments against national socialism, communism and liberalism.” However, he has only partially assessed “whether and to what extent they are useful for understanding modern political phenomena” and made only a limited analysis of the relevance of Hildebrand’s philosophy to “the analysis of the political situation of today”. He says that his analysis “will necessary be limited” and that there are “many issues which could be analyzed from Hildebrandian perspective”, but we are not given reasons why this analysis of Hildebrand’s ideas that are potentially “useful for understanding modern political phenomena” should be limited, especially, if this is “the most important contribution of the dissertation”. While I see an overall value in his work, to which he certainly devoted a great effort, my suggestion is that if Mr. Vargić would decide in the future to revise and publish his dissertation, this last chapter should be improved: divided into thematic sections and in a more systematic way apply philosophical ideas of Hildebrand to today’s political issues. Then this work could be of a great value to the contemporary reader.

In the dissertation, I have not found any explicit theoretical description of the research methodology used. Nevertheless, assuming that the main method is a textual analysis, it is used properly. There are some minor problems, but above all, author's conclusions are logically derived from the sources and well supported. The work has over 1100 references to primary and secondary literature, and the Ph.D. student has accumulated a substantial knowledge of the subject. This has ensured the achievement of the assumed goals.

2.3. The structure of the dissertation

The reviewed dissertation has 285 pages (263 pages is the text). It consists of a brief introduction (5 pages), five chapters (257 pages), the conclusion, which is also brief (3 pages only), and a bibliography (17 pages). The structure of the work is based on the traditional principle to provide some background to ideas discussed, a discussion and a conclusion), appropriate for this type of study. However, the proportions between the introductory parts and the discussion and conclusions are not ideal. The parts in which the findings are discussed, the fifth chapter and the conclusion, which is the Ph.D.'s student truly novel and original contribution to research, should be much larger in proportion to other parts. The initial four chapters, which have also largely an introductory character, amount to 220 pages (which amounts to 84 % of the whole dissertation text), while the last chapter, in which the "most important contribution of this dissertation" (p. 4) is to be provided, only to 35 pages (13%). The remaining 8 pages (3%) are the introduction and the conclusion.

2.4. Literature used

The doctoral student used 275 bibliographic sources. A great part of them, 45% (125), are works (books and articles) of Dietrich von Hildebrand. As many as 64% (80) of them are publications in German, mostly press articles published in the 1930's in the journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat*. This testifies the author ability to use both English and German in his research, and use primary sources. The latest publications come from 2022 and the oldest from 1882 which shows that the Ph.D. student has used a rich literature for his dissertation. In my opinion, the literature used is correctly selected, and it is varied and rich.

2.5. Detailed substantive evaluation of individual parts of the dissertation

In terms of content, the work deserves a positive assessment. Nevertheless it is worth to make some specific critical comments with the hope that these comments should help the PhD student to improve his future research and publications on this subject. Some, namely about the proportion between the introductory part and the part devoted to the discussion of the relevance of Hildebrand's philosophy to "the analysis of the political situation of today" and to the resulting conclusions, have already been made.

Introduction. The introduction of the reviewed doctoral dissertation (not even 5 full pages of text) is a bit short to adequately describe all essential elements that should be presented in it, including the justification for the choice of the topic of work (the relevance of Hildebrand's ideas for interpreting the political phenomena in the present) and a description of the structure of the work (given), in addition to methodological assumptions (missing) and an overview of the basic concepts (missing) that are used in the work and ensure its terminological clarity.

Chapter 1 (Context of Dietrich von Hildebrand's Political Struggle), 36 pages long, provides a good historical background of the life and work of Hildebrand during the 1930, and particularly of the rise of National Socialism in Germany. This includes his Vienna years and cooperation with Austrian Chancellor Dollfus, and of his editing of the journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat*. The Ph.D. student accepts without questioning some standard interpretations of historical events, for example, that the conditions of the Versailles Treaty were unjust and hard to Germany because its lost 13 % of its territory, forgetting that the territories that Germany lost (to France and to Poland) were mainly those which it earlier conquered. There is not enough discussion of alternative historical perspectives.

Chapter 2 (Philosophical Roots of Hildebrand's Thought), 28 pages long, presents the philosophical foundations of Hildebrand's opposition to Nazism and communism, and especially his realist approach to phenomenology. Philosophers, Husserl, Scheler and Reinbach are presented as those who influenced Hildebrand and contributed to his philosophical development. The Ph.D. thoughtfully shows the entire spectrum of philosophical theories and concepts that are well presented. He attempts, briefly, but rather successfully, to demonstrate that Dietrich von Hildebrand has also become an original philosopher who furthers research in phenomenology. The main Hildebrand's works, which he uses as reference, are *What is Philosophy?* and *Ethics*.

Chapter 3 (Personalistic Grounding of Hildebrand's Political Philosophy), 77 pages long, presents the main concepts, such as person, value, love and community, that the Ph.D. student considers to be the foundations of Hildebrand's personalism, and on which his political philosophy can possibly be build. The analysis is based on his following main works (the titles of those which have been translated are in English): *Moralia: Nachlassenes Werk*, *Graven Images: Substitutes for True Morality*, *Ethics*, *Art of Living*, *The Nature of Love*, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity*, *Metaphysik der Gemeinschaft*. This list, even if not complete, and supplied with a rich literature of secondary sources, show how much reading and research on Hildebrand the Ph.D. student has done in his doctoral work, and this is admirable. The analysis of Hildebrand's ethical concepts is thoroughly developed and the conclusions are well derived from the readings. What is perhaps missing is an attempt to formulate the political philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand in a more systematic form, based on such concepts as state, authority, the best form of government, civil disobedience, justice, liberty, property, war and peace.

Chapter 4 (Hildebrand's Philosophical Critique of National Socialism, Communism and Liberalism), 75 pages long, is another admirable analysis of Hildebrand's work, which in this case focusses on his political writings, which were published mainly from 1935 to 1938 in the journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat*. The Ph.D. student presents Hildebrand's arguments against Nazism, communism and liberalism, as well as tries to clarify his position towards authoritarianism and fascism. The analysis seems mature and deserve recognition, nevertheless, the reader may feel unsatisfied with the lack of the scientific discussion and references to other researchers, such as Pawel Kaźmierczak, who has written extensively on this subject, and whose two English articles on the subject of Hildebrand and National Socialism are in fact mentioned in the bibliography.

Chapter 5 (Assessing Contemporary Relevance of Hildebrand's Political Philosophy), 35 pages long, as its title suggests, deals with the relevance of Hildebrand's ideas to today's political phenomena. It is the Ph.D. student's novel and original contribution to research. However, it has some weaknesses and could be better developed. First, if we consider this

chapter as the most important from the point of view of the goals of the dissertation, by contrast to other chapters, it is not divided into thematic sections. Dividing it in sections would contribute to its clarity and would allow the reader to more clearly perceive the topics discussed. Second, I do not see any reason why the “the analysis of the political situation of today” in the light of Hildebrand’s philosophy should be limited, if this is actually the main goal and “the most important contribution of the dissertation”. It is a correct observation that “the modern liberal democracy is fundamentally susceptible to the propaganda and lies, as well as to totalitarianism” (p. 248), but practical political consequences, supported by examples, are not derived from this claim. In fact, in today’s liberal politics we can have a great degree of disinformation, propaganda and fake news. The notion of “political correctness” has been formed and to express dissenting opinions about the COVID-19 pandemics or the war in Ukraine can cost a dissenter to be silenced or to lose his job or even (as in case of Ukraine), to be placed on a death list. Furthermore, unfortunately, we do not have today in liberal democracies an open debate on vital political issues, and it still requires courage to speak about them, if someone holds a different view. The Ph.D. student limits his discussion to the issues of nationalism, immigration and abortion. He does not address the issues of individual freedom vs. vaccinations, global warming, and war and peace, from which the open public debate is today largely removed and replaced by propaganda and disinformation coming from the main media. Only if we, like Dietrich von Hildebrand, courageously and sometimes risking our career or even life, address these issues, by applying to them the ideas of personalism, absolute truth, firm faith, and objective morality, we could really benefit from his philosophical heritage and attack today’s futile idols that lead the destruction of our civilization. Hopefully, the Ph.D. student shall do this in his future works.

Conclusion. In the conclusion of the dissertation, which is only 3 pages, the author presents a brief summary. The conclusion should be far more developed and should contain findings and research limitations, as well as directions of further studies on this subject.

2.6. Language and formal side of the dissertation

From the linguistic and formal point of view, the reviewed doctoral dissertation can be assessed positively. As already mentioned, the introduction and especially the conclusion should be longer and better developed. The last chapter should, for the sake of clarity, be divided into thematic sections.

There are also some minor problems with the linguistic side of the work. First, in English research works, the author uses “I” rather than “we” to make his statements. Second, I have consulted this with a linguist from the UK and he confirmed my objections. It is very strange and essentially incorrect to use “will” in sentences that refer to the past like: “He will move to Vienna where he will start a journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat* with a group of collaborators ...” (p. 2). It should be corrected to: “He moved to Vienna, where he would start the conservative journal *Der Christliche Ständestaat* with a group of collaborators ...”. (Note the comma after “Vienna” and the article “the” before “journal” – these are additional minor corrections.)

Biographic references are applied correctly.

2.7. Strong and weak points

After reading the dissertation, I have come to the conclusion that it should in general be assessed positively because of its strong points. Certainly, the Ph.D. student has put a lot of personal effort to complete the dissertation. He has done a considerable amount of readings in

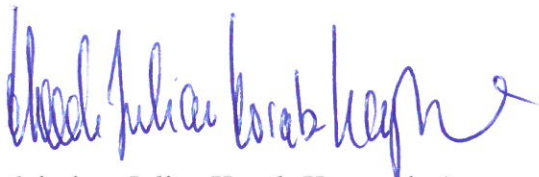
both English and German of many Hildebrand's work and supported his interpretations with a many secondary sources. The weak points have already been indicated. There is too great emphasis on the introductory part of the dissertation and too small on its most important part that is related to the concept of the political philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand and to the application of his ideas to modern political problems. The conclusive part of the dissertation, which is most important as the novel contribution to knowledge, should be better developed.

3. CONCLUSION

The above-mentioned suggestions and criticisms do not change my positive opinion on the work as a whole. The doctoral dissertation submitted to me for review meets the statutory criteria on academic degrees and titles because the work is:

- an original interpretation of philosophical and political ideas of Dietrich von Hildebrand and provides background to his life and times;
- demonstrates the general theoretical knowledge of the PhD student in the discipline of philosophy, especially in the field of phenomenology,
- confirms the ability of the PhD student to conduct independent research.

Podając ocenie kwalifikacyjnej całość pracy uważam, że Doktorant wykazał się dobrą ogólną wiedzą teoretyczną w dyscyplinie filozofii. Udowodnił, że posiada umiejętność samodzielnego prowadzenia pracy naukowo-badawczej. Dokonuje oryginalnych interpretacji. Całościowa ocena recenzowanej rozprawy doktorskiej jest pozytywna. Przedłożona mi do recenzji dysertacja doktorska spełnia ustawowe kryteria (art. 13, ust. 1 ustawy z dnia 14 marca 2003 r. o stopniach naukowych i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule w zakresie sztuki, Dz. U. z 2003 r., nr 65, poz. 595 z późn. zm.)



(Włodzimierz Julian Korab-Karpowicz)