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REVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Author: Hrvoje Vargić

Title: On Truth and Totalitarianism: Assessing Contemporary Relevance of Dietrich von Hildebrandt's Political Philosophy

Supervisor: dr hab. Alfred Marek Wierzbicki

Research Scope and Goals

The dissertation submitted by Mr Hrvoje Vargić is conceived as a monograph on the political philosophy of Dietrich Hildebrand, an important representative of the phenomenological movement and at the same time one of the most recognized philosophical figures of the 20th century Catholic Church. The author's main purpose is to examine Hildebrandt's arguments against National Socialism, communism and liberalism as well as to assess their relevance in the contemporary philosophical and political context. Insofar as both phenomenological and Catholic background of Hildebrand's political philosophy is supposed to enable him, in Vargić's interpretations, to approach the politics from "first principles", as he calls it, the central claim of the dissertation is that "Hildebrand's investigations show promising potential to be used for understanding the political situation of today" and that "his analyses are not just relevant to understand the past, but they offer a quality method for interpreting the political phenomena in the present".

The thesis of his doctoral dissertation Vargić defends in five subsequent steps. In the first one he reconstructs both general-historical and individual-biographical background of Hildebrandt's political philosophy. The aim of the first chapter is to deliver the basic information about the political and economic situation in Germany, Italy and Austria after World War as well as about Hildebrand's early philosophical and political formation. What the author aims at in this chapter, is to contribute to understanding the rise of communism, fascism, National Socialism and political Catholicism in the interwar period and to point at the personal determinants of Hildebrand's opposition against some of those political phenomena. In the second step of his argumentation, in order to explain the philosophical determinants of this opposition, Vargić reconstructs the intellectual roots of Hildebrand's thought, especially this of his phenomenological approach to philosophy. In the second chapter of his dissertation he discusses in this regard the philosophical specifics of two main circles within the phenomenological movement, the Munich and Göttingen one, and examines the influence of their representatives such as Husserl, Scheler and Reinach on the philosophy of Hildebrand.

The way, in which Hildebrand himself furthers the research in phenomenology, Hrvoje Vargić reconstructs in the third step of his argumentation. He devotes the next chapter of the doctoral thesis to the examination of these concepts of Hildebrand's phenomenological philosophy which he considers to be central, namely, person, value, love and community. While following the well-established interpretation of this philosophy as an example of both realistic phenomenology and Christian personalism, he analyses in this chapter the function of these concepts as foundations of Hildebrandt's own political philosophy. The main directions of his philosophical-political opposition to National Socialism and other forms of totalitarianism the author discusses in the fourth step of his argumentation. After clarifying the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism he distinguishes between the epistemological, anthropological, ethical, socio-political, cultural and religious arguments of Hildebrand's critique. The thesis about the contemporary relevance of this critique Hrvoje Vargić justifies in the last step of his argumentation by examining the philosophical premises of Hildebrand's opposition against not only National Socialism and communism, but also liberalism. What the contemporary relevance of Hildebrand's political philosophy is supposed to consist in, is, according to the argumentation delivered in the fifth chapter, the method which this philosophy offer in interpreting "totalitarian tendencies in today's society, especially in their interplay with liberal-democratic society".

Overall Evaluation

The doctoral dissertation submitted by Mr Hrvoje Vargić represents an independent and comprehensive piece of scientific work of high academic standard not only with regard to the formulation of research questions, but also theoretical and methodological basis, treatment of the literature and form of presentation. One can only agree with the main assumption of the dissertation, that today, in a time of post-truth, populist reason and identity politics, the question of the theoretical meaning and contemporary relevance of the political philosophy of Dietrich Hildebrand turns out to be not only scientifically significant, but also politically topical problem. Even though Hildebrand's moral philosophy and his struggle against National Socialism are relatively well researched questions (Buttiglione, Cajthalm/Vohánka, Seifert, Stöcklein, Crosby, Gubser a.o.), their mutual relationship and philosophical meaning of his anti-totalitarian opposition has not been, until now, a topic of monographic, systematic study. The theoretical originality of Vargić's monograph consists especially in the contribution to research on the highly debatable relationship between phenomenology and political philosophy. In the second chapter of his dissertation the doctoral candidate explicitly asks the critical question, how it is possible to do political philosophy on the phenomenological foundation and answers it by pointing at the distinction made by Hildebrand between "genuine" and "empirical" essences. Vargić argues convincingly that the realist-phenomenological approach to political philosophy represented by Hildebrand is possible as an investigation of both a priori and empirical facts as well as as an analysis of both genuine essences and empirical ones.

A twofold purpose of the doctoral thesis, aiming at the historical reconstruction of the philosophical meaning of Hildebrand's arguments against totalitarianism and critical assessment of their contemporary relevance, has been fulfilled by Vargić in a more than satisfying way. In the first chapter the author examines the political implications of Hildebrand's realist phenomenology and personalist philosophy against the broad background of the history of Europe in the interwar period. The historical context of his thought Vargić synthetically and at the same time vividly reconstructs on the basis of the pertinent literature.

While analysing in the second chapter the influence wielded on Hildebrand by Husserl, Scheler and Reinach, the doctoral candidate demonstrates not only deep knowledge of the history of the phenomenological movement, but also insightful understanding of the theoretical meaning of the complex phenomenological approach to philosophy. It is difficult not to be impressed by the intellectual precision and consistency in examining the anthropological, ethical and socio-ontological foundations of Hildebrand's political philosophy carried out by Vargić in the third chapter of his dissertation. The same can be said about both competent and fair clarification of Hildebrand's positions towards Italian Fascism and political Catholicism in Austria as well as about the detailed analysis of his arguments against National Socialism, communism and liberalism delivered in the fifth chapter. Insofar as Hildebrand never developed the phenomenological-personalist approach to the political philosophy in a systematic way, the actualisation of the theoretical potentialities of his personalism in this regard, fully covering the source texts and the existing literature in the relevant field, can be considered a separate, innovative achievement of the candidate.

The most interesting and inspiring contribution of Vargić's dissertation to the history of ideas consists in pointing at the relevance of Hildebrand's argumentation for the contemporary political debate. Despite a possible critical remarks against the interpretation of the theoretical meaning of personalist political philosophy delivered in the doctoral thesis, there is no denying that the candidate fully succeeded in demonstrating the critical potential of Hildebrand's anti-totalitarian arguments in the twenty-first century context. In the fifth chapter of his dissertation Vargić very skilfully applies the insights gained from the reconstruction of both phenomenological and personalist premises of Hildebrand's opposition against totalitarianism to diagnosis of the political challenges of today. The doctoral candidate precisely identifies and elucidates the contemporary manifestations of tendencies recognized by Hildebrand as constitutive for the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. While mentioning in this context, among others, the contemporary epistemological indifference to the concept of truth, moral relativism, individualism, devaluation of the concept of person and instrumentalization resp. politicization of religion, Vargić very aptly transfers the arguments put by Hildebrand against National Socialism to the value-content of modern liberalism.

Even though the author of the dissertation explicitly maintains the lasting critical potential of Hildebrand's anti-totalitarian argumentation with reference to the liberal-democratic society, his interpretation of its contemporary relevance can be considered nuanced and unbiased. Vargić does not ignore some weaknesses and naiveties of political personalism as regarded from the contemporary perspective. First of all, he gives a critical assessment of the stance towards both Mussolini's dictatorship and Dollfuss's authoritarianism adopted by Hildebrand in the thirties. Apart from the "idealization" of certain traits of Austrian and German culture, the doctoral candidate also recognizes Hildebrand's support for monarchism and corporatism as influenced by the historical and cultural situation in the interwar period. The one-sidedness and exaggerations in interpreting these and some other aspects of the Christian Western culture Vargić consistently interprets as resulting from the fact, that in the domain of political critique Hildebrand dealt with "empirical essences", which unavoidably limited the precision and clarity of his analysis.

While taking into consideration that the same limits apply to his own attempt at furthering Hildebrand's critique, the doctoral candidate puts a lot of effort into addressing the question of the connections between liberalism and totalitarianism in a balanced and, as far as possible,

impartial way. What is particularly noteworthy in this respect are his arguments against Popper's and Berlin's thesis, that claiming that there are absolute and eternal truths and values necessarily leads to totalitarianism. The criticism against relativism and what he calls "liberal epistemology", which Vargić takes up in the last chapter of his dissertation, can be considered a model application of Hildebrand's "essential analysis" of liberalism in the twenty-first century context. Vargić very convincingly argues that the contemporary anti-totalitarian relevance of the phenomenological method consists in discovering at least some a priori truths, like for example human dignity, that can be recognized as objective and universal. The basic thesis of his dissertation, namely, that only the analysis of the essences of things provides an adequate method for grounding the principles which would guard liberal-democratic society from totalitarian tendencies, Vargić successfully defends by pointing at both left-wing and right-wing totalitarian threats in a modern democracies.

Critical Remarks

Despite the cautiousness of Vargić's approach to the theoretical meaning of Hildebrand's political philosophy as well as to the possible application of this philosophy to the contemporary political challenges, some of his statements can give rise to a discussion. The most fundamental of the possible follow up questions concerns the tenability of Vargić's assumption about the theoretically non-controversial relationship between Hildebrand's realistic phenomenology and Christian personalism. The author of the dissertation has right to assume, that Hildebrand clearly distinguished his purely philosophical considerations from those obtained by faith and that he derived his concept of the human person primarily from philosophical insight, not Revelation. However, when Vargić states, at the same time, that Hildebrand's faith "illuminated his philosophical insights and helped him to see more clearly the issues he was dealing with", he risks transgressing against the rules of pure philosophical interpretation. He thus seems to underestimate the contemporary theoretical relevance of Husserl's reserve with regard to Hildebrand's Catholic conversion and to ignore his objection, that it resulted, by its proper meaning, in moving away from the phenomenological search for certitude to the theology of faith in search for understanding.

Admittedly, the author is entirely right in maintaining that Hildebrand's conversion by no means necessarily affected the theoretical relevance of his philosophical insights. Nevertheless, the impact of this conversion on what Hildebrand understood by "first principles" and what Vargić himself, following this understanding, recognizes as totalitarian tendencies in liberal-democratic society is too obvious to require more comment. Vargić's assumption about the illumination of Hildebrand's philosophical insights by faith makes it impossible not to ask, in the first instance, to which extent his examination of the "weakness of liberalism" in rational justifying the human rights has to be understood as based on the essential analysis of their value-content and not on some theological premises with regard to the human nature. Especially while interpreting the controversy about the "right to abortion" as an example of liberal indecision how to tackle the problem of mutually opposing explanations of human rights, Vargić seems to deal with the domain of rather empirical than genuine essences. But even if arguing for recognition of fetuses as persons was based on insight in the genuine essence of some human group, concluding from this "a priori fact" total abortion ban, as affecting unequally different groups of persons, would only confirm the legitimacy of Popper's thesis about some connection between claiming the theoretical graspability of absolute truths and totalitarianism (or, at least, authoritarianism).

Since the significant philosophical arguments contained in the doctoral dissertation of Hrvoje Vargić deserve thorough discussion which would need more space than I have here, in closing my review, I would just like to highlight some technical issues. Although the content of the dissertation is sufficiently matched with the title, the monographic approach to the relationship between truth and totalitarianism attempted by the author would benefit from a separate paragraph in the first or fourth chapter detailing the relevant definitions of the latter concept. While discussing the general historical background of Hildebrand's political philosophy, the author could consider taking into account also some other standpoints within the German anti-totalitarian opposition of his time (Dietrich Bonhoeffer?) and comparing them to each other. Special attention would deserve the political philosophies and critical approaches to totalitarianism within the phenomenological movement. Apart from Edith Stein and her investigations concerning the state and the community, the important contribution to the analysis of the phenomenon of the total state delivered first of all Aurel Kolnai. Even though Hrvoje Vargić refers to Kolnai's criticism against Hildebrand's support for Engelbert Dollfuss, he could have discussed the political phenomenology of this collaborator of *Der Christliche Ständestaat* and the author of the studies such as *Total State and Civilisation* or *The War Against the West* more extensively.

Conclusion

Summing up the whole review, it can be concluded that Mr Hrvoje Vargić has done a huge and important work contributing to a better understanding of the possible political implications of phenomenology in general and that of the theoretical meaning of Hildebrand's political philosophy in particular. If some of his insights seem controversial, it just speaks for the fact that the doctoral candidate has fully achieved all the goals he set for himself in his dissertation with regard to assessing the contemporary relevance of Hildebrand's philosophy. Even without the revisions on the basis of the present few critical comments, the research is in my opinion of more than sufficient quality to be published as a monograph.

In conclusion, I declare that the doctoral thesis of the doctoral candidate meets all formal and customary requirements and I fully and without hesitation support granting Mr Hrvoje Vargić a doctoral degree in philosophy on the basis of submitted dissertation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'R' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.