



Does German Philosophy Have a History? And Has There Ever Been a “German Spirit”?

Does German philosophy have a history? The question seems absurd, because every child knows that the Germans are the people of poets and thinkers, or at least they once were. German philosophy is no less famous worldwide than German music and poetry. Yet it is not at all easy to answer the question in the affirmative. There have undoubtedly been many famous German-speaking philosophers, but that does not imply that there is a history of them that can be recounted in a meaningful way. There are, after all, many philosophers whose names begin with a “P,” but a history of philosophers whose names begin with P does not strike us as a particularly meaningful project. Nor is it hard to see why: an intellectual connection is lacking. The history of an individual can be recounted to the extent that one is aware of constants and coherent developments in his life, and a history of several people can be recounted to the extent that they are connected by a common topic. A history of ancient Platonism from Plato to Proclus is the history of people and institutions characterized by a special relationship to Plato and on that account distinguishable from other people and institutions. But is there something—for instance a method or a theme—that is common to all German philosophers, and only to them? Was the development of German philosophy at least a self-contained process governed by its own laws?

To begin with the last question: the answer is clearly “no.” Anyone seeking meaning and coherence, anyone seeking truth in the history of philosophy, must consider the history of European philosophy, at least, as a unified whole. Schelling—who concluded the lectures he delivered in Munich in 1827, “On the History of Modern Philosophy,” with a lecture entitled “On National Differences in Philosophy”—sees in religious seriousness and *apriorism* something that distinguishes German philosophy from the two most important neighboring philosophies, the French and the English. However, he emphasizes that “the truly universal philosophy cannot possibly be the property of a single nation, and so long as any philosophy does not go beyond the borders of a single people, one can be safe in assuming that it is not yet the true philosophy.” When the French philosopher Victor Cousin, who had made Hegel and Schelling known in France, was accused by patriotic countrymen of bringing the enemy into his homeland, he rightly replied that in philosophy there is no homeland other than truth. In fact, Nicholas of Cusa cannot be understood without the Catalan Ramon Llull, Leibniz without the French philosopher Descartes and the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, or Kant without the Scotsman Hume and the French-speaking Swiss Rousseau; and for all three of them, ancient philosophy was, in different ways, a point of reference for their own thinking. Indeed, for the Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages the influences of Islamic and Jewish thought were also important. For example, Meister Eckhart, like Thomas Aquinas, frequently grappled with Maimonides and Averroes, and also with the Persian Avicenna—and he did so more often than most philosophers today debate thinkers from other cultural groups in our own globalized world. In short, the extraction of a separate history of German philosophy underestimates the real referential relationships in the world republic of thought, and it therefore seems as wrong-headed as a history of German mathematics, which obviously exists only as a dependent part of world mathematics. It is equally difficult to find traits that are common only to German philosophers, or at least to all of them. To be sure, almost the whole of German philosophy in the eighteenth century was determined by the reception, or at least by the conscious criticism, of the decisive ideas of the Enlightenment. But as its best modern historian, Jonathan Israel, has shown, the Enlightenment was a thoroughly European

phenomenon. Not only were its ideas found in most Western European countries, but the reception-history relationships, the real intellectual-history configurations, transcended national borders. And, conversely, individual German philosophers stood far apart from one another—what connects Kant and Nietzsche, for example? Would it not be much more natural to relate both of them to Hume than to each other?

Thus the suspicion arises that “German philosophy” is an artificial construct that owes its existence to nothing other than the need of the German nation and the German nation-state to create an intellectually ambitious identity. It can hardly be an accident that in the first half of the nineteenth century books with titles like *Deutscher Sinn und Witz* (German thought and wit, 1828) and *Geist deutscher Klassiker* (The spirit of the German classics, 1850) were still rare, but became more common in the second half of the century in connection with the unification of Germany (*Deutscher Geist und deutsches Schwert* (The German spirit and the German sword, 1866); *Deutscher Geist und deutsche Art im Elsass* (The German spirit and German ways in Alsace, 1872); *Deutsches Herz und deutscher Geist* (The German heart and the German spirit, 1884), and downright proliferated in the first half of the twentieth century. And writings that make use of the “German spirit” are not limited to books of the kind that one can today only handle gingerly with forceps, such as that of Arthur Trebitsch, the well-known anti-Semite of Jewish descent who supported Hitler and was admired by him, *Deutscher Geist—oder Judentum: der Weg der Befreiung* (The German spirit—or Jewry: The path to deliverance, 1919). First-rate scholars such as Ernst Troeltsch, as edited by Hans Baron, and Ernst Robert Curtius wrote on the German spirit.

The fact that in the meantime people have ceased to talk about the German spirit cannot be attributed to the catastrophe of National Socialism alone. After the war, an effort was still made to grasp the German spirit; its most important document is Thomas Mann’s novel *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde* (Doctor Faustus: The life of the German composer Adrian Leverkühn, told by a friend, 1947). Today, such an effort no longer seems in accord with the self-conception of an age that is forming supra-national units such as the European Union and whose essence

is globalization. And yet this epochal change means only that it has become absurd to talk about *current* German philosophy as an independent entity that is more than a number of objects related only externally. It does not mean that this also holds for the past. Precisely because the German spirit, if it ever existed, is part of the past, we can now examine with greater distance and objectivity the question as to what it was. An intellectual historian who studies the various European cultures since the end of the Middle Ages can scarcely avoid the impression that certain ways of questioning and approaching the world are more strongly developed in some European cultures than in others. To be sure, in every culture there are always exceptions that stand closer to the mainstream of another culture than to its own, but that does not change the fact that in most cultures there is something like a mainstream worldview that often deviates from those of other cultures. This is rapidly changing in the age of the Internet, in which one communicates with people in other continents more quickly and more often than with one's own next-door neighbors.

In an oral culture, however, all direct, intellectually fruitful interactions take place with people in one's physical proximity, and this also holds for the majority of such interactions after the rise of writing, even down into the twentieth century. To be sure, books from other cultures and correspondence with scholars from other lands played an important role in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, but they were fewer in number than interactions with members of same culture. Indeed, it is obvious that the course of modern history was in no way determined by a steady increase in intellectual globalization. The advances in systems of communication and transport that characterize the modern age were accompanied by the loss of Latin, the common language used for academic purposes in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Thanks to the emergence of English as a new common language for academic purposes, the present is in many respects closer to the Middle Ages than to the nineteenth century. We must not forget that Hume did not know German, nor Kant English; even in the 1820s, very few British intellectuals could read German. Until the eighteenth century, French was the modern *lingua franca* for educated Europe, though it was not as dominant as Latin had been in the Middle Ages. But Edward Gibbon still wrote his first book in French; Hume persuaded

him to compose his *magnum opus* in English, predicting that it would have a significant future after the British victory in the Seven Years' War. It is *a priori* probable that language barriers, deliberately strengthened by the rise of the nation as the primary factor in identity, produced national cultures in the era of nation-states. This is all the more relevant to the history of philosophy, because philosophy is connected in complex ways with culture as a whole, not least because a clarification of the ultimate goals of both individuals and the collective takes place within its framework. Hence there is much to be said for the working hypothesis that although the German philosophy of the Enlightenment shares common traits with European philosophy of the period, it acquired a specific configuration that distinguishes it, beyond the simple use of the German language, from that of neighboring countries. This hypothesis is rendered all the more plausible by the fact that almost all the hegemonic German intellectuals came from a religious denomination that hardly existed in the most heavily populated European states: Lutheranism, which shaped the German spirit more than any other factor. The Lutheranism in which they were brought up is also one of the traits shared by Kant and Nietzsche. In addition, the transition from one thinker to the other took place quickly; and the only mediating figure required for it was Schopenhauer, another German. (Because of the enormous importance of Lutheranism for the formation of the German spirit I considered for a time bringing in Søren Kierkegaard, who was often in Berlin and quoted Shakespeare, for example, in German. But I decided against doing so because Kierkegaard wrote nothing in German and cannot be understood by drawing on Kant and Hegel alone, without knowledge of his specifically Danish environment).

Thus the objective of this book has been outlined. My goal is to provide a brief survey of German philosophy—a sort of aerial view, as it were—and thereby to bring out peculiarities that distinguish this philosophy from those of other European nations. We will see that *reflection on the concept of Geist (spirit) is a crucial part of the German spirit*. Despite all the changes in German philosophy, plausible lines of development will be made clear; without them, a history really cannot be written. The audience to which this book is addressed is not primarily composed of professional philosophers, but rather of educated general readers—it

is intended to be of interest, for example, to mathematicians and lawyers, and therefore it occasionally touches on their disciplines. But I have foregone footnotes and cited no secondary literature, even though I owe much to it. I have often modernized spellings in quotations, most of which can easily be found on the Internet. In citing posthumously published texts, I give the usual titles, even if they date from a later time. Here we are concerned with the main lines, not with scholarly details; I hope the reader will be encouraged to read the classics of German philosophy, rather than spend too much time on another book of secondary literature. Heinz Schlaffer's *Die kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (A short history of German literature) provided me with a model, and of course I had constantly in mind Heinrich Heine's incomparably astute work *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (*On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*). The influence on my first chapter of Hagen Schulze's brilliant historical essay "Gibt es überhaupt eine deutsche Geschichte?" is obvious. My book does not presuppose an extensive knowledge of philosophy and deliberately avoids presenting complex technical arguments. Since philosophy inevitably consists partly, but not wholly, of such arguments, this book is more a history of ideas than a history of philosophy; I am concerned especially with the historical changes in consciousness that are triggered by philosophy and/or conceptualized by it. Thus this book falls into the domain of German studies, understood as the general study of German culture and not solely of German literature. I repeatedly point to other achievements of German culture, particularly in the literature and the human sciences, that differ from the achievements of other cultures and that can easily be related to German philosophy. I am no less interested in interconnections between the history of German philosophy and political history. The religious presuppositions of the German spirit play a central role as well—I seek to understand the path that leads from German mysticism to the Reformation, the transformation of Lutheranism into classical German philosophy, and the de-Christianization of Germany in the nineteenth century.

The present book may be useful also to those who want to understand what specific role German culture played in the context of the modern age in Western Europe. This was one of the two criteria of selection that determined this short overview. But what

was the initial body of material from which I made the choice of those works that might best shed light on the special path taken by German philosophy? What complicates this seemingly simple question is the fact that Germany was politically unified only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that even today states exist outside the German Federal Republic that are wholly or partly German-speaking. Language, in view of what was previously said about it as a connecting link, seems to me the most meaningful criterion of definition. This means, first, that Austrian but also Hungarian philosophers writing in German, such as György Lukács, should be counted as part of German philosophy; and second, that philosophers who wrote only in Latin, even though they lived in territories that are now part of modern Germany or were in their time part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, should be excluded. From this it follows that the overwhelming majority of medieval philosophers from Germany do not belong to German philosophy in the sense defined here. In fact, they neither differed sufficiently from other medieval philosophers to constitute, through their ideas, a distinct subgroup, nor did they have an important influence on classical German philosophy. Meister Eckhart, the first creator of a German philosophical language, is the central exception to this rule. Thus, for the most part, German philosophy in the sense we have given the term here extends from 1720 to 2000; I concentrate on the especially innovative period between 1770 and 1930. However, I also mention works not written in German by thinkers who wrote primarily in German but who occasionally still used either the old language of Latin for academic purposes (Latin continued in use for formal academic occasions down to the nineteenth century), the European cultural language of French, or the new academic language, English. Neither Kant's Latin works, nor Marx's *Misère de la philosophie*, nor Hans Jonas's *The Phenomenon of Life* can be left out of a history of German philosophy. Qualifying works written in Latin were a requirement of the German university; despite his exile in France, Belgium, and Great Britain, and the surrender of his Prussian nationality, Marx remained rooted in German culture, on which he exercised an enduring influence. Jonas helped translate his aforementioned book into German, and ultimately wrote his last great work in his native language. I have even discussed here two philosophers who wrote in German

only occasionally. One is Leibniz, who wrote most of his works in Latin or French (for an academic and a nonscholarly but educated audience, respectively). His thought represents a starting point for Kant's philosophy, and indeed without Wolff's creation of a highly sophisticated German technical language for philosophy, German philosophy in the linguistic sense defined here would not exist at all; Wolff, however, was inspired by, among other people, Leibniz. In addition, I could not envisage ignoring Nicholas of Cusa.

It might be replied that the problem disappears if a territorial or ethnic criterion is substituted for a linguistic one. No one doubts that Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz were born and grew up in the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, or that German was their native language. But apart from the fact that Kant never set foot on the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, to which Prussia proper did not belong, it can also be objected against such a criterion that it creates artificial boundaries: so long as there is a common language for academic purposes that transcends state borders, any drawing of boundaries in accord with political structures is rather arbitrary. The assumption that there is something that binds German philosophers together and that this is what we have in mind when we make use of the concept of a German spirit, is valid from the outset only if a causal mechanism links the representatives of this spirit, and that mechanism is and remains the especially intensive reception that is made possible by language—and in fact, for philosophy, by the language used for academic purposes, rather than by the native language. Not peoples, but individuals and their attributes (in fact often socially shared) are ontologically prior. Only on the basis of an increase in socially shared attributes such as a common language, religion, and political rule can something like a people be formed—or in the event of their decline, be dissolved.

A history of Germany cannot begin with the unification of Germany in 1871; the widespread desire for a common state was an outgrowth of the strong German national consciousness that had developed since 1800. This consciousness was partly engendered by developments in neighboring countries, and partly expressed the feeling that, since about 1760, German-speaking culture had taken a path that distinguished it from other European cultures. This new path did not emerge as the result of a

return to earlier periods in German history; a comprehensive interest in the German Middle Ages or even in early Germanic history did not develop until the nineteenth century. Goethe knew Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and English literature incomparably better than he knew Middle High German literature; indeed, despite his enormous gift for languages, he did not take the trouble to learn to read Middle High German. To put the point provocatively, one can say that the German spirit did not exist before 1750, even if it rested on earlier developments, and especially on Lutheranism. But even if Lutheranism combined the religious with the national in a way that was unknown to the Middle Ages, it was first of all a religious movement and only secondarily a national one. The dating of the German spirit proposed here is also valid for the external perspective: only since the early nineteenth century (Madame de Staël's famous book on Germany was published in 1813) did Europe begin to take a specific interest in German culture, and not just in the German nation as the traditional bearer of the Holy Roman Empire, that august relic from the Middle Ages. It was, among other things, that special and honorable role that made Germany's rise to the status of a modern nation-state like France, Spain, or England so difficult. Until the collapse of the Empire, Germany was politically both more and less than the other great European states. The Empire's Christian-universalist project, which we citizens of the European Union now look back upon with more respect than did the age of nation-states, guaranteed that Germany would be more deeply entangled in the past and at the same time that its thought would be more utopian than that of France or England, for example.

If from our perspective at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the political and cultural focus of world development seems to be turning away from Europe after two and a half millennia, we look back on the last thousand years, we can say (albeit over-simplifying to a considerable degree) that of the great European nations, Germany was the last that exercised a certain intellectual hegemony. In the High Middle Ages, Italy and France were Europe's leading cultures; in the sixteenth century, Spain was the foremost power, in the seventeenth primacy passed to France, which had to yield it to the United Kingdom in the eighteenth. (In the seventeenth century, the Netherlands

played an important secondary role.) The writers in other European nations who are considered the greatest in their respective national literatures come, like Dante, from the Middle Ages, or like Camões, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, from the early modern period. By contrast, in the sixteenth century, drama in Germany did not rise above the level of Hans Sachs, and Germany produced its first literary masterpieces only around 1800. (Russia was the only major European country to follow even later.) The history of German culture is thus the history of the most belated Western European culture, at least in the areas of literature and philosophy—in the plastic arts, first-rate work was already done by Tilman Riemenschneider and Albrecht Dürer around 1500, and in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Heinrich Schütz and Johann Sebastian Bach won international recognition for German music. The simultaneity of brilliant literary and philosophical achievements is one of the reasons for the special attraction of classical German philosophy. The latter took up questions raised by modern science and the Enlightenment, as did other European philosophies of the time, but it developed at the same time as a poetry of original greatness was forming, a poetry of a kind that hardly still existed in neighboring Western countries. The well-known view mentioned above, to the effect that Germans are the people of poets and thinkers, was first shaped in the nineteenth century to mark the high level of culture among Germans in general; but it can also be understood as indicating a connection between philosophical and poetic development so close that it had before this existed only in Greece. It is exemplified by the youthful friendship of Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin.

But the true reason why it makes sense to produce a new account of the history of German philosophy at the beginning of a century that will no longer be a European one is the extraordinary quality of this philosophical tradition that is surpassed only by that of the Greeks. This is a massive value judgment, and the reader should be forewarned: he will find much in this book—which is half essay, half history—that deliberately interprets German philosophy in light of its culmination in German idealism. Inevitably, this decision is shaped by its author's own philosophy. Every historian has to select, and my second criterion of selection is in fact the *quality* of a philosophy. I make no attempt at

completeness here; I concentrate on the greatest thinkers and ignore academic philosophers who were influential only in their own time. What Horace said about poets—that neither humans nor gods allow them to be mediocre—holds to an even greater degree for philosophers. In addition, only the German classical philosophers shaped a German culture that endured over generations. Here we will be dealing solely with those thinkers who achieved truly important insights or at least threw light on peculiarities of German culture. These are the philosophers without whom the development of that culture cannot plausibly be explained. But in what does the importance of a philosopher consist? Philosophy is concerned with truth, and so, quite logically, we assign high rank to a philosopher when he or she has recognized certain truths for the first time. Philosophy is however such a complex enterprise, and its truth so many-layered, that we also have to recognize as important a philosopher who had the courage to pursue, all the way to the end, an idea that later turned out to be false. Working out phenomena, the ability to conceptualize one's own time, reflections on the foundations of philosophical claims to validity, subtleness in the construction of concepts, precision in the analysis of arguments, an eye for the essential in the results of scientific¹ research, the construction of bridges between different spheres of reality, and the writing of dense, sometimes also literarily brilliant texts are all philosophical virtues that only seldom appear combined in a single individual. Fairness also requires us sometimes to acknowledge the greatness of two thinkers who are diametrically opposed in method and content.

But aren't value judgments inevitably subjective? There is a point of view that says that they are, and this viewpoint is itself a philosophical position that was formed only belatedly. At least by the end of this book the reader will know how it was arrived at and why it is not self-evident. But if the reader wants to know what drives the author of this book, then it must be admitted that

¹ The English terms "science" and "scientific" are used to translate German *Wissenschaft* and *wissenschaftlich*, respectively. As Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall note in the preface to their translation of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, the German terms suggest "thorough, comprehensive, and systematic knowledge of something on a self-consciously rational basis." This contrasts with the more limited English meanings of "science" and "scientific," which should here be understood in the special German sense. —Trans.

my motive is personal. I was born and grew up in Italy, learned German as a foreign language, and a large part of my youth, in which I benefited from a Lutheran training in religion, was spent enthusiastically appropriating German language, literature, philosophy, and human sciences. Having in the meantime become an American married to a Korean, for more than a decade I have been living and teaching at the leading Catholic university in the United States. My perspective on Germany is no longer an internal one, but rather that of a foreigner who wants to understand two things: what factors helped German philosophy rise to be one of the two most fascinating in human history, and how, despite this philosophical tradition, the moral and political catastrophe of 1933–1945 could happen.

This book has benefited enormously from critical readings by my father, Johannes Höhle, and by my friends Karl Ameriks, Roland Galle, and especially Carsten Dutt, during the time they spent at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study; I wish here to offer them my hearty thanks.