

Objective Idealism Today: Principles, Topics, Perspectives
to be held at the University of Bamberg and Banz Monastery, Bad Staffelstein,
July 24-27, 2025

Introduction

The goal of this conference is to explore the relevance and application of objective idealism to contemporary theoretical and practical challenges. Objective idealism, as a philosophical position, posits that objective theoretical knowledge can be attained through reason, not solely through experience, and that this knowledge has ontological significance—the ideal structures identified through reason can illuminate the world.

The two most prominent objective idealists in the history of philosophy are Plato, who emphasized the primacy of ideas themselves, and Hegel, who, influenced by the revolution of Christianity, sought to understand the presence of ideas within reality. The revival of objective idealism in our age was initially sparked by the work of Karl-Otto Apel, who, as Jürgen Habermas's mentor, advanced beyond Kant to formulate a categorical ethics for the technological age. Dieter Wandschneider also contributed significantly by linking objective idealism with the philosophy of nature and modern physics.

Today's most prominent objective idealist is the German philosopher Vittorio Hösle, now working at the University of Notre Dame, who recognizes an array of ways, both systematic and empirical, in which we can improve on Hegel (*Hegels System*). In his major work, *Morals and Politics*, Hösle seeks to combine aspects of Hegel's political philosophy (and, beyond that, elements of ancient political philosophy, including its elevation of the intertwining nature of morals and politics) with advances in the social sciences and historical developments since the time of Hegel. Mark Roche and Christian Illies, the conference organizers, have achieved similar results in the fields of aesthetics and the philosophy of biology, respectively. Contemporary versions of objective idealism are enriched by progress in, and engagement with, advances in the individual disciplines.

The renaissance of objective idealism in systematic and especially practical philosophy is understandable, for it offers a holistic and complex approach to reality, is deeply reflective in terms of justification theory, and is consistently rational in its approach to reality, whose puzzles and problems it regards as in principle rationally solvable despite all the difficulties.

Today, of course, we are talking about a contemporary form of objective idealism. On the one hand, objective idealism must engage and absorb the partly justified criticism of certain traditional idealistic theorems and arguments, and, on the other hand, it must make it its permanent task to keep up to date with the findings of, and developments in, the individual disciplines. The old central idea, namely, that reality is rationally structured, that all being, cognition, and action follows or (in the case of action) should follow recognizable, rational patterns remains unchanged.

For current variants of an objective-idealistic approach, defining and legitimizing standards of orientation for concrete moral or political action requires a dual understanding: theorists must understand, and take into account, both the patterns of normative ideals and arguments and the patterns of real, current social phenomena.

A key advantage of objective idealism—particularly in terms of its motivational psychology—is that it does not merely analyze and describe reality. Instead, it consistently examines and articulates the tension between ideal and real perspectives. By making

well-founded assumptions about the ideal state of entities, whether on a small or large scale, objective idealism inherently acknowledges that the current state often falls short of these ideals. The core task, then, is to identify the deviations and deficits, understand their causes, and articulate our responsibility to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal. This involves formulating, communicating, and realizing actionable principles and concrete demands on ourselves and others to move us closer to the ideal.

Objective idealism, which by its very nature is open and integrative, is today inevitably a collaborative endeavor. It excludes neither discussion nor dissent but is constantly evolving by confronting critical questioning and new insights and tasks, in exchange with individual scientific disciplines as well as with other philosophical approaches, taking into account their strengths and always bearing in mind the finite nature of human knowledge. This even applies to the two dominant paradigms of our age, naturalism, which believes that the only valid truths are those of the natural sciences, and social constructivism, which reduces truth claims to the conditions of their genesis, although objective idealism clearly positions itself as a counterforce to these philosophical orientations.

Historical Perspective

Whereas Plato's philosophy (unlike that of his most important student, Aristotle) gained its normative power of orientation with a certain distance from empirical reality and a focus on the eternal ideas, Hegel's system design pursues the claim to trace the unfolding of the ideal basic structures of reality in their empirical plausibility meticulously and with encyclopaedic completeness. Plato makes a sharp distinction between the perfect world of ideas and material reality, which is no more than an imperfect imitation of these ideal forms. Hegel's philosophy, on the other hand, understands the idea as an immanent part of the world that manifests itself in a historical process.

However, Hegel's work soon faced criticism for its dogmatic interpretations, particularly concerning historical reality, and it struggled to withstand the burgeoning state of knowledge in increasingly specialized disciplines. As modern individualism and the natural sciences triumphed, and specialized scientific knowledge grew exponentially, objective-idealist attempts to interpret the entirety of empirical reality lost significance. Moreover, modern philosophy, especially German Idealism (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel), faced criticism for its rational claims to justification. Since the 19th century, reductionist critiques of reason, such as the historicization of reason by Dilthey and its naturalization in various forms, rejected any claim to a binding, rational mode of orienting knowledge. These critiques increasingly denied reason the competence to make normative statements at all. Consequently, since reason following general laws or the "power of the better argument" (Habermas) no longer holds ultimate authority, there is no longer a general consensus in philosophy or beyond—such as in democratic communities—on what should constitute well-founded, intersubjectively comprehensible, binding knowledge and action. This decline in consensus persists despite ongoing scientific trust in the rational truthfulness of the natural sciences.

In recent decades, it is thanks to Karl-Otto Apel, especially with regard to philosophical questions of justification and practical philosophy (the latter partly with Jürgen Habermas); Dieter Wandschneider, above all with regard to natural philosophy; and especially their student Vittorio Hösle, that the objective-idealistic approach is once again present in a critically revised, renewed, and rethought form and engaged with current discourses on a wide range of topics.

Hösle has established and developed a contemporary form and a forward-looking program of Platonic-Hegelian idealism in a large number of, in some cases, very extensive scholarly publications, with a comprehensive critical reception of the history of philosophy, which systematically applies this philosophy of reason to all areas of reality in exchange with the relevant disciplines—in the good Platonic tradition with the consistently pursued goal of offering ethical and political orientation knowledge with regard to the most pressing problems of our time, as illustrated not least by his main work, *Morality and Politics*.

Conference Goals and Structure

Given the current situation and challenges facing philosophy, the promising possibilities of a modernized objective-idealist approach in providing relevant orientation knowledge, and the inherently discursive nature of objective idealism—which takes other philosophical approaches and scientific progress seriously—it is both timely and necessary to hold a conference on current objective-idealist principles, themes, and perspectives. This conference will be organized as an interdisciplinary meeting of distinguished experts in dialogue with Vittorio Hösle. In other words, the conference, planned for July 2025 (preceded by an online lecture and discussion series), aims to offer selected renowned international experts a platform for a concentrated review of the current findings and challenges of objective idealism. To reflect the political orientation of Plato, the founding father of objective idealism, the opening event will feature a lecture by former German President Horst Köhler, who has extensively engaged with Hösle’s environmental policy proposals for global climate protection.

The thematic blocks of the conference (and the lecture/discussion series) are roughly based on Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, thus reflecting the systemic idea, but are entirely geared toward the work of critically developing objective idealism and making it fruitful for solving philosophical and practical problems. Specifically, at the end of the year, the speakers are to choose a topic within their given subject area and propose it to those responsible for the conference (i.e., the organizers), which is either of particular importance in the current discussion or, in their opinion, receives too little attention. In the short presentations on their topics, they should then be guided by the following two key questions, the intention of which is to ensure that the conference is consistently focused on the essentials while maintaining a critical and future-oriented perspective: (1) In my view, what are the most important substantive contributions of renewed objective idealism to my topic? and (2) Where do I see the most important unresolved issues regarding this topic?

In terms of format, all thematic blocks follow a dialogical scheme, true to the intersubjective spirit of modern objective idealism. Instead of the usual conference lectures, only short presentations are planned for all blocks (in the case of the concluding panel discussion, short introductory statements). Each short presentation will be followed by a discussion, first with the speaker and Vittorio Hösle, then with other experts and the audience of experts from other disciplines as well as selected international doctoral candidates and students. Everyone is encouraged to formulate their contributions in such a way that they are understandable and interesting not only for specialists.

In summary, the aim is to gain an overview of the current state of research on objective idealism, to identify new research questions, and to outline options for action in view of the various social challenges of our time, especially geopolitical and ecological challenges. The results of the conference and the online lecture/discussion series are to be published in

multimedia form (print, online, video, audio). Alber Verlag has expressed a strong interest in cooperating with us.

Prolepsis

It is unusual for a conference to be so wide-ranging. Most conferences are disciplinary, subdisciplinary, or even more narrowly focused. Our response to this anomaly is threefold. First, what unifies this conference is the shared interest in objective idealism. Second, it was traditionally the task of philosophy not only to clarify and insist on precision but also to learn from other disciplines and seek an integration of voices, addressing questions about the whole. We want to preserve this ideal, which might otherwise be lost, to the detriment of human knowledge. Third, a university embodies not only specialized knowledge but also the interrelation of diverse areas of knowledge. This pursuit animates the development of ever more comprehensive theories and justifies why various disciplines—mathematics, science, social sciences, arts, humanities, architecture, business, engineering, law, and medicine—are housed within a single institution. Unlike specialized institutes that focus on individual disciplines, a university seeks unity among disciplines amidst their isolated applications. This relational search for unity remains central to the idea of a university.

Another unusual feature of the conference is its deeply dialogical nature, which we view as a strength. Most conferences involve 45-minute presentations with brief discussions. In contrast, we will shorten the presentations and prioritize extensive dialogue. This dialogue often becomes the most engaging part of a conference, and we aim to capture this in both video and print formats to enhance accessibility and reception.

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Structure, Topics, Speakers

			Topics (topics in parentheses will be held online and in advance of July 2025, but all sessions will be recorded and become part of the published volume)	Speaker	Moderator
Thu 24.07.	Evening		Sustainability and Sufficiency	Dr. H. Köhler	Prof. Dr. C. Illies
Fri 25.07.	Morning	Block 1	1. Objective Idealism Today	Prof. Dr. D. Wandschneider	Dr. G. Schäfer
		(17.02.)	2. (First Principles / Foundational Issues)	Prof. Dr. A. Koch	Prof. Dr. H.-D. Klein
		(18.03.)	3. (Truth, Knowledge, Science)	Prof. Dr. G. Damschen	Dr. S. Probst
		Block 2	4. Philosophy of Nature	Prof. Dr. C. Illies	Prof. Dr. C. Spahn
	Noon				
	Afternoon	Block 3	5. Philosophy of Mind and Intersubjectivity	Dr. N. Kreft	Prof. Dr. T. Kesselring
		(21.01.)	6. (Hermeneutics)	Ass.-Prof. Dr. A. Spahn	Prof. Dr. D. Schönecker
		Block 4	7. Philosophy of Law, Morality, and Politics	Prof. Dr. J. Herdt	Mag. Dr. M. Hackl
Sat 26.07.	Morning	Block 5	8. The Climate Crisis as a Philosophical Challenge	Dr. C. Luyckx	Dr. T. Unnerstall
		(04.02.)	9. (Geopolitical Challenges)	Dr. E. Kanterian	M. Hartwig
		Block 6	10. Philosophy of Art	Prof. Dr. M. Schmitz-Emans	Dr. J. Hagens
	Noon				
		(10.02.)	11. (Forms of Philosophical Expression)	Dr. C. Poetsch	Prof. Dr. W. Braungart
		(10.03.)	12. (Philosophy of the History of Philosophy)	Dr. E. Pili	Prof. Dr. W. Metz
		(29.01.)	13. (Appropriation of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy)	Prof. Dr. A. Bierl	Prof. Dr. G. Uhlmann
	Afternoon	Block 7	14. Modern and Contemporary Philosophy	Ass.-Prof. Dr. F. Suarez Müller	Prof. Dr. C. Stoll
		(26.05.)	15. (Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment)	Prof. Dr. J. Israel	Prof. Dr. M. Lane
		Block 8	16. Philosophy of Religion	Prof. Dr. R. Kany Prof. Dr. J. Rohls Prof. Dr. H. Tetens Dr. A. von Werder	Bischof M. S. Sorondo

Written confirmation has been received from all the speakers and moderators listed here regarding both the conference and the online sessions.

The specific topics and theses within the given subject areas will be proposed by the speakers toward the end of this year.