

# THOUGHT THINKING

THE PHILOSOPHY OF  
GIOVANNI GENTILE

Edited by Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield

**Title page**

# **Thought Thinking**

**The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile**

Edited by Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield

## **Publisher information**

2015 digital version by Andrews UK Limited  
www.andrewsuk.com

Originally published in the UK by Imprint Academic, PO Box 200,  
Exeter EX5 5YX, UK, in conjunction with R.G. Collingwood Society  
(Registered Charity No. 1037636)

Cardiff School of European Languages, Translation and Politics,  
Cardiff University, 65–68 Park Place, Cardiff CF10 3AS, UK  
<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/collingwood>

Originally distributed in the USA by Ingram Book Company, One  
Ingram Blvd., La Vergne, TN 37086, USA

© 2015 world copyright:  
Bradley Society and Collingwood Society

No part of any contribution may be reproduced in any form without  
permission, except for the quotation of brief passages in criticism  
and discussion

### ***Collingwood and British Idealism Studies incorporating Bradley Studies***

The Journal of The Bradley Society, The Collingwood Society and  
the Collingwood and British Idealism Centre, Cardiff

Executive Editor: David Boucher

Editors: James Connelly, Bruce Haddock, William Sweet, Colin Tyler,  
Andrew Vincent

#### **EDITORIAL BOARD**

Terry Diffey (Sussex); W. Jan van der Dussen (Open University,  
Netherlands); Leon J. Goldstein (State University of New York at  
Binghamton); Ian Hodder (Cambridge); Michael Krausz (Bryn  
Mawr, U.S.A.); Leon Pompa (Birmingham); Rex Martin (Kansas and  
Cardiff University); W. Mander (Oxford University); Peter Nicholson  
(York); James Patrick (St. Thomas More, U.S.A.); Lionel Rubinoff

(Trent University, Canada); Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, U.S.A.);  
Heikki Saari (Helsinki); Guy Stock (University of Dundee); Donald  
Taylor (Oregon, U.S.A.); Professor Guido Vanheeswijck (Antwerp  
and Louvain).

[imprint-academic.com/collingwood](http://imprint-academic.com/collingwood)

# Introduction

**Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield**

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 1–15

## 1.

The Italian author Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944) occupied a radical position among philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century. He tried in earnest to revolutionize idealist theory, developing a doctrine that retained the idealist conception of the thinking subject as the centre and source of any intelligible reality, while eschewing many of the unwarranted abstractions that had pervaded earlier varieties of idealism and led their adherents astray. Gentile's efforts to present a doctrine that was fully self-consistent and free of unnecessary assumptions led him to *actual idealism* or *actualism*, a form of anti-realism that stopped just short of outright scepticism, and that, in both its radicalism and its comprehensiveness—the whole of intelligible reality, argued Gentile, is constructed in the course of thinking—has rarely been approached in the century since it was first described. While Gentile's philosophical interests were broad, his commitment to the core principles of actual idealism remained remarkably consistent. On any given problem it is possible to reconstruct a sharply defined and distinctively Gentilean perspective by reference to those same principles. In this respect, Gentile stands out from his peers as more than a thoughtful man who, in an age of radical political upheaval and social change, turned to theory to help him understand. Rather, he was a theorist first and foremost, dedicated to a set of what he regarded as permanent problems in the history of philosophy. To these, he believed, a robust form of constructivism was the only tenable answer.

Any of these considerations would by itself make Gentile a strong candidate for study by today's philosophers. This is despite the fact that few mainstream theorists now call themselves idealists and that

the specialist terminology of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century idealism, with its catalogue of reified abstractions such as *Geist* (or, for the Italians, *Spirito*), is now little used except by intellectual historians. Nonetheless, the influence of the idealists remains considerable. Kant's ideas, in particular, feature prominently in English-language philosophy, though often in restated or adapted forms. The chief purpose of this volume is to present Gentile as a credible philosopher who still has something to say to us, while at the same time criticizing his theory with the same even-handedness that would be applied to the ideas of any serious thinker. Our purpose, to borrow a Crocean phrase, is to show an Anglophone audience what is living and what is dead in actual idealism.<sup>[1]</sup> Once Gentile's ideas are open to view, we leave it to the reader to decide which parts of his doctrine, if any, are worthy of further exploration.

## 2.

Between his early twenties and his death at the age of sixty-eight, Gentile published works on a vast array of philosophical topics. His *Opere complete* now extends to more than fifty volumes, including nine in which he elaborates his own idealist system, as well as others on education, religion, art, politics, Italian culture and the history of philosophy.<sup>[2]</sup> Gentile was also a translator, editor and reviewer, publishing, to name just a few examples, an Italian edition of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he edited and translated in collaboration with Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice;<sup>[3]</sup> various writings of Bertrando Spaventa, whom Gentile regarded as one of the most important figures in the transmission of Hegelian philosophy into the Italian context;<sup>[4]</sup> and a great many reviews in journals such as *La Critica* and *Il giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, discussing works published in Italian, French, English and German.<sup>[5]</sup> At different times he also served as a schoolteacher, a university professor, *ministro della pubblica istruzione* (education minister, 1922-1924), president of both the *Istituto fascista di cultura* (Fascist Institute of Culture, 1925-1937) and the *Reale accademia d'Italia* (Royal Academy of Italy, 1943-1944) and author of the first, technical half of the official

*Dottrina del fascismo* (Doctrine of Fascism, 1932), officially attributed to Benito Mussolini.

Given his great prominence during his lifetime, it is perhaps remarkable that Gentile is so little discussed, and even then so poorly understood, in the English-speaking world. Few of his works have ever been translated into English, and these represent only a fraction of his great corpus and the many topics discussed therein. This neglect is partly explained by his close association with the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (National Fascist Party), of which he remained a loyal member and supporter between 1923 and his assassination in 1944. This never-recanted affiliation need not have fatally damaged Gentile's philosophical reputation—after all, both Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger have been tentatively re-admitted into the philosophical canon, despite their support for the even more notorious National Socialists in the 1930s—but it has tainted the popular perception of him, making him appear, at least to those unfamiliar with his other ideas, to have been the philosopher of Fascism first and a philosopher simpliciter only second. This has made it easy to dismiss Gentile as a mere oddity in the history of philosophy, notable chiefly for something other than his ideas. This problem is compounded by his approach to philosophy, which owes much to Hegelian philosophers of a kind that was, even at the time he was writing, becoming increasingly remote from mainstream Anglophone theory. His style is prone to strike modern readers as excessively florid and unclear, while his terms of reference reflect a brand of bloated Hegelianism that was not to shed its excesses until after the Second World War. Long-standing worries about early twentieth-century Hegelians being unable to express themselves, except in a dense private language of murky, self-referential abstractions, are made all the more acute when it is known that, whatever Gentile's theory meant in its own terms, it was compatible with and even conducive to totalitarian Fascism.<sup>[6]</sup>

To make matters worse, the relevant secondary literature in English is scarce, mostly antiquated and only intermittently insightful. Many of the books and articles written about Gentile have been concerned to extract any sense whatever from his dense utterances,

drawing no conclusions more significant than that he was obviously a clever fellow; the few that do more have had to work hard to address the standing question of why one would ever choose an unapologetic, card-carrying Fascist as a topic of serious philosophical study. As such there has been little continuous debate over the real substance of actual idealism: Gentile and his ideas are endlessly reintroduced and broadly reinterpreted by each author, without any of the regular back-and-forth, attack and defence by which discussion is given its momentum. Those that admire his work agree that he has been unjustly neglected; those that do not simply continue to ignore him. Even in Italy, where the mania for clarity and straight talk never took hold to the same extent as in the world of Anglophone philosophy, Gentile's stylistic quirks and esoteric vocabulary made him a divisive figure. Some thought (and still think) him profound, exciting and ambitious; others have dismissed him as a hack, an obscurantist or a philosopher-for-hire, issuing high-sounding but hollow pronouncements intended to conceal, at best, fuzzy thinking and, at worst, a sinister political agenda.<sup>[7]</sup> In Italy, at least, the bulk of Gentile's work is available to those prepared to read it, so the picture of him that has emerged, at least after a long post-War period of relative neglect, is more three-dimensional than what we find in the English literature. There he is widely, if not universally, recognized as one of the major Italian philosophers of the twentieth century. Whether this is merited by his theory or only his unusual biography remains an open question.

If any of the work on Gentile's actual idealism is to make an impact on serious philosophical debates outside Italy, some way must be found to get over Gentile's enduring reputation as a philosopher of merely parochial importance. It is to that end that this volume is intended, in a small way, to contribute. Whether or not it is possible to rehabilitate the man, we seek to show that his philosophy contains appreciable riches whose value is independent of the author's political allegiances. Each of the seven original essays included in this volume examines a different aspect of Gentile's work, connecting it in various ways with other figures, movements and themes that show the enduring relevance of his ideas while at the



same time trying to exorcise some persistent myths that have arisen around him. As well as these essays, we have translated four of Gentile's shorter works, originally published in Italian between 1912 and 1931. With these our aim is to give English-speaking readers representative samples of his thought on a range of topics not currently represented in the existing literature. Only one of these has been translated into English before, and it has been our aim to produce translations that are both as clear as Gentile's style allows, as well as accurate, relatively concise representations of what he actually thought. If we have succeeded, these should be useful for both existing specialists and newcomers to his work.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 3.

Gentile was born in the small town of Castelvetro, in the western corner of Sicily, on 30 May 1875. His father, a pharmacist, periodically struggled to maintain his business and cater to the needs of his large family.<sup>[9]</sup> Gentile was an intellectually precocious youth, and in 1893 he won a coveted place at the *Scuola Normale di Pisa*, then, as today, one of Italy's premier schools. Moving to the mainland, he soon fell under the influence of Donato Jaia, himself a former disciple of the right-Hegelian philosopher Bertrando Spaventa. Under Jaia's guidance, Gentile became an enthusiastic student of both history and philosophy, with a special interest in the Italian philosophical tradition, on which he was to become a leading expert. Through his connections to Jaia and Spaventa, Gentile was converted to idealism, and soon came to the attention of Benedetto Croce, who, his elder by nine years, was by the mid-1890s gaining recognition as a major Italian intellectual. In each other they found common cause. Both were by this stage committed to promoting wider recognition of a distinctively Italian intellectual tradition, as well as the spirit of the *Risorgimento*, according to which Italy itself, in order to regain the prestige it had enjoyed in the Roman and Renaissance eras, should be unified both politically and culturally. Croce and Gentile became correspondents and, later, collaborators.

This partnership was to become one of the defining features of Gentile's intellectual life.<sup>[10]</sup>

As a young man, Gentile was among Europe's most conspicuous champions of idealism, staunchly opposed to the rising tide of empiricism, positivism and 'scientism' that, on his account, threatened to engulf the speculative traditions of the preceding century. Gentile defended this position throughout his career, even as idealism was increasingly rejected by his contemporaries. In those early years, however, Gentile and Croce were recognised in Italy as credible public intellectuals and advocates of a plausible (and distinctively Italian) alternative to the philosophies imported from abroad. Despite disagreements over the intricacies of idealism, their collaboration proved enormously fruitful, giving rise to *La Critica*, which, following its foundation in 1903, was quickly acknowledged as the foremost anti-positivist philosophical journal in the country.

Prior to the First World War, Gentile's primary interests were in education and the history of philosophy. Prompted in part by the appearance of Croce's *Filosofia dello Spirito*, comprising a series of volumes published between 1902 and 1909, Gentile began earnestly to develop his own systematic theory in essays such as 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' (The Act of Thinking as Pure Act, 1912) and 'Il metodo dell'immanenza' (The Method of Immanence, 1912). These marked the beginning of the most productive phase of an always productive career. By the time the war was over, Gentile had published both volumes of his *Sommario di pedagogia* (Summary of Pedagogy, 1913–1914), *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Reform of the Hegelian Dialectic, 1915), the *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto* (Foundations of the Philosophy of Right, 1916), the *Teoria generale dello Spirito come atto puro* (General Theory of the Spirit as Pure Act, 1916) and the first volume of a *Sistema di logica* (System of Logic, 1917), alongside a good deal of journalism and commentary on the Italian political situation, the progress of the war and the prospects for its aftermath.<sup>[11]</sup> Within a few years he had added to these works his *Discorsi di religione* (Lectures on Religion,

1920), *La riforma dell'educazione* (The Reform of Education, 1920) and the second volume of his *Logica* (1923).

In late 1922, Mussolini's *Partito Nazionale Fascista* came to power as the major constituent of a coalition government. In recognition of his reputation as an educational theorist, Gentile, though at that stage not a Fascist, was invited to take up the post of *Ministro della pubblica istruzione*. This proved to be the first in a series of events that cemented Gentile's notoriety. In the absence of a fully developed policy programme, he was given free rein to effect radical changes to the Italian education system, and these were, with at least a hint of irony, described after the fact as 'the most Fascist of all reforms'. The second key event came in 1923, when Gentile officially joined the PNF: he was no longer an outsider or fellow traveller, but a committed insider, lending his philosophical talents to the promotion of the Fascists' 'totalitarian' vision of the state. The next two watershed moments came in quick succession in the spring of 1925. The first was in March, when Gentile gave a public lecture, entitled 'Che cosa è il Fascismo?' (What is Fascism?), identifying the *manganelli* (truncheons) of the Fascist *squadristi* (Blackshirts) as a moral force imbued with the 'grace of God'. This lecture, delivered in the wake of the Matteotti crisis, prompted a decisive break with many of Gentile's former friends and admirers, not least Benedetto Croce. <sup>[12]</sup> This split was made explicit, public and permanent in April 1925 when Gentile wrote *Il manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti* (The Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals), laying out their aims and values for international perusal. This prompted a vehement reply, written by Croce and published ten days after Gentile's *Manifesto*, entitled *Il manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti* (The Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals). <sup>[13]</sup>

From this point forward, Gentile occupied a series of high-profile positions, both in and out of politics, though never again as a minister. He was presented as the intellectual face of the regime, called upon whenever a policy or initiative required an air of scholarly credibility. As the president of the *Istituto fascista di cultura*, for example, he oversaw the promotion and development of Fascist culture in publications such as the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. Although no

longer directly involved in policy-making, Gentile remained a loyal and vocal supporter of the regime. Even after 1938, when anti-Semitic laws were introduced in order to align Fascist Italy with Nazi Germany, he did not publicly oppose them, despite their incompatibility with his own vision of the Fascist state as one founded on solidarity through citizens' mutual recognition of each other as thinking beings. Race, for Gentile, could not be anything but an empirical abstraction, and was as such a wholly inappropriate criterion for an individual's inclusion in or exclusion from the state.

Despite his reservations, Gentile remained loyal, speaking out in favour of Fascism as the Second World War began. When the Kingdom of Italy surrendered to the Allies in the autumn of 1943, he moved to the Nazi-controlled Italian Social Republic and dashed off his final systematic work, *Genesi e struttura della società* (Genesis and Structure of Society). The manuscript was completed before the year was out, but the book would not be published until the War was over and Gentile was dead: he was assassinated by Communist partisans on 15 April 1944, as a symbolic reply to the executions of five imprisoned anti-Fascist activists the month before. The killers had selected Gentile not because of any involvement in this incident—indeed, commentators have consistently noted the small irony in the fact that he was killed on his way home from Florence after arguing that anti-Fascists should be shown clemency—but because he was known to have been a prominent and steadfast Fascist from the beginning.

Gentile was given a grand public funeral and was buried at the *Basilica di Santa Croce* in Florence. At the time of his death, several of his works were unpublished or incomplete. These included *Genesi e struttura di società*, published to mixed reviews in 1946; various works, some substantially complete, on the history of philosophy, aesthetics and literature; and part of a philosophy of history, a topic that had exercised him through much of his career, but one that he had never yet laid out systematically. These were collected and published over a space of several decades, with the edited fragments on the philosophy of history appearing only in the mid-1990s.<sup>[14]</sup>

#### 4.

The present volume comprises eleven essays. Seven of these are new pieces written especially for *Thought Thinking*, and are intended both to contribute to ongoing debates about Gentile's philosophy and to indicate just a few of its many aspects that continue to draw the attention of philosophers, political theorists and intellectual historians. These are supplemented by new English translations of four of Gentile's shorter works, selected to offer some direct insight into his ideas and style of writing.

We recognize the unfamiliarity of Gentile's work to most English-speaking philosophers. Indeed, as we have said, one of the main motivations behind the present volume is to clear away some of the obscurity and misunderstanding in which actual idealism has long been mired. Existing translations of Gentile's works are few, and all reflect the considerable difficulty of making his ideas intelligible to an Anglophone audience without unduly distorting them in the process.

Gentile is a difficult philosopher in any language. His obscure terms and awkward syntax can make him as much a puzzle for native speakers of Italian as for those reading him with the aid of a dictionary. We mean to show that the effort demanded of the reader is a price worth paying for the riches careful reading may yield, but this in no way mitigates the harsh truth of the fact that Gentile's work, and especially his technical work, is tough going. Given the special difficulties involved in rendering Gentile's work in intelligible English, the process of preparing translations for this volume was unusually circuitous. In the first instance, rough translations were prepared by James Wakefield. These drafts were then passed to Lizzie Lloyd, who made substantial corrections in order to square the translations with what Gentile actually wrote. Finally, the translations were carefully examined and reworked by Lloyd, Wakefield and Bruce Haddock in an attempt to ensure that Gentile's sense was conveyed as clearly as possible within the structure of the original text. Where literal translations would have left the meaning obscure, we have translated more liberally, prioritizing sense over strict faithfulness to Gentile's phrasing. Occasionally, though, his awkward style has been

retained, since it was considered that it would have been necessary to rewrite rather than translate his ideas in order to make his claims clear.

Any translator committed to producing an English rendition that is both faithful to Gentile's sense and reasonably easy to read must face several special challenges. One is that Gentile expresses his ideas in his own idiosyncratic terminology, which in some ways resembles but is never identical to that of any of his idealist antecedents and contemporaries. Any reader who comes to Gentile expecting a derivative of Hegel is likely at first to find her surroundings familiar. Actual idealism is packed with references to the spirit, the dialectic, the absolute, the universal, the endless unfolding of history and a host of other Hegelian-inflected notions. But this resemblance is misleading; Gentile conceives of each of these concepts in the way demanded by actual idealism, with its peculiarly unremitting focus on the subject's act of thinking, through which the whole of reality and indeed truth is continuously created. To make sense of that, he supplies some technical terms of his own. These are drawn from a diverse set of sources. (As well as his native Sicilian and Italian, Gentile was well versed in ancient Greek, Latin, German and French, and he takes it for granted that his readers are similarly multilingual.) His technical language can be confusing to a newcomer, not least because he regards his own philosophical concerns as perennial problems. In any given work he tends to restate the same idea several times over, using slightly different technical language in each passage. He makes few concessions to the reader, tending to lay out his ideas abruptly and unapologetically, with dense metaphors and literary allusions but few concrete examples to help those left behind.

The essays in this volume will explain many of the technical aspects of Gentile's theory, but, to assist with the reader's orientation, it is worth sketching out a few of the most important. *Pensiero pensante* ('thought thinking') and *pensiero pensato* ('thought thought', which never makes much sense in English) are original to him, though obviously informed by cognate concepts in German idealism. The first refers to 'concrete', actual thinking as it is

performed by the subject. It is the *activity* of self-conscious thinking, a process that involves the endless creation of reality. The second refers to 'abstract' thought, which is thought as the object created in the course of actual thinking. These furnish actual thinking with content. Claims are articulated using abstract concepts (words) and made *real* as the act of thinking affirms or denies them, thereby including them in or excluding them from reality as the subject (itself an abstraction, except so far as it is a self-creative act of thinking) perceives it. Gentile believes that his account of concrete and abstract thought is no more than a true account of how each of us actually experiences thinking. To him it is *undeniably true* that we experience the world by thinking about it in the continuous present, that our thinking not only describes but creates reality, and that as such it is strictly absurd for us to presuppose the existence of a transcendent or pre-reflective reality. He believes that he can keep his theory from collapsing into relativism or solipsism, but this is contested. Some of the essays in this volume include responses to this part of Gentile's theory.

On Gentile's account, then, the standpoint of actual thinking is inescapable; we cannot know or say anything without thinking it, and abstractions, unless affirmed by actual thinking, are unreal. What we do not think, or that which is not 'immanent' in the concrete reality of our thought, we cannot know; and about what we cannot know, or that which is 'transcendent' of our thinking, we can say nothing intelligible whatsoever. Gentile's preoccupation with the difference between 'immanent' and 'transcendent' views of the world owes a great deal to Christian philosophy. His view of the subject endlessly creating and recreating its own reality, including itself within it, is captured by his concept of *autoctisi* (approximately 'self-constitutivism'), which comes from Bertrando Spaventa, albeit supplemented by St Thomas Aquinas, from whom Gentile takes the concept of thinking as a 'pure act' (St Thomas's *actum purum*). The related principle of *norma sui*, the idea of thought as its own standard, comes by an indirect route from Benedict Spinoza. The concepts described above constitute the backbone of actual idealism from its earliest iterations through to the last. The question of

whether these amount to a defensible conception of the relation between subject and object, thought and reality, is one that the contributors to the present volume try to answer.<sup>[15]</sup>

[1](#) This connection has been made before. See Cleto Carbonara, 'Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto nell' attualismo di Gentile', *Enciclopedia* 76–77: il pensiero di Giovanni Gentile, vol. 1, eds. Simonetta Betti, Franca Rovigatti and Gianni Eugenio Viola (Florence, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1977), pp. 197–204.

[2](#) These are now published by Le Lettere, a direct descendant of the Sansoni publishing house which took responsibility for publishing Gentile's works in 1936.

[3](#) This Italian translation is still highly regarded and remains in print today. See Immanuel Kant, *Critica della ragion pura*, ed., trans. Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (Bari, Laterza, 2012 [1907]).

[4](#) See, for example: Spaventa's *Scritti filosofici*, ed. Giovanni Gentile (Naples, Ditta A. Morano & Figlio, 1901); *Principi di etica* (Naples, Piero, 1904), to which Gentile contributes an introduction; *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea*, ed. Giovanni Gentile (Bari, Laterza, 1909); and *Logica e metafisica*, ed. Giovanni Gentile (Bari, Laterza, 1911).

[5](#) The journal *La Critica* was established in 1903 by Benedetto Croce, and was edited jointly by him and Gentile until their acrimonious split in the mid-1920s. Gentile then established *Il giornale critico della filosofia italiana* and served as its editor.

[6](#) Several of Gentile's contemporaries actively promoted the impression of him as an obscurantist who, at least after his attachment to Fascism, could no longer be considered a credible philosopher. Examples include Benedetto Croce, who was harshly critical of his former friend; and Guido de Ruggiero, who accused Gentile of complacency and intellectual dishonesty, having 'shut himself up in one or more formulae, which he is wont to repeat and to amplify and vary with invincible monotony', thereby promoting 'an abstruse and tiresome theology ... or else religious oratory, full of unctious and false rhetorical emotion.' See Guido de Ruggiero, 'Main Currents of Contemporary Philosophy in Italy', trans. Constance M. Allen, *Philosophy* 1: 3 (1926), pp. 320–32, p. 327.

[7](#) For a discussion of Gentile's reputation in Italy, see Daniela Coli, 'La concezione politica di Giovanni Gentile', in *Logoi* (Castelvetrano, Edizioni Mazzotta, 2006), pp. 37–57.

[8](#) Our 'Basic Concepts of Actualism', which appears in the present volume, is a translation of Gentile's 'Concetti fondamentali dell'attualismo', another translation of which recently appeared as 'The Foundations of Actualism', in *From Kant to Croce: Philosophy in Italy, 1800–1950*, eds., trans. Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 695–705



[9](#) See Gabriele Turi, *Giovanni Gentile: una biografia* (Milan, Giunto, 1998), pp. 7–10; and, for a short but useful account in English, Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: the Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013), pp. 22–4.

[10](#) There has been a great deal of literature on the relationship between Gentile and Croce. For a recent scholarly account of its development, see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 25–39 and chapters 2, 3, 6 and 8. Sossio Giametta discusses the philosophers' common interest in the project consolidating Italian reunification in 'Croce e Gentile', *Idee* 28: 9 (1995), pp. 213–18

[11](#) Much of this is now collected in *Guerra e fede* and *Dopo la vittoria*, both published by Le Lettere.

[12](#) The Matteotti crisis had begun in June 1924 with the kidnap and murder of the Socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti at the hands of Fascist activists. This was a response to the publication of Matteotti's scathing *exposé* of the PNF's corruption and use of violence in the preceding elections.

[13](#) Both manifestos have been translated recently by Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver. See 'Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals', in *From Kant to Croce*, pp. 707–12; and 'Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals', in *From Kant to Croce*, pp. 713–16.

[14](#) Giovanni Gentile, *La filosofia della storia, Saggi e inediti*, ed. Hervé Cavallera (Florence, Le Lettere, 1996).

[15](#) The editors are profoundly grateful to the many people who contributed to this volume and otherwise assisted with its creation. We are especially grateful to all the contributors, as well as Tim Barnwell, David Boucher, Richard Broome, Sheila Haddock, Lizzie Lloyd, Keith Sutherland, Jean Wakefield and Michael Wakefield.

# Gentile as Historian of Philosophy: The Method of Immanence in Practice

Bruce Haddock<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 17–43

**Abstract:** This essay shows how Gentile's 'method of immanence' informed his distinctive approach to the history of philosophy. By reference to Gentile's influential studies of thinkers such as Rosmini, Gioberti and Vico, Haddock shows how a method of internal criticism that he had employed throughout his work on history of philosophy could be distilled as an appropriate method for philosophy itself. Gentile always denied that a disciplined approach to philosophy could be attained without serious engagement with the history of philosophy. In important respects, he saw them as aspects of a single enterprise.

Philosophical reputations are precarious things, depending often on circumstances that have little to do with technical philosophical questions. In Gentile's case, even philosophers who have genuinely admired aspects of his work have been troubled by his portrayal of himself as the 'philosopher of fascism'.<sup>[2]</sup> A rich literature has dealt with this problem in significant detail.<sup>[3]</sup> Controversy, we must assume, will always surround Gentile as a political philosopher. We should note, however, that political philosophy had not been a central concern in Gentile's formative years. He established his philosophical bearings through intense study of the history of philosophy, introducing levels of sophistication and systematic commitment to the field that were unusual among the philosophers of his day. Even his critics acknowledge his accomplishments as a historian of philosophy. There is some recognition among specialists that the lineaments of his mature thinking can be traced back to his

early work in history of philosophy.<sup>[4]</sup> What is less often noticed, at least in the English-speaking world, is the enduring quality of his work on the history of (especially) Italian philosophy, which set terms of reference for analytical engagement not only with a distinctive tradition in philosophy but also nurtured a broader understanding of the role a reflective public played in the fashioning of an emerging Italian public culture. These issues, to be sure, are troubling in their own right, not least in relation to episodes in Italian political development that are often cast in a negative light. Yet it is beyond dispute that Gentile and his early followers established disciplinary standards in their treatments of Italian philosophy that have continued to inform historically motivated work.<sup>[5]</sup>

Beyond sub-disciplinary criteria, however, Gentile advanced the more audacious claim that philosophy simply cannot be conducted properly without direct engagement with the history of philosophy. As agents, but as philosophers more self-consciously, we respond to a world of ideas that is driven by myriad efforts to think clearly. We are dealing entirely with ideas and values that are constructed by our shared conceptual commitment. We bring our own intellectual concerns to the record of other people's thinking, and in the process transform past thought into a living world of philosophical argument and debate. In this view, in an important sense, the history of philosophy is the unavoidable starting point for serious philosophical work, even if we do not see ourselves as historians of philosophy. But that is only a part of the story. Gentile's crucial point is that to disregard the history is to miss the philosophical point of engaging with, and contributing to, a developing world of ideas.

Gentile effectively adopted a 'method of immanence' from the outset of his career, though the essay of that title (translated in this volume) was first published in 1912. What this shows, among other things, is the remarkable continuity in basic ideas and themes that run throughout Gentile's career. Gentile traces a series of problematic issues that run throughout the history of philosophy, each responding to a prevalent dualism entrenched in the western philosophical tradition in Plato's original synthesis. He regarded any suggestion that a world of ideas somehow confronts a world of facts

as a wholly untenable position. Common sense very easily slips into a characterization of ideas as a more or less adequate representation of an objective world set wholly apart from our thinking. How the relationship between ideas and things should be grasped is, of course, a vexed technical issue. Gentile portrays the series of metaphysical positions, from Plato, through Aristotle, the Epicureans, Stoics, Plotinus, the Church Fathers, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, down to the resurgence of idealism in his own thought, as attempts to overcome the dualism between subject and object that constitutes a major obstacle to the proper understanding of thinking as an activity.

As a philosophical/historical sketch, the essay covers an astonishing range of positions, without losing sight of the urgency of the problem in contemporary philosophical debate. The terms of reference are set by the Kantian distinction between things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves, endorsing Kant's focus on the judging subject but seeking to avoid the continuing iteration of dualist themes even in German idealist work that had properly recognized the dualism to be the key problem in the Kantian position.

Gentile's solution is beguilingly simple. The intelligible world for us is a product of our thinking. We notice things, construe relations between things, defend the intrinsic value of certain positions and objectives, all in terms of networks of ideas that are our own constructions. We come to these ideas in the works of other thinkers, where they take their place as a body of ideas and facts, almost like a natural world confronting thinkers striving to understand it. But they are not straightforward bodies of facts and ideas at all. As examples of past ideas, they are relevant to us as a series of problems that we are trying to resolve in our current thinking. We confer life on past ideas in our actual thinking, not as repositories of wisdom but as active dimensions of our best efforts to understand ourselves and our world. In the process, we literally bring them to life, recognize them as active attempts to resolve specific problems, incorporated as basic building blocks in our own thinking. In the essay Gentile highlights a thread that continued to inform the best thinking of his

day. He describes the 'method of immanence' as 'the concept of the absolute concreteness of the real in the act of thought and in history'.<sup>[6]</sup> His target is any account that sets ideas against a world they are supposed to represent. In his view there simply is no such perspective. We are all embedded thinkers doing our best to give a coherent account of our world, in the process projecting a view of a past and a natural context. Our thinking is all we have to guide us. Anything else we might appeal to is a conceptual illusion.

The historical gloss in 'The Method of Immanence' should thus be seen as a defence of a specific philosophical position. It presents, in the most concise form possible, the argument at the heart of Gentile's celebrated *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (Theory of Mind as Pure Act), first published in 1916, and probably the most influential of his pre-fascist writings.<sup>[7]</sup> The point to stress is that Gentile refuses to distinguish historical interpretation from philosophical defence.

In *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, as in 'The Method of Immanence', Gentile contends that the western intellectual tradition has its origin in a mistaken conception of reality. For the Greeks, in his account, philosophy is essentially contemplative. The world is a self-complete entity, and the task of thought is to formulate concepts that correspond with this objective reality. Subject and object are irrevocably opposed. Gentile treats the naturalism that this relationship entails as the major stumbling block of all theories of knowledge. Even those philosophies in which intimations of idealism have often been perceived are only 'a one-sided idealism or half truth', because they are unable to embrace the whole of reality.<sup>[8]</sup> Thus, Plato's transcendent idealism 'leaves matter, and therefore the becoming of nature, outside the idea'.<sup>[9]</sup> And in Kant's critical idealism 'the idea is a mere unifying activity of a manifold arising from another source, and the idea therefore supposes its opposite, an unknowable, which is the negation of the idea itself'.<sup>[10]</sup> With the advent of Christianity a new principle is promulgated that offers an alternative to the dualism of classical naturalism. In place of nature conceived as an object awaiting comprehension, there is reality conceived as the will of God. Nature is now construed as God's

spiritual construct, and man partakes of God's nature insofar as he creates his own world of thought. Truth can no longer be conceived as a body of systematically related ideas that correspond with the external world, but as a product of thought itself. He claims that 'true thought is not *thought thought (pensiero pensato)*, which Plato and the whole of ancient philosophy regarded as self-subsistent, a presupposition of our thought, which aspires to correspondence with it. For us the *thought thought (pensiero pensato)* supposes *thought thinking (pensiero pensante)*; its life and its truth are in its act.'<sup>[11]</sup>

Gentile draws this radical constructivist insight from Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* of 1710.<sup>[12]</sup> The motto of that work, *verum et factum convertuntur* (the truth and the made are convertible), acknowledges that nature remains a closed book for human understanding. We can observe the extrinsic connections of natural phenomena, but because nature is God's artifact, we 'cannot know why one phenomenon must follow on another, nor in general why what is, is'.<sup>[13]</sup> We can know, of course, the world of abstractions, of straight lines and triangles, because these are constructions of our imaginations. And, moving on to Vico's *Scienza nuova* of 1725, Gentile notes with approval Vico's extension of his making and knowing principle to the world of human artifacts, the world of history.<sup>[14]</sup> The lesson that Gentile derives from Vico is a confirmation of his notion that truth as a fixed and finished product is inconceivable, that there is not philosophy, but the activity of thinking philosophically.

The truth is that the fact, which is convertible with the truth (*verum et factum convertuntur*), in being the same spiritual reality which realizes itself or which is known in its realizing, is not, strictly speaking, a fact or a deed but a doing.<sup>[15]</sup>

In this way, through Vico, Gentile claims that he has overcome what remained of dualism in Hegel. The key thought for Gentile is that Hegel had presupposed outside of self-consciousness the absolute idea which would be its consummation. In his *Logic* Hegel distinguished a system of thought and a sequence of categories which were opposed to the ordinary thinking of an empirical

individual in very much the way that Plato's Forms were opposed to their material counterparts:

The idealism which I distinguish as *actual* inverts the Hegelian problem: for it is no longer the question of a deduction of thought from Nature and of Nature from the Logos, but of Nature and the Logos from thought. By thought is meant present thinking in act, not thought defined in the abstract; thought which is *absolutely ours*, in which the "I" is realized. And through this inversion the deduction becomes, what in Hegel it was impossible it could become, the real proof of itself which thought provides in the world's history, which is its history.<sup>[16]</sup>

*The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* should be read as an extended defence of Hegel's conception of a 'concrete universal'. The point is to take the embeddedness of ideas seriously, without undermining the universal claims that are a necessary feature of attempts to think rigorously about truth and value. It is uninteresting simply to report how things look from a particular perspective. Our concern, rather, is to think as clearly as we can about whatever happens to concern us. What comes to our attention will reflect priorities in our particular cultures, but our responses are contributions to a universal dialogue, conducted in all manner of different contexts. Gentile's defence of this position is not couched in narrowly theoretical terms. He sees it as a necessary feature of any serious engagement with past philosophy. And, crucially for this paper, he first deployed the approach in his earliest detailed work in history of philosophy.

Gentile had from his student days been educated in the exclusive atmosphere of academic philosophy. At the University of Pisa he fell under the influence of the Kantian scholar Donato Jaia, who had studied under Bertrando Spaventa (1817-83), and his interest in idealism and regard for Spaventa remained for the rest of his life. Gentile regarded Spaventa as 'the master of philosophic knowledge, not only at Naples but for the whole of Italy'.<sup>[17]</sup> He very much saw his own early work as an extension and development of Spaventa's original philosophy, involving as it did close study of Hegel along with

a sustained attempt to treat the history of philosophy philosophically. Between 1900 and 1925 he edited and published collections of Spaventa's works, culminating in the splendid three-volume edition that is introduced by a book-length study of Spaventa by Gentile, first published in 1899.<sup>[18]</sup>

What Gentile valued above all in Spaventa, highlighted in the short preface to the edited works, was the 'immanentistic philosophy' he had inaugurated, evident especially in his *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea* (Italian Philosophy in its Relations with European Philosophy).<sup>[19]</sup> In what were originally a set of lectures, Spaventa stressed the national context of a philosophical tradition, but insisted that the articulation of a particular view of the world should also be seen in relation to wider issues in the development of philosophy and culture. Spaventa, a committed Hegelian like Gentile himself, intent on reading Hegel in the light of subsequent developments in philosophy, used the terms of reference of German idealism in a series of studies of the best of Italian philosophy. The risk of anachronism in this approach is obvious, but Spaventa's point is that neglect of mainstream philosophy runs the risk of presenting the Italian philosophical tradition as a curious side-show. Spaventa's concern is to highlight the deeper significance of Italian philosophy within the context of both a developing national culture and European thought as a whole.

Spaventa's central claim, which Gentile would endorse vigorously in his own work, is that Italian philosophy has something unique to contribute to the spiritual life of Europe, but that contribution can be properly estimated only in the context of an understanding of the relations between a philosophy and the concrete circumstances of its formulation:

In order to see the strength that resides in the nationality of our philosophy, it is necessary to understand the significance of nationality in the life of philosophy in general. And to that end it is not enough for me to say: philosophy is the last and clearest expression of the life of a people. Beyond this



abstract conclusion, I must show that such an expression has had an historical existence.<sup>[20]</sup>

Hegel's influence on the specific scheme defended by Spaventa is clear. He sees the emergence of nationality as a key feature in the development of philosophy. In India, ancient Greece and Europe during the Middle Ages, so he argues, nationality had not constituted a philosophical problem. A shared culture, in each case, had led to universality in philosophy. After the Renaissance, however, intellectual life in Europe fragmented in the wake of the emergence of discrete nations. Far from lamenting the demise of philosophical unity, Spaventa treats the proliferation of traditions as a sign of intellectual maturity. The philosophical unity that preceded the Renaissance he regards as abstract. In the course of modern history, the various nations highlighted different aspects of the stock of shared assumptions that constituted the European tradition. 'Thus abstract Being', he writes, 'appertains to the Indians, the Intelligible to the Greeks ... abstract Thought and Matter to the French, Substance to Spinoza who was born in Holland, Perception to the English, and all the rest to Germany. Where then, you will say, is Italian philosophy?'<sup>[21]</sup> Spaventa claims that in the history of modern philosophy, Italian thought had twice given the lead. He treats Bruno and Campanella as precursors of Descartes, just as Vico can be regarded as a precursor of Kant.<sup>[22]</sup> The fact that these promising intimations were not pursued in Italy should not be attributed to any inherent weakness in Italian philosophy. Spaventa singles out the heavy hand of the Inquisition as a major impediment to philosophy. The seeds of empiricism, naturalism and idealism can all be found in Italy, but they would only come to fruition in the more hospitable political cultures north of the Alps. Again in line with Gentile's later vigorous endorsement of the Risorgimento, Spaventa argues that if Italian philosophy in the nineteenth century seemed to be a backwater, the situation would be remedied by the achievement of political unity: '... we know that only in the unity of a free state can all the powers of our life develop themselves freely.'<sup>[23]</sup> There is promise here of a bright future for Italian philosophy. The immediate task of

philosophy, in Spaventa's view, is to study the mature product of European thought, particularly in Germany, in order to understand in all their ramifications the logical implications of ideas that had originated in Italy.<sup>[24]</sup>

Gentile approached his own early work in precisely Spaventa's terms. His thesis of 1897, *Rosmini e Gioberti*, set the contributions of two key Italian thinkers very clearly in the wider context of the development of modern philosophy, treating 'a critical interpretation of Rosminianism' almost as a 'representation of our speculative consciousness'.<sup>[25]</sup> This was a method he was to follow in his forays into the history of philosophy throughout his career. Rik Peters picks out three notions that remained important to Gentile to the very end—the contribution of engaged thinkers to the revival of modern Italy, the significance of historical awareness for a proper understanding of a culture, and the claim that philosophical ideas are immanent themes in a scale of historical development.<sup>[26]</sup> What is distinctive in Gentile's thesis is detailed attention to particular thinkers, coupled with wider and controversial claims about the perspective from which we make judgements, here and now. Read in the light of Gentile's later distinction between *pensiero pensante* and *pensiero pensato* in *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, his early awareness of the significance of present judgement in any conception of knowledge is striking. We may describe when and how a man lived, what he wrote and thought, what he had for breakfast if we really must, but that does not give an account of the drama of actual thinking. To do that we must bring our own philosophical concerns unashamedly to bear in our reconstructions of past ideas, recognizing that our subjects could not have put the point quite like that, but highlighting the living thread that helps us to grasp the active dimension in the construction of a world of ideas.

Gentile is happy to present both Rosmini and Gioberti in relation to dilemmas in philosophy left unresolved by Kant. He treats them as contributors to post-Kantian philosophy, despite the fact that neither could be regarded as Kantian scholars in the technical sense.<sup>[27]</sup> In Rosmini, for example, Gentile focuses on the act of judgement, as if what was at issue was the Kantian *a priori* synthesis. The pervading

idea is that thinking is something we do, not something that simply happens to us. Stressing the act of judgement, rather than the substantive truth claims we make, brings a thought back to life. If Kantian terms of reference make the thought most vivid to us, then we should use them. De Ruggiero, at a point in his career when he identified himself closely with Gentile, makes the point with disarming honesty. In a discussion of Rosmini that follows Gentile's thesis closely, he says:

... what is the nature of the intellectual idea of being, apart from the judgment? It is not an empirical reality, not a sensation, because it is objective: it is not a transcendent reality, because it is ideal: it is a transcendental conception. Rosmini does not actually state this, but it is implied in all his reasoning.<sup>[28]</sup>

Gentile treats Gioberti in similar vein. He picks up on Gioberti's powerful idea, echoing Vico, that to know a thing is to create it. But the thought has quite a different significance in Gioberti's theological context than in Gentile's post-Kantian idealism. How far the equation of making and knowing depends upon specific theological assumptions is a vexed question that warrants detailed treatment. Gentile's tactic is to pick up a suggestive idea and to press it into a shape that can be defended from his own perspective. He insists that 'intelligibility and reality must be seen in relation to the same principle, such that philosophy should be construed as the constructor of knowledge and the real'.<sup>[29]</sup> Rosmini and Gioberti both contribute to the development of this thought, but we are left wondering how far Gentile's gloss can be read back into the original positions of his sources. This is high-risk interpretation, pressed in support of a specific philosophical claim. The guiding thought, of course, is Gentile's. Rosmini and Gioberti are treated as crucial contributors to the development of an argument that can be currently defended. That makes them 'living' philosophers in Gentile's special sense. Whether they would have recognized his terms of reference is a secondary question that cannot be effectively answered.

The mood of Gentile's work in history of philosophy is dominated throughout his career by the 'backward glance'. In relation to the Italian tradition, in particular, he seeks intimations of current practice in philosophy, and concentrates his attention upon those thinkers in whom an incipient awareness of present philosophical problems can be discerned. Detailed studies, however, are always set in the wider context of the history of philosophy as a whole. This is a monumental achievement in its own right, comparable in many ways to Hegel's magisterial *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.<sup>[30]</sup> He treats modern philosophy as a response to the challenge of dualism, entrenched in the western philosophical tradition from Plato onwards. History of philosophy evaluates the adequacy of successive attempts to resolve the problem of knowledge. He assumes from the outset that dualism, in any of its guises, is a failure. Empiricist and rationalist strands since the Renaissance are interesting but failed attempts to characterize the act of thinking within dualist terms of reference. It is axiomatic, for Gentile, that all thinking is a quest for coherence within a world of experience. The specific task of history of philosophy is to explain the present practice of the discipline in relation to the contradictory tendencies from which it has emerged.

The continuity of Gentile's thinking on this point is remarkable. He takes the challenge of the opening paragraphs of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* very seriously indeed. 'There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience', but 'it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.'<sup>[31]</sup> Kant asks us to focus on the primary judgements that make our world intelligible. Gentile accepts the point, but rejects the idea that conceptually structured experience confronts a world that can be regarded in some sense as unstructured. Judgement is all-important here. Gentile's radical departure from Kant, following Hegel, is to treat what we call the world as a world of thought. If judgement is central to everything we say or do, our focus should be on the act of thinking. History of philosophy, on this view, as a primary record of thinking, provides the indispensable material without which we simply cannot do philosophy at all.

Gentile was happy to use the great Kantian synthesis, with its strengths and weaknesses taken into account, as a watershed in the history of philosophy. Even his treatment of particular thinkers, as we have seen from his thesis, is generally couched in relation to Kant's problem, if not in Kant's terms. A hasty reader might conclude from this that avowal of an anachronistic criterion might lead to neglect of detail. Nothing could be further from the truth. Gentile's practice as a historian of philosophy is best appreciated through his detailed textual studies. In this paper, for illustrative purposes, I focus on his work on Giambattista Vico, a major influence on all the Italian idealists.<sup>[32]</sup>

Gentile began to concern himself seriously with Vico soon after his first collaboration with Croce in 1902, and the interest continued for the rest of his life. He came to Vico, however, with a fully worked out position of his own, recognizing affinities and exploring implications very much in the idiom of his own philosophy. He construed the pre-eminent issue in his own work, overcoming the dualism of subject and object, in the idiom of German idealism. Here Gentile followed Spaventa, and both have been accused, by historians of ideas in particular, of distorting key themes and thinkers within the Italian humanist tradition. In Gentile's case, however, whatever shortcomings there may be in his treatment of Italian philosophers should not be seen as a consequence of hasty reading. His study of Vico, in particular, is marked by painstaking attention to detail. In the years before 1914 he worked with Croce and Nicolini on a critical edition of Vico's works for the *Scrittori d'Italia* (Italian Writers) series of the Laterza publishing house. While Croce concentrated on the volume that was to become *L'autobiografia, il carteggio e le poesie varie* (Autobiography, Correspondence and Assorted Poems), Gentile prepared *Le orazioni inaugurali, il De italorum sapientia e le polemiche* (Inaugural Orations, On the Wisdom of Italy and Polemics). The textual work of these years was the basis of the studies that were later to be collected in the *Studi vichiani* (Vichian Studies).<sup>[33]</sup> And while it is clear that Gentile's interpretation of Vico is based on an attempted redescription of his thought in the mode of

his favoured terminology, there should be no suspicion that this assimilation is at the expense of historical research.

Vico had a special place in Gentile's scheme of things. The constructivism at the heart of Gentile's theory of knowledge can read back into Vico without too much distortion, though it remains a controversial question whether Vico's constructivism should be described as idealist. What they share beyond any doubt is rejection of a crude sensationalist view of induction. Knowledge of the world as a passive accumulation of information is ruled out in favour of active assertion in conceptual form of what would otherwise remain unthinkable and therefore beyond experience. Gentile highlights Vico's stress on the projection of meanings on to the world that confronts us, something that begins in the fantasy world of childhood but continues through the organization of spheres of knowledge in the mature sciences. Significantly from an interpretative point of view, Gentile chooses not to restrict himself to Vico's terms of reference. The projectivist view he defends gained currency in the Romantic period, but he sees it as implicit in Vico. The Romantics had targeted both the rationalist and empiricist strands of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought. Gentile sees his own philosophy as the reduction of these critical fragments to systematic form, very much following Hegel's lead:

Vico is the precursor of Romanticism, critic of Descartes and Locke, enemy of every mechanistic and mathematical philosophy, conscious of the originality of the spirit and of the sterility of a knowledge all deductive and analytic; most sensitive to the profound difference between human reality, that is synthesis, creation, freedom and knowledge of itself, and the natural pretense that man finds himself in the face of a God-created world that has emerged without his intervention or involvement.<sup>[34]</sup>

Unlike most of Vico's commentators, Gentile distinguishes three phases in the development of his theory of knowledge.<sup>[35]</sup> He is clear, however, that the first phase, which comprises the inaugural orations delivered between 1699 and 1707, gains significance only insofar as

it contains intimations of Vico's later philosophy. Gentile sees Vico's early thought as largely derivative, recalling the Renaissance Platonists and particularly Ficino. Vico's effort to reconcile the humanist tradition with the prevailing rationalism of Descartes, however, is much more suggestive, constituting, in Gentile's view, a connecting thread through the various phases of his thought. In this interpretation Gentile broadly follows the view Vico himself had taken of his own development.<sup>[36]</sup> Vico regarded the conspectus of knowledge in the orations as a failure, but Gentile construes that failure in his own distinctive style. Using his own terms of reference, he stresses the impossibility of maintaining two mutually exclusive conceptions of reality. On the one hand, he highlights the residual naturalism that Vico retained from Greek thought, distinguishing knowledge of the world from the activity of coming to understand it; while on the other hand, he notes Vico's awareness that to speak of the world at all is to speak of a world of concepts, in which the character of the world is constituted by the manner in which it is conceived.<sup>[37]</sup>

The dilemma concerning the nature of reality reappears in modified form in the second phase of Vico's thought in *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, according to Gentile, where the focus is on the necessary limits of knowledge of a world one has not created. And the scepticism is only mitigated in the *New Science* because in that text people are at least accorded a privileged knowledge of a civil world they have in some sense made for themselves. Gentile writes that

the two Vichian works complete each other. Which is to say that at the basis of the process from nature to God of the *Scienza nuova* there remains always for Vico a process from God to nature, a Platonic derivation, which therefore explains the Vichian tendency to pantheism and to immanence and consequently to subjectivism and to the metaphysic of the mind, like the tendency, also incontestably Vichian, to theism and to transcendence, and therefore to Platonism and to the metaphysic of being.<sup>[38]</sup>

The uncertainty that surrounds the scope of knowledge in Vico's later works is seen by Gentile to be implicit in the ambiguous conception of reality in the early orations. The confusion generations of commentators have noted in Vico's mature work is thus very much a reflection of his inability to resolve the problem of knowledge within the terms of reference he had inherited.<sup>[39]</sup>

In Gentile's interpretation, Vico does not attain an autonomous theory of knowledge until 1708 with the oration *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (On the Study Methods of Our Time).<sup>[40]</sup> And the metaphysical presuppositions of the principle suggested in that work, that one can know only what one has made, were developed in 1710 in Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians) and in the replies to criticisms of his theory which he wrote in 1711-2 following hostile comment in the *Giornale dei letterati d'Italia* (Journal of Italian Scholars).<sup>[41]</sup> These works comprise the second phase of Vico's philosophy in Gentile's view. But while Vico was later to distance himself from the form his work had taken at this stage of his career, Gentile insists that the making and knowing principle (*verum et factum convertuntur*) is the kernel that sustains the third and final phase of Vico's philosophy. Gentile portrays the theory that was first made public in 1720 with the *De universi iuris uno principio et fine uno* (On the One Principle and End of Universal Law), and subsequently developed through the various editions of the *New Science*, as an extension of the equation of making and knowing from the world of abstractions to the world of history.<sup>[42]</sup> Gentile thus sees Vico's metaphysical tract of 1710 as crucial for the grasp of a distinctively Vichian position.<sup>[43]</sup> More than this, he presents the transition from the *De antiquissima* to the *New Science* as an ideal development analogous to the passage from the subjective idealism of Kant to the objective idealism of Hegel. A crucial phase in the history of philosophy in Germany is heralded in the genesis of Vico's thought.<sup>[44]</sup>

The Kantian perspective that dominated Gentile's *Rosmini e Gioberti* is equally evident in his interpretation of Vico. He claims that Vico's constructivist theory of knowledge specifically anticipated Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism: '... thus Vico was led



to discover his great principle of the *verum factum*, in terms of which science is only possible in relation to that which is made: which is the same concept with which Kant was obliged, very much later, to justify the value of science, as knowledge, not of an object that offers itself fine and completed to the human mind, rather of an object constructed precisely from the act of knowing.<sup>[45]</sup> Gentile takes the argument further, claiming that when Vico construes knowledge as the active product of the understanding, he is being more consistent than Kant himself in the application of an essentially Kantian distinction. For Kant there remains outside experience the unknowable 'thing-in-itself' which is its presupposition. In Vico, however, so Gentile claims, there is nothing outside thought. The world as perceived is a web of artificial concepts that constitute reality. Truth is conventional. Nature, as God's artifact, cannot be known as it is in itself; but neither can a view of nature as a product of God's will be represented as a necessary limit to human understanding. Maker's knowledge has no limitation outside itself; it is simply that human beings have not made nature (though they have constructed plausible experiments). He explains that

the Vichian judgement is really the pure Kantian concept, though fused with invention or perception: ... Perception is in short not so much the passive experience of Kant, foundation of the active function of the spirit, as pure mental activity, creative and constructive, in relation to which one does not rework a content already acquired, but acquires and posits the content itself; and it does not remain therefore in the already known, but proceeds from there to its limits: *non analytica via, sed sinthetica*, to use Vico's words, which anticipate the famous distinction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>[46]</sup>

As early as the *De antiquissima*, then, Gentile sees the beginnings of ideas that would lead Vico beyond an abstract conception of knowledge, confined to the manipulation of definitions, to concrete knowledge based upon human action, anticipating not only Kant, but Hegel and beyond.

Vico, in this view, used the relative isolation of Italian culture in his day from the dominant rationalism in northern Europe to develop themes from the older humanist tradition in Italy to dramatic effect. Gentile, here as elsewhere, self-consciously explores ideas that will become prominent in his own thinking: '... to the mathematical and naturalistic intuition of atomism', he writes, 'Vico opposes the idealistic and humanistic conception of history, and to the abstract contemplation of clear and distinct ideas, object of intuition and mathematical deduction, the autogenetic process of humanity, which creates its world, and in its world itself.'<sup>[47]</sup> Focus on language as a human artifact, enmeshed in a context of interrelated meanings and values, leads directly to the broader perspective of the *New Science*. Gentile interprets the *New Science* as the self-conscious comprehension of the mind's phenomenological development, the conceptualization of a process that is also one's self-creation. The (highly contentious) claim is that Vico has overcome the abstract consideration of man in nature, opposed by an alien object, by conceiving of man as a concrete entity creating himself in the process of making his own history. In other words, Vico has attained Hegel's conception of spirit as absolute idea.<sup>[48]</sup>

This close correlation of Vico and Hegel obviously overlooks a number of difficulties. In particular, if Vico's *New Science* is to be read as an anticipation of Hegel's absolute idealism, it is necessary to explain away Vico's manifest dualism as an archaic residue. For in the *New Science*, no less than in the *De antiquissima*, Vico's theory of knowledge is based on the rigid distinction of man from nature. It is true that the scope of human knowledge is vastly broadened in the *New Science* to include history as a human artifact, but knowledge of nature is still strictly limited to the kind of crude approximation of natural process that the scientist attempts in the laboratory. For Hegel, on the other hand, the absolute idea is the culmination of the whole of knowledge, a complete spiritualization of reality. Gentile evades the problem by finding in Hegel a trace of the very same dualism. Speaking of Vico he says: 'His major defect consists in not having freed himself entirely from transcendence and dualism; ...

But these grave residues of the ancient dualistic conception also persist in the absolute idealism of Hegel[.]'<sup>[49]</sup>

In Gentile's view, the residual dualism in the philosophies of both Vico and Hegel has momentous consequences. While it is clear that they both rightly understand philosophy to be self-conscious reflection upon the activity of knowing, they nevertheless fail to distinguish that activity from the object which it is the business of philosophy to come to know. There remains outside philosophy a truth to which every given philosophy aspires. In this, of course, for Gentile, they are repeating an error bequeathed to the western intellectual tradition by Plato. In form *The Republic* offers a fixed and finished world whose mysteries would be revealed after the appropriate philosophical education. In fact it is a world constituted by the presuppositions of its author, and its philosophical merit is to have displayed those presuppositions as a coherent world of ideas. When Vico and Hegel turn to history they see a world that is constituted by the presuppositions of historians. But they also imagine a fixed and finished past that historians seek to understand. Beside the presuppositions of the critical historian, Vico sets his ideal eternal history; and insofar as the explanations of the former are assessed in relation to their correspondence with the supposed world of the latter, Vico's account of the historian's task is vitiated by the familiar Platonic confusion of a world *sub specie aeterni* with a world *sub specie temporis*.<sup>[50]</sup> Modes of thought adopted to understand the world cannot be distinguished from the object of attention. And while specific modes of thought may dominate a particular period, this is a function of the mind's construction of its conceptual world and not a logical sequence that the observer passively comprehends.

Gentile's literal rendering of Vico's philosophy in Hegelian terminology is a prime example of the anachronism that is built into his approach to the past. Nor does he regard this as a 'problem' that can be avoided in any distinctively philosophical interest in the history of philosophy. Gentile's retrospective perspective in the study of the history of philosophy is not a consequence of a lack of historical discipline or imagination, but an inherent dimension of his

conception of thought itself. Intelligibility, in any domain, is constituted by the conceptual framework of the observer, and the task of the philosopher can only be to strive for greater coherence within that frame of reference. He can neither judge a past philosopher from an arbitrarily selected perspective that purports to be universal, nor reconstruct a past world of ideas from the point of view of historical agents themselves. His interest in history is confined to the avenues that can be seen to lead to the present. History, in this view, is the success story of the present. What Gentile specifically values in Vico is the intimation of his own theory of knowledge that he discerns in the *verum ipsum factum principle*. He cites other idealists (Jacobi, Spaventa and Croce) who have similarly recognized affinities between their notions of knowledge and Vico's. [\[51\]](#) In each case, he accepts that they will be redescribing Vico's intellectual engagement, literally presenting his concerns in language that he could not have adopted. If this is a problem, it is certainly not unique to their particular interpretations. It is a limitation consequent upon the interpretation of anything whatever. We can simply never say what Vico might have had in mind with a particular form of words. Our only interest is in what we can make of (what we take to be) his thought.

Gentile's comments on the necessary presuppositions of understanding take us beyond the historicism that he stresses in relation to the method of immanence. Given his endorsement of a retrospective perspective in history of philosophy, it might be supposed that a historical reconstruction of a specific thought in the past must be construed as a new creation, and hence could not be identified with the actual thought of a historical agent. That is certainly true of the evaluative gloss that a historian presents in an interpretation of a given thinker. But Gentile also highlights another dimension that links an original thought with a later historical reconstruction. We can treat a philosopher's view of the world as a product of time, place, economic context and so on. Beyond that, however, is the act of understanding itself which, Gentile insists, is not in time at all. Understanding *The Republic* is not a matter simply of accumulating a grasp of successive sentences, but of seeing the

relation of ideas as a coherent set. Our reading may be a matter of hours and days, interspersed with all manner of distractions, just as Plato may well have laboured for years over the work. We might say as readers that we suddenly see how the argument hangs together, almost in a flash, though that remains a misleading temporal metaphor. And we must assume, of course, that for Plato it is an idea, and not simply a succession of sentences. Gentile is emphatic on this point. Understanding ideas articulated in the past, he claims, is an 'instantaneous or timeless act of thought'.<sup>[52]</sup> We project a past in our mind's eye, but it is 'abstractly imagined', whereas 'the only history that really is, is not in time but in thought and of thought; it is eternal'.<sup>[53]</sup>

The thought at the heart of this claim is not easy to interpret, not least for practising historians labouring over actual texts. It can too easily be dismissed as a product of a misleading metaphysical metaphor. Without the idea of an 'eternal object', however, we are left with 'facts' as a positivist might regard them, little more than one thing after another. A history of philosophy pursued along these lines could have no philosophical interest. Nor indeed, in Gentile's view, could the 'facts' themselves have any status other than as products of acts of thought. And that is not the way the positivist construes them.

Stress on the constructive dimension of thought pervades Gentile's philosophy throughout his career. What puzzles in his characterization of thought as somehow timeless is his continued insistence that we are still dealing with an act. The notion of *pensiero pensante* is here pushed to an extreme, as if hard thinking should not be viewed as a continuing activity in time. The thought can be rescued if we can separate comprehension from the activity of thinking, though problems clearly remain. Gentile's solution is to distinguish the transcendental ego from the empirical ego, enabling him to separate the universal truth claims without which hard thinking is inconceivable from the empirical circumstances that might have been the occasion for addressing a particular issue at any time. Crucially, we posit this distinction whenever we engage in hard thinking ourselves. It matters that we present a thought as

universally defensible, and not simply the opinion we happen to hold at the moment. Within these terms of reference, a philosophically inspired history of philosophy—Gentile cannot imagine any other kind that would be remotely worthwhile—can be viewed as a transcendental dialogue in pursuit of truth claims that are limited only by the conceptual power of the historian of philosophy himself. How far Plato, Hegel, Vico, Rosmini or whoever might recognize the terms of reference is a secondary question that cannot be finally resolved. We pursue truth here and now in the active present, and our claims are necessarily cast in universal form. The fact that thinking develops, and our current claims will in time be presented in a different light, is entirely beside the point.

Gentile's interpretative approach to history of philosophy has far-reaching implications for all facets of his thought. What he defends is a form of ideal dialogue, far removed from the conventional picture of him as a defender of an authoritarian state. In his last book, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, often read as an apologia for fascism in a very narrow sense, he actually uses the idea of a 'transcendental dialogue' to convey the resolution of hard cases in our ordinary dealings with each other.<sup>[54]</sup> The text as a whole is troubling in many respects, not least in its wholly inadequate treatment of civil society. Chapter 4, however, 'Transcendental Society or Society *In Interiore Homine*', should not be hastily dismissed. He pictures us conjuring up ideal interlocutors as we wonder what to do or think. This is a model of reflection as we all experience it, playing with hypothetical situations in our mind's eye as we confront hard choices here and now. It deserves to be read alongside Rawls's notion of 'reflective equilibrium' as a model of theoretical deliberation.<sup>[55]</sup> Taken on its own, the chapter has no authoritarian implications, though the same cannot be said of *Genesis and Structure of Society* as a whole. What needs to be noticed here is that the model had been worked out in practice in the course of Gentile's life-long work in history of philosophy. The stress on individual judgement will surprise readers accustomed to see Gentile as the 'philosopher of fascism'.

Even in narrow technical terms, Gentile's contribution to history of philosophy demands reappraisal. He did as much as anyone in his

generation to develop standards of disciplinary rigour in the field. His specific contribution to theory of knowledge, too, can scarcely be appreciated if its roots in his approach to history of philosophy are not properly appreciated. Viewed in this light, Gentile's support for Mussolini and fascism remains as puzzling as ever. Philosophers, no less than other folk, sometimes make shocking political choices which are often best explained in relation to context. Gentile's philosophy, however, deserves to be treated in its own right. His work in history of philosophy, in particular, can still be read with profit. A wider view of his achievement is surely timely.

[1](#) Cardiff University, HaddockBA@cardiff.ac.uk.

[2](#) The phrase is used in the title of A. James Gregor, *Giovanni Gentile: Philosopher of Fascism* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2001). The comment of R.G. Collingwood in his *Autobiography* may be taken as typical of a good many of Gentile's erstwhile admirers: 'There was once a very able and distinguished philosopher who was converted to Fascism. As a philosopher, that was the end of him.' See R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. David Boucher and Teresa Smith (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 158.

[3](#) See Gabriele Turi, *Giovanni Gentile. Una biografia* (Turin, UTET, 2006); Sergio Romano, *Giovanni Gentile. La filosofia al potere* (Milan, Bompiani, 1984); and Manlio Di Lalla, *Vita di Giovanni Gentile* (Florence, Sansoni, 1975).

[4](#) See H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 7; and Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013), pp. 23–5.

[5](#) Among Gentile's followers, Guido de Ruggiero may be treated as exemplary. Among his many works see *Modern Philosophy*, trans. A. Howard Hannay and R.G. Collingwood (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1921); and *Da Vico a Kant* (Bari, Laterza, 1937).

[6](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'Il metodo dell' immanenza', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), p. 232; see 'The Method of Immanence', §12, herein.

[7](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London, Macmillan, 1922).

[8](#) *Ibid.*, p. 253.

[9](#) *Ibid.*

[10](#) *Ibid.*

[11](#) *Ibid.*, p. 43.

- [12](#) See Giambattista Vico, *Opere filosofiche*, ed. Paolo Cristofolini (Florence, Sansoni, 1971), pp. 55–131. For discussion see Bruce Haddock, *Vico's Political Thought* (Swansea, Mortlake Press, 1986), pp. 58–64.
- [13](#) Giovanni Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, p. 15.
- [14](#) See *ibid.*, p. 16.
- [15](#) *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- [16](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 254–5.
- [17](#) Quoted from H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, p. 40.
- [18](#) See Bertrando Spaventa, *Opere*, ed. Giovanni Gentile (Florence, Sansoni, 1972, 3 vols.). Gentile's study of Spaventa is in vol. 1, pp. 3–170.
- [19](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'Preface', Bertrando Spaventa, *Opere*, vol. 1, p. 7. *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea* is in *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 405–678.
- [20](#) *Ibid.*, p. 426.
- [21](#) *Ibid.*, p. 445.
- [22](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 420, 446–7.
- [23](#) *Ibid.*, p. 427.
- [24](#) See Marcel Grilli, 'The Nationality of Philosophy and Bertrando Spaventa', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, II (1941).
- [25](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti* (Pisa, Tipografia successori fratelli Nistri, 1898), p. xi.
- [26](#) See Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 23–5.
- [27](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti*, pp. 54–67.
- [28](#) Guido de Ruggiero, *Modern Philosophy*, pp. 306–7.
- [29](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti*, p. 286.
- [30](#) See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpson (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1896, 3 vols.).
- [31](#) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London, Macmillan, 1933), p. 41.
- [32](#) For full discussion see Bruce Haddock, 'Vico and Idealism' (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1977).
- [33](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani* (Florence, Sansoni, 1968). The *Studi vichiani* were first published in 1915, with a second, and much revised, edition appearing in 1927. Bibliographical details of Gentile's work on Vico can be found in Benedetto Croce, *Bibliografia vichiana*, edited and extended by Fausto Nicolini (Naples, Riccardo Ricciardini, 1947–8, 2 vols.), vol. 2, pp. 779–83; and Nicola



Nicolini, 'Gli *Studi vichiani* di Giovanni Gentile', in his *Croce, Gentile e altri studi* (Florence, Sansoni, 1973), pp. 83–91.

[34](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani*, p. 417.

[35](#) See Bruce Haddock, *Vico's Political Thought*, for an account of Vico's intellectual development.

[36](#) See *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1963).

[37](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani*, pp. 90–2.

[38](#) *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[39](#) See Benedetto Croce, *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico* (Bari, Laterza, 1911), for a celebrated reconstruction of Vico's thought that focuses on the fault line highlighted by Gentile.

[40](#) See Giambattista Vico, *Opere filosofiche*, pp. 787–855.

[41](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 55–168.

[42](#) See Giambattista Vico, *Opere giuridiche*, ed. Paolo Cristofolini (Florence, Sansoni, 1974), pp. 40–343; and Giambattista Vico, *Opere filosofiche*, pp. 169–338 and 377–702.

[43](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani*, pp. 106–7.

[44](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 112–3 and 131.

[45](#) *Ibid.*, p. 124.

[46](#) *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[47](#) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[48](#) See *ibid.*, p. 134.

[49](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 134–5.

[50](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 110–1. Note that Gentile extends this reading to the view of art and imagination in Vico and Hegel. See Giovanni Gentile, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Giovanni Gullace (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 285.

[51](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani*, p. 135.

[52](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'The Transcending of Time in History', in Raymond Klibansky and H.J. Paton, eds., *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 104.

[53](#) *Ibid.*, p. 104. Collingwood addresses the issue in similar vein in his celebrated essay 'Human Nature and Human History', in his *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993), arguing (p. 218) that the fact that an idea 'can be apprehended by historical thought' makes it an 'eternal object'. For discussion see Bruce Haddock, 'The Historicity of Thought', in R.G. Collingwood,

*An Autobiography and Other Writings*, eds., David Boucher and Teresa Smith, pp. 335–52.

[54](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, trans. H.S. Harris (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1966), pp. 98–108. For further discussion of the idea of a ‘transcendental society’ see James Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism: A Study of Actual Idealist Moral Theory* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2015); and James Wakefield’s contribution to this issue.

[55](#) See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 48–51.

# The Integral Philosophical Experience of Actualism

Antonio Giovanni Pesce<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 45–72

**Abstract:** This essay explores the central role that Gentile assigns to concrete thinking. Through a combination of historical and theoretical interpretation, Pesce argues that Gentile's radical ideas had their roots in great cultural shifts of the nineteenth century, and in particular in the widespread dissatisfaction with the reduced conception of the person that had arisen through the scientific advances of that period. Gentile's stress on the richness of concrete thinking makes actualism an especially pertinent alternative to the empiricism and positivism that pervade mainstream thinking today.

## 1. Introduction

All philosophy is the experience of a concrete human being and not of a meregnoseological subject. That is: no thought is pure enough to tackle problems that are equally pure without them seeming to pose crucial challenges to the very existence of that thought. This concreteness of philosophical experience is the edifying aspect of a scientific text, to which Kierkegaard refers in his preface to *The Sickness unto Death*.<sup>[2]</sup> This concreteness totally absorbs whoever experiences it. For the experiencing subject, the person who suffers and cries and hopes, though in reality the world remains an inter-subjective space, it is nonetheless *his* world. And it is to that world that we must respond.

Giovanni Gentile's philosophy was formed and matured against a backdrop of intense crisis. Without yielding either to irrationalism or to facile scientism, he searched for a way forward that was in line

with the centuries-old humanist tradition in Italy. His thought represented not only the highest moment of modern gnoseology, but also a point of departure, a dawn that reclaimed concrete interiority.<sup>[3]</sup> At the end of his life he wrote that

philosophy... is the leaven, the very soul of life; for the concrete realization of the self-concept is the fulfilment of self-consciousness. Philosophy is continual vigilance and reflection over what we are, and what we make of ourselves; a burning restlessness, a dissatisfaction that never accepts us as we are or the things we do as they stand.<sup>[4]</sup>

Actualism could have represented a turning point in western thought. Was it only Gentile that we lost when his life was cut short by an unjust death sentence? More even than that, in Italian and European culture, we lost the will to continue along the path down which he had led us. We devoted ourselves instead to philosophies that lead us directly to what today is usually, and not entirely mistakenly, described as a *post-human* era.

Perhaps there is still time to take up the old philosophy. After all, there is still much more to say about it.

## **2. A Europe of *Buddenbrooks***

During the forty-year *belle époque* leading up to 1914, there were profound changes whose effects were not immediately obvious, despite their radicalism. Quality of life improved in three main areas: diet, welfare and culture. In general (and we should not forget that we are taking a broad view of a complex period, in which Croce's distinction between the useful and the true is prominent), people were better fed than they had been in the past, they received better services and illiteracy was becoming less widespread. Moreover, the period was, with the exception of the Balkans, relatively peaceful.<sup>[5]</sup> This does not detract from the fact that it was also a complex epoch: the epoch of the masses, who managed to find themselves a place on the public platform in every country, as well as breaking down the system of representation, which was still closed in on itself.<sup>[6]</sup> This

involved changes to the organization and language of politics, which played out fully in the twentieth century. The epoch also witnessed the decline of elites as ‘parliaments became much less a preserve of the nobility and the upper middle class’.<sup>[7]</sup> Cities expanded to the detriment of the countryside: more was spent on foodstuffs and prices fell considerably.<sup>[8]</sup> Above all, it marked the beginning of the gradual weakening of the nineteenth-century views of progress and reason, which amounted, in the end, to liberalism. In any case, the *absolutes* of the nineteenth century had crumbled.<sup>[9]</sup> This is not to say that there was a shortage of intellectuals still rooted in nineteenth-century doctrines, nor that the on-going crisis of culture could be detected in popular sentiment. However, already doing the rounds was the idea that the conception of reason—to which Hegel and Comte had, in different ways, dedicated their lives—was nothing but an abstract logical construction. So too was the idea that we had not even scratched the surface of reality. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust and Luigi Pirandello sensed the impending demise of that world whose end Robert Musil and Italo Svevo described so well. They were tired of the idea of a past that did not hold the key to the present but which, at times, felt like a shackle. This feeling was also symptomatic of Europe’s anxiety; Europe wanted something different, it was apprehensive about the profundity of being. A Europe of *Buddenbrooks*, then, passed from the productive and dynamic beginnings of the nineteenth century to the complexity and uncertainty of its ending. By 1914, as the lights of the *belle époque* were about to go out, Europe still had not managed to resolve these experiences.

This general climate had more specifically philosophical corollaries. At the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘bankruptcy of science’<sup>[10]</sup> could be declared. The crisis of positivist scientism, in France and Italy alike, came together in 1870—Sedan for the former and the capture of Rome for the latter. But there was still nothing but the vaguest idea of how this so-called reawakening idealism, of which the reviews spoke, would replace positivist scientism. What was certain was that ‘in that fight against an empty intellectualism, in that exasperated sense of dissatisfaction in the face of the too-facile

systematization of reality, in that “tragic sentiment” of life, in that revolt against a simplistic and superficial optimism, perhaps the most profound exigencies of our age were registered.’<sup>[11]</sup>

In Italy, positivism had emphasized a less abstract knowledge. It was inclined not to get lost, like the ‘lifeless spiritualism of Terenzio Mamiani’, in ponderings of a vaguely rhetorical flavour,<sup>[12]</sup> but to end up chasing ‘the chimera of an absolute knowledge that would enclose reality in a readymade fabric of rigorously determinable relationships’.<sup>[13]</sup> Life followed a different course; consciousness was said to be confined and ‘unsatisfied by the naturalism of the second half of the century’.<sup>[14]</sup> It is in this arena that idealism was reborn, when, one day in late February 1903,<sup>[15]</sup> Gentile came to grips with what he called a ‘torment’. Judging by the publications of the time—these were the years in which Papini and Prezzolini’s *Leonardo*, Corradini’s *Il Regno* and Borgese’s *Hermes* were first published, as well as Croce’s *La Critica*—Gentile was not alone in thinking this:

We want and seek unity, an idea that connects nature and history; we seek out the fullness of life and of knowledge; we want to put the god back into the deserted and desolate temple. We want and we seek, but our abilities do not live up to our hopes; and in the process we deny more than we affirm; or we affirm a need more than we affirm a way to satisfy it.

We naturally turn our gaze to the past, to a time when the torments of today were not yet felt; and we look away, finding that what we saw was insufficient for our purposes today, for if they were problems in the past, then the reasons we overcame them are also in the past.<sup>[16]</sup>

Life never stays the same or, in other words, its problems are both one and many. There is no point looking to the past for solutions to the problems of the present: if we find something in the past that is of use to the present, it is because the present illuminates the past. But then the solution is no longer the same as it was before; it is something new, recreated by the urgency of a pressing question that arises from life, for life itself.

It was clear that the philosophy of this generation could be neither oratorical spiritualism, nor anaemic positivism. The former said nothing, or very little, about the world; and the latter said too much about it, and was therefore entirely reductive. A few years later, Croce (a friend of Gentile) wrote, with his usual irony, about how in his youth he had regarded positivism with 'utter contempt'. In adolescence, he writes, we make many mistakes and sometimes we take sides (philosophically speaking) too hastily, but only because 'we want to understand something seriously'. Positivism's 'incoherent collection of trivialities' was unable to satisfy this longing for understanding.<sup>[17]</sup>

### 3. The Life of the Spirit

This fullness 'of life and of knowledge' is touched on in Gentile's aforementioned 1903 preliminary text. It is the light that illuminates the path to an interior complexity that already makes up the whole world because it is intrinsic to all of us. Gentile locates it in the concept of spirit, in that interiority where subject and object are indissolubly bound. But to speak of 'spirit' 'is always to speak of concrete, historical individuality: a subject that is not thought, but enacted'. As such it should be thought of as a subject and not yet a 'spiritual fact'.<sup>[18]</sup> This is actualism's greatest contribution because, when pushed to its extremes, western gnoseology ends up unveiling what had been suppressed for half a millennium. Gentile already speaks the language of existentialism, albeit in typically gnoseological terminology. Because, from a personal perspective, man returns to centre stage, laden with passions, anxieties and hopes, and also with the concrete certainty of himself and his world. If that crisis of the subject we so often hear about really exists, it arises as philosophy is re-appropriated as the abstractness of logic gives way to a yearning for truth; when life is no longer likened to leafing through a ready-made book, but to writing one's own. This process—from the *Sommario di pedagogia* to *Genesi e struttura della società*, which culminates in the *Teoria generale dello spirito* and the *Sistema di logica*—is certainly not always linear or even

entirely explicit. However, in the end we discover a depth from which the light of experience shines: we find being, which is reflected in thought, but can never be totally put to the test. It is this Gentilean transcendental nature that condemns the need for transcendence, which is never completely satisfied.<sup>[19]</sup>

The human being is a subject; he is ‘that being which calls itself “me”’, and as such it cannot be conceived either as a thing or as “a reflection of the real”, but rather as its “active, living source”.<sup>[20]</sup> This subject, known as the ‘Ego’, is not a thing on which something else is predicated, but the person who predicates; the subject does not reflect nature, but nature reflects the great depths of the human spirit. And both—the subject that affirms and the object that is affirmed, spirit and nature—constitute a hendiadys in which the real resides. In fact, in the chapter dedicated to self-consciousness in the *Sommario*,<sup>[21]</sup> Gentile makes clear that he cannot reach self-consciousness, a pure Ego, without consciousness, because if one thinks, one always thinks something. At the same time what is thought is the enactment of a subject, of some body, and without these facets, self-consciousness cannot be realized. We cannot stress the complexity of this concept enough: this is how the concreteness of Gentilean thought is brought to fruition. Had we been able to accuse actualism of anti-scientism, it was only because we wanted to discredit the point on which actualism is founded. We should reread the whole of the paragraph dedicated to the unconscious in the *Sommario* with this in mind.<sup>[22]</sup> Here Gentile, speaking about psychology, is able to draw a clearer distinction between his own conception of the soul and that of the natural sciences: ‘The psyche of which we speak’, he writes,

and which we want to understand fully, is nothing but an act to us, and that act makes us who we are, it is self-consciousness which in itself implies consciousness. For us, that which is psychic is not the object of thought, but the subject; it is ours, it is in us, it is who we are.<sup>[23]</sup>

More than belonging to us, the psyche is what we are: each of us is that act of thought. Through it we will see more than either the



idealistic interpretations or pragmatism have to offer when it comes to the basic point on which actualism was founded. It is what we are: any other approach to the psyche will, therefore, have to come to terms with the following: 'the science of the subliminal' is proffered to us, to this act and the object of the act, so that the 'subject ... does not admit anything before or after it'.<sup>[24]</sup> And if this is the response to a certain psychology—the term had just been developed, but the unconscious had been much discussed already by the end of the nineteenth century—biologism's response is no less forthright. In fact, the response is so strong that we can learn from it all over again today, given that far too often—in the philosophy of mind, in neuroscience and so on—man is too easily reduced to what can be gleaned from a CAT scan. Biology asks, 'When did we begin?' but it can find no answer, since the object of its investigation can only be a given subject, situated in time. It cannot be the investigating subject, who cannot be captured in thought, because of the simple fact that it is he who thinks, and he who makes himself object of thought.<sup>[25]</sup> Furthermore, we all have recourse to the most concrete thing we have available, which we cannot transcend: ourselves. But this is a concept that we can affirm only once our lives have begun. There is no doubt that, for some of us, this time will come at the moment of our conception, while for others it comes with the onset of speech. Either way, anyone who attempts to justify his own opinion through his own act of thought is still himself. The truth is that pinpointing a beginning is impossible; any other form of thought (scientific theories, philosophies, opinions, etc) that does not make us what we are (an act), is really a fact, and therefore not original. Gentile sought to show that life is self-generating, that it cannot be analysed but rather lived through; and he accepted the challenge of the mystery of our being. For this he was accused of mysticism. Today, then, when we feel the inauspicious consequences of a certain scientific reductionism, we are left strangely dismayed. Why should we accept that a human being is no longer a human being below a certain level of psychic activity (nervous response, behaviour, etc)? For Gentile—who proffered a concept of the sanctity of life that was acceptable to any belief system, the possibility of only partially experiencing life

and our being—it would have been sacrilegious. After all, praxism—the reduction of actualism to Marxism by way of Gramscian hermeneutics<sup>[26]</sup>—would have seemed to Gentile a ‘mistake’, because he could not accept that the act ends up on the same level as fact. Anyone who holds this view bases it on what the philosopher writes in his *Filosofia di Marx*, where he makes the distinction between a society that educates and a society that is educated, and which ‘comes back to educate’ in turn.<sup>[27]</sup> As a weak response, we could say that Gentile is not speaking of his own thought here, but rather of Marx’s, and that he did not take up Marxism, except to republish a new edition of his work when the manuscript of *The German Ideology* was rediscovered in the early 1930s (by contrast, he turned his attention to *Rosmini e Gioberti* when he began to catch sight of his own objectives: a simple case, a whim, or maybe something more, the hermeneutic key to a thought?). However, rereading what Gentile writes about Marxist praxis, it is clear that the culture plays a rather more subtle role. He ends up reducing Marx to Hegel (and that was no mean feat in those days), and, just as he does with all of idealism, he reveals its indebtedness to Vico’s *verum et factum convertuntur*.<sup>[28]</sup> As an approach it owes much to the Spaventian tradition that has a specific political scope in the excesses of a recently-born state and in an epoch in which Italians were discovering themselves as a united people. Moreover, it is important to note that, up until that point, Gentile had no qualms about offering speculative interpretations of the thought of others, as he had in his early work, *Rosmini e Gioberti*.<sup>[29]</sup> Given the historical character of his philosophy, it made sense for Gentile to acknowledge openly his own indebtedness to other peoples’ thought. Gentile’s philosophy is often attributed to two philosophers, Fichte and Marx, although Gentile himself never felt an affinity with them. Obviously we can argue the case that the Sicilian philosopher was mistaken in his writings about their philosophical systems, but in this instance we should also have the courage to accept the challenges that his method carries with it, and not to barricade ourselves behind the presumed philological scientific rigour of the approach.

Gentilean immanentism cannot be reduced to that of Marx. Similarly, that concept of society—which you can just about make out, reading between the lines in his early text, *Filosofia di Marx*—should be read in the light of the documents that followed. These documents clearly show that the education to which he refers is not mere political praxis for the satisfaction of a need. Rather it reveals how each of us summons our ancestral lines in order to legitimize our own existence. We do so thanks to the voices of others, our *socius* in this voyage to discover our Ego.

#### 4. The Life of the Ego

Gentile would never do away with praxism, because to do so would be to cast the subject and object as equals, which is illogical. There is no doubt that for Gentile you cannot speak of the subject and object outside of this dialectical relationship, and in fact to do so would lead to nothing but abstractionism. However, none of us can ever alienate ourselves completely in an alter ego. And even though an object alienates the subject, it never entirely exhausts its full complexity. There is a *primus*, which in human life is a *primus inter pares* (first among equals), and this is—or rather, these are—the subject. ‘A subject is always the subject of an object, because a subject comprises the act corresponding to it’,<sup>[30]</sup> and every time we think of ourselves, about our lives, about our most intimate feelings (like our happy childhood years), it is in the unity of that unique act, which is our Ego, that we find the key to lived experiences.

It was in those years that Luigi Pirandello wrote ‘either we write life or we live it’, and according to Gentile, if the object seems to stand up without the subject, it is only because we have a limited vision of the object, because we think that it is all about this utensil here, this pen or this table. Perhaps without this pen or this table, my existence would still have meaning, but can I really think of my childhood without the interior unity that makes me who I am? So we are not talking about the abstract nature that remains in the eye of the telescope, or on the pathologist’s table, but that nature which is, above all, my body, which I am. Is it thinkable in the abstract, without

me? And is history thinkable in the abstract, not so much the history of Napoleon or Nelson, but rather my history? Is history thinkable without taking into account those acts that make up life, without those objects (all the more relevant if they are people!) that are a part of me? The 'indispensable precondition' for understanding anything is that the object is not disconnected from the subject.<sup>[31]</sup> The present essay, for example, is the result of hours of meditation that have only just taken shape, and are a fact that remains, in itself, independent. But can the essay also be read without being considered the thought of someone thinking? And as soon as thoughts are set down, as they emerge from that thinker, they may not enter the reality of another thinker because, as he reads this essay, he remakes it in his own thought (and he might not even agree with the essay, but that is another story).

According to Gentile, 'the object is always opposed to the subject so that it is always conceived as being dependent on the subject's actions, but never allowed to participate in the life that animates the subject'.<sup>[32]</sup> It is easy to think of these words as the object of a subject that wrote them, and much less easy to think of them as the object of whoever will come to read them. That the realized work is not his (the writer's) work is testament to his own positivity.<sup>[33]</sup> Yet if these words have something to say to the reader, it is because they enter into and take part in that concreteness of the reader's existential experience. Again, there is a unity here that is never completely within one's grasp. Even when we do not misinterpret them, but remain faithful to their meaning, these words will take on a greater significance than the writer ever invested in them. And these words recall the interior world from which they sprung; they will lead to a world that integrates the interior worlds of writer and reader. It is the only world in which the two poles can meet. But is there any guarantee that the work has been carried out correctly and brought to its proper conclusion? This question may be answered with another: what guarantee does our life have, beyond the sacrifice with which we try to do good and avoid evil, to seek the truth and steer clear of mistakes? Living is not planning; we cannot close up shop

and keeping totting up the balance until our last breath. All results depend on the authenticity of the spirit that strives to attain them.

God has no need for society, and, according to the Aristotelian definition, animals are not able to live in society.<sup>[34]</sup> But man is neither of these things. Through living, he expresses himself—in whatever evangelical way he is inclined—he expresses his true being that can be neither buried nor allowed to bear fruit, but must persevere, take risks and keep moving along the path of existence in order to get the most out of life. All the while he knows that the existential tension generated by the dialectical relation between Ego-as-act and ego-as-fact will never abate, because he will never be able to get to the bottom of it. Once again, language betrays Gentile, who draws the obsolete distinction between the transcendental Ego and the empirical Ego. In reality, the empirical ego (fact) reflects the transcendental ego (act), without ever being able completely to objectify it in its totality because man is a living being. I can think about myself, but I cannot—simultaneously, in the self-same act—also grasp myself through the act in which I think about myself.<sup>[35]</sup>

This is what Gentile means by concreteness. He does not deny that the world and its contents truly exist, but rather that they can be affirmed by a subject whilst also pretending that they do not exist.<sup>[36]</sup> The *Sistema di logica* shows precisely how the *pensiero-logo astratto* (abstract thought-logos) is worthy of dignity. Without it, the *pensiero-logo concreto* (concrete thought-logos) would be empty, it would be as nothing.<sup>[37]</sup> So this does not mean denying that things are as they are, but that, unlike things, thoughts cannot exist in and of themselves. Things press upon the world (cosmos) because of the light that thought ignites. If thought could wholly encapsulate itself, with a perfect sense of itself, or if its being expressed the whole of its essence, then the logic of the concept would be determined by the thought. But this is not the case, just as the object without Ego is an abstraction and 'the Ego without object is an abstraction too'.<sup>[38]</sup>

When Gentile affirms that the Ego constructs the real, his language lets him down. Today we can restore the complexity of his reasoning by using another phrase: rather than thinking of the Ego as a constructor, the Ego is a living person. And this also explains

Gentile's use of the concept of the world, which in Greek, it is worth remembering, is κόσμος, order. As such the world does not exist because there are things, but because these things have a sense, a meaning, an order. Insulated within his *Cogito*, modern man had become detached from reality. Despite the speculative tradition to which he belongs, and despite all the limits of this approach, Gentile knows how to claw back that lost harmony of man and world for modernity. Though he reaches it by other ways and means it is a harmony of which Thomist realism can be proud. The world exists as unity that is mediated and endured, it is a profound unity, though never explicitly so. The Ego and the other are two worlds that have to rediscover the unity that nonetheless animates them. This world that is mine is my life; it is the people that I love, and without whom I would be unthinkable. This world is the joy, sadness and suffering that I have gone through, and that have gradually shaped the person that I am now; in other words, this world is made up of the interweaving of my story with other stories. When I encounter the other, my world expands, ever further universalized, and in it I discover, not by accident, that there is a common essence. In the *Sistema di logica* there is wonderful passage that reveals a sensibility not easily rivalled in gnoseological logicism:

[The thinker] is nestled inside a brain. It is perhaps almost like a spider in its hole, which draws from inside itself the material to weave a web, a poor web that the slightest breeze would break. Thought is the most delicate and subtle spider's web; it exists only as long as it exists, like the sun and the ocean, like all of nature and God. And this spider's web exists, not as something that is in the world, but as something extraneous to it, so that the world would be the same world even without it. The world, the spider's world, exists in its totality as long as this spider's web exists. And when an insect stings my lip, or my earlobe, we should say that it has pierced me, all of me in my unity. Just as the world is unified, in that all its parts are tied together and recall one another reciprocally, so the spider's web is the world too. And the whole world is in that

spider's web, and the web cannot tear itself apart from the world without thereby tearing the world apart as well. [\[39\]](#)

When this spider's web (to extend the metaphor) is torn apart, we all feel a great torment. We can still endure the difficulties of a world without the technology that surrounds us every day, a state of affairs that would be truly dire, but all of this seems accidental compared to the essence of our world. And if, on the other hand, for some this is not the case, then maybe the moment has arrived for such people to examine their consciences and ask themselves what kind of existence they have. So I can then imagine myself living as my ancestors did. But I cannot imagine myself living someone else's life. And I have always lived this life that I live together with others as well. I cannot think of myself, unless abstractly, without the people who I love and have loved, without these attachments that sustain my existence now and in days gone by. I cannot think of myself without those friends in whom I have confided heartache or with whom I have shared joy, light-hearted moments, hopes and ideas about the world. When our fathers, mothers, siblings, loved ones and friends depart us, we suffer greatly, and we feel that a part of us (our world) is no longer there. Death does not deprive us only of a human being: it deprives us of a world, the world of these and thousands of other people who have lived alongside the departed. This person matters more than any artefact or thing, because when the world of sense falters, you cannot hope for anything other than to be able to experience it again. There are few things in the world as beautiful as the Sistine Chapel, but if, for some reason, it were to fall down, we would still hold onto the hope that, in some remote corner of the earth, an interior world was flourishing, as Michelangelo's did, and that one day it would be ready to show itself. If, however, Michelangelo had died before embarking on his works, perhaps the beauty of the world would have suffered. Who can say what potential a human life has? And who can determine life's ultimate meaning, and know what a life might make or destroy? We may be able (hopefully as late as possible) to choose the person we become on the basis of bodily and genetic traits, but we can never choose an

interior world. It only takes a moment, a seemingly banal experience, for a human being to find new hermeneutic means by which to interpret his own lived experience. This is why, despite scientific advances, we do not make the slightest dent in the great drama of life; there will always be another Michelangelo, and other painters, too, throughout the course of universal history.

## 5. The Lifeworld

Gentile's position on the dynamic of the Ego is clear because, until his death, he reiterated time and again that a materialist realism is as bad as any form of solipsism. You cannot, therefore, ask whether or not actualism absolved itself of the charge of solipsism, nor whether or not other philosophies might have done so more effectively. But to accuse a philosopher of a propensity towards the solipsistic (the accusation most frequently levelled at him) remains particularly unjustifiable because it reduces the argument to a form of nihilism.

The life force that makes up the true world in which I live with others would be incomplete if it did not also include some thought content, because life that does not flow freely putrefies like a pool of stagnant water: 'The object of the Ego participates in the new life of the Ego, vibrates through it, and is embodied in it'.<sup>[40]</sup> Only through practice do I understand who I truly am. My reasons acquire concreteness through dialogue, and the reasons that emerge as a result will have a broader horizon of truth than the reasons I would have come up with if I had thought about it by myself. The need for a world is integral to the Ego; without one, this Ego would not be conscious of itself:

The self-concept, for which the spirit is everything, is real, and acquires consciousness of the self. This self is inconceivable as something anterior to and separate from the consciousness that is the object of the self-concept. The self-concept is realized by realizing its object or, put another way, it is realized by situating itself as both subject and object. The Ego is spiritual reality. It identifies the self with itself, not as an



identity that is posited in its immediacy but an identity that we posit. As we reflect, we are at once ourselves and something else, and we find ourselves in that other. The self, which is supposedly itself without being the other, clearly cannot be only itself, because it just exists to the extent that it is also the other. And the other could not be the other without also being the self, given that the other is only conceivable when indistinguishable from the subject. The other is, therefore, only conceivable as something synonymous with the subject which finds itself by positing itself.<sup>[41]</sup>

This is why Gentile always insisted upon the concrete liberty of man, who can never do everything he wants, because 'in the position of this other, his egoism is already weakened'.<sup>[42]</sup> And so the Ego cannot but posit the object, or rather the Ego is the relationship between subject and object. And, incidentally, to frame the question of the object in terms of will, of intentional productivity, means not having remotely understood the nature of the Ego; it means denying it, and thereby missing the central point of actualism. So our lives are ethical commitments like any other. They are the morality upon which reality hinges:

The source of any morality consists in seeing oneself wholly committed to every part of the world, and seeing the world wholly committed to us from moment to moment: actions, words and thoughts are all part of the process through which the world is made.<sup>[43]</sup>

We are not alone in this endeavour; there is not only a world of silent things, because, as we have said already, we encounter (and at times come up against) our world through the interior worlds of others, which, unlike things, we cannot reduce to objects. There is an alter ego, which is my *socius*, a person with whom I share both life and its wrongs. This alter ego creates a wider world alongside me and, thanks to me, it is the manifestation of a universality of the Ego that would be impossible in the absence of other voices.<sup>[44]</sup> It is someone who accompanies us on the path of history, and from the

depths of his soul we can draw out a sense of our existence and our duty to the world more clearly than we can from things alone:

The human individual is not an atom. The concept of society is immanent in the concept of an individual. For there is no ego, through which the real individual is realized, who does not have within him (rather than just alongside him) an alter ego who is his essential *socius*—that is to say, an object that is not a mere ‘thing’ opposed to him as subject, but a subject like himself. The repudiation of the pure objectivity of the object coincides with the transcending of the pure subjectivity of the subject. The idea of a pure subject or pure object, in their immediacy, is an abstraction. Their concrete reality arises through their synthesis, the self-constitutive act of the Ego.<sup>[45]</sup>

In Gentile’s masterpiece, *Genesi e struttura della società*, written while he sensed his impending death, the theme of the *socius* became explicit and not simply tied to a generic reference to the object. But that is not to say that he only happened upon the *socius* in his final work. Rather, Gentile’s whole speculative process must be consistent with it in order to demonstrate that actualism does not escape the problem of the concrete and real identity of each individual person, but neither does it result in a vague mysticism.<sup>[46]</sup>

In effect, the tone of *Teoria generale dello spirito* (The Theory of Mind as Pure Act) is still akin to Hegelian logicism. The paragraph entitled ‘Gli altri e noi’ (Self and Others), a quarter of the way through the second chapter, ‘La realtà spirituale’ (Spiritual Reality), is a typical example of a language in which, ‘speaking strictly’,<sup>[47]</sup> the other becomes a stage for us to pass through. We cannot help but pass through ourselves; it is something we must do, but we must not stop there.<sup>[48]</sup> But this stage should be understood in light of another:

The other is not so very other as not also to be part of the self. We should bear in mind that the “we” of which we speak is not the empirical self (neither as the scholastic blend of soul and

body, nor even as pure spirit). Rather it is the true, transcendental “we”.<sup>[49]</sup>

Moreover, granted that in the second chapter, and in the ‘Note’ inserted before that—beginning with the fourth edition (1924) and retained right up to the last (1938) that Gentile edited—we find a *Frammento di un gnoseologia dell’amore* (Fragment of a Gnoseology of Love), dated 1918. In it he writes, *mutatis mutandis*, what he had already included in the first volume of the *Sommario di pedagogia*, which says: ‘to love someone is not to repel them from us but to enclose them within us. It is not to regard them as a stranger, but rather as part of us, or rather as our very selves!’<sup>[50]</sup>

There is no need to either talk about changes, nor even to negate them: in philosophy there is not a first moment of speculation and then a second, because even radical changes, when they are properly thought through and justified, always originate from the development of the same problem. Before we set off, we never know where the path leads. We know that we have a road to follow, we have tried to study the route carefully, and that we have carefully taken all the proper precautions. The rest is not under our control. We do not know the whole truth, and we never will. But every piece we add to the puzzle changes the perspective from which we view it, according to how much of the puzzle is complete.

It is entirely true that *Genesi e struttura della società* is marked by a tone and set of considerations not present in Gentile’s earlier theoretical works. But we cannot claim that this tone and these considerations are entirely new, set apart from his early works. That is not the case at all. They do not appear in actualism out of nowhere, and in the *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto* (Foundations of the Philosophy of Right, 1916), we can read one of the most beautiful references to this human *societas*. In the seventh paragraph of the fourth chapter, ‘Lo svolgimento, l’individuo e la società’ (Development, the Individual and Society), Gentile describes the difference between society *inter homines* and society *in interiore homine*.<sup>[51]</sup> We all make ourselves universal through the other, and we do so even at the risk of momentary chaos,<sup>[52]</sup> because in the

other we sense something that makes our world tremble. We cannot make a new life without giving birth, but childbirth is a painful process, wrought with anxiety, dread and suffering.

Gentile returns to this thought in a paragraph of *Genesi e struttura della società*. He adds a flavour of something else here, by using the examples of a baby who speaks with inanimate objects and a poet who interrogates the moon.<sup>[53]</sup> Here Gentile is speaking figuratively; he in no way thinks that a thing is a partner, who, as we put it earlier, could be called a subject. Nevertheless he understands, perversely enough, that the dialogue between me and an alter ego is important. Not forgetting that an object is in any case a spiritual product (a work of art reveals to us the interior world of the artist), the *socius* carries that infinite world inside himself, the infinite world that the *socius* and I have always been, even if not considered in themselves:

Just as a word spoken is identical with the unspoken word that we hear inwardly though it remains unuttered; just as if we hear and understand someone else's words, we hear the words as if we had said them ourselves, and we can agree with those words even before we realize who spoke them. So, from the point of view of the dialectic of practice, the "empirical other", as we may refer to him, is first and foremost entirely different physically from us. He is no more and no less than that internal "other" who appears from the very beginning on the transcendental plane. For through the dialectic this other enters into relation with us and becomes our other.

... All the infinite forms of social life are to be found here, in the dialectical link of *alter* with *ipse*.<sup>[54]</sup>

This society in and through which I live also guarantees the truthfulness of my existence. By holding fast to life's deepest root, I do not lose myself, and if ever I do, actualism offers a way of returning to myself, of withdrawing inside myself<sup>[55]</sup> to find the deepest sense of my existence. And this deep root will never snap. Can I doubt the existence of my world, if the world and I are indissolubly united? And, in answer to the sceptics, if I ever doubt

the existence of this table, of this chair, of this pen (even if only abstractly) as I sit before a fireplace on a winter's evening, we can imagine ourselves to be the 'subject' that doubts everything other than himself, simply for the sake of doubting. But we can never cast into doubt those attachments that cradled us through our adolescent years, or those caresses that comforted us in our most difficult moments growing up, or the happiness and sadness that have left their imprint on us and made us who we are? No, we cannot, because it is to that *socius* which is my mother, my father, my life-long friend or the person I love, that I return in moments of confusion, to find that solid ground, that rock on which I belong.

In the second volume of the *Logica*, dedicated to the practical critique of scepticism, there is the most wonderful passage. Although it is rather long, it is worth quoting it in its entirety, since here we do not encounter any logistic philosophizing or quibbling over concepts. Instead we find that bimillennial spiritual experience that is able to accompany man and illuminate his interior darkness. Here we see a philosophy that becomes self-consciousness and that can unite theory and practice; it is neither a fully formed theory to impose upon reality nor a practical doctrine appropriate for western man in psychological crisis:

So if, in some moment of uncertainty, when the auto-synthetic energy of the spirit is weakened, the world appears to free itself from the embrace with which we clasp it close to us in order to live in the life of the whole, a life from which we can never free ourselves except in death; and if we are beset by doubts about our most firmly held convictions, which we have always thought served us well, but that momentarily seem like mere subjective constructions, like dreams, whose world exists alongside us, but the dream world is not the world; we could certainly go back to that most profound sense of our life, which is in the moral conscience, not as consciousness of the law which initially regulates our relations with others, but as consciousness of that truly original regulative law of our relations with ourselves in life. Whatever happens we live with

others and they with us. This law enables us to actuate ourselves in practice because we can only be that universal Ego that we are through the process by which the Ego realizes itself. And the Ego is at once itself, other, and many others besides. All of this makes for a world that seems to be varied and therefore discordant, but the Ego is perpetually imposing unity on disparate experience. Thus we cannot help but rediscover the faith that momentarily escaped us: faith in a reality that is both one and many at the same time. And in this reality we find our children, our friends, our enemies, all the people who are indifferent to us, and all the things, the rocks, plants, animals, stars, Brother Wind and even Sister Death. In this world, unification with and absorption into the eternal life of our soul is our duty, our life, our being. The love of our children and our parents, the very passion that brings us into conflict with our adversaries, and which is also a form of that absolute love from which the Ego turns in on itself in the end—all of these help us to trust the truth that had been cast into doubt, the truth that this is our life and our being. We cannot, in an abstract empty thought, withdraw into ourselves bleakly mulling over our own emptiness.<sup>[56]</sup>

## 6. Philosophy and Existence

Gentile's entire *oeuvre* is scattered with judgements about actualism. One particularly suggestive example is to be found in the *Sistema di logica*, in which he says that actualism 'objects to the principle of the concreteness of existence,'<sup>[57]</sup> while also recognizing 'the validity of abstract logic'.<sup>[58]</sup> This concreteness is a perpetual problem; the spiritual life is offered only through the *already and not yet*. The solution to this problem generates a further problem, from the pleasure of which is born a new, pained reflection: 'The solution to the one problem of one moment becomes the problem for the next'.<sup>[59]</sup> There are some questions from which there is no escape: whether or not we are philosophers, we have all asked ourselves whether God exists, whether there is virtue in this life, and whether life is

worth living. These questions will always arise when it comes to characterizing the differences contained within a single existence. These questions demand answers that we must all reach, sooner or later.<sup>[60]</sup> Death, above all else, is inescapable, and this is the cardinal problem. Because there are problems and then there are more problems; some weigh on us more than others. We cannot worry ourselves about how many petals a flower has, but at the same time we cannot escape death or its associated anxiety, because we have to die. Gentile writes:

and we are pressed to find the solution, because if we die entirely, what we end up losing is not a flower that matters little to us, since the world remains substantially the same without it; but we end up losing everything, even the world itself. It is a matter of being or non-being; being or not being ourselves; and so for us everything is being and non-being.<sup>[61]</sup>

This is the 'revealing wall' (*muraglia rivelatrice*), a frontier through which our identity is articulated. In existentialist language, we would call it being *in check*, as in one of Bergman's great films, death closes in on the knight. But he is not alone in this. Sooner or later, the moment of being in check comes to us all: failure in life, deeply felt unhappiness, full awareness of an existential emptiness, our death as the cause of anxiety or sorrow for some of the people we love. In the end, we need to make sense of all this. We cannot turn our back on our roles as scholars and hide our questions away in the back of a drawer at home, putting off answering them until tomorrow. For that home is already empty: all that is left is silence and emptiness, and our desperate suffering. We can stop teaching philosophy but we can never stop thinking about philosophy, we never stop asking questions and looking for answers. 'Understanding philosophy thus,' writes Gentile in 1929, 'as the very essence of man thinking as a thinking being, it is clear that it is no longer an abstract theory that presupposes human life, because it is rather philosophy that creates life.' That is why man is more a 'philosophical animal' than a political animal.<sup>[62]</sup> We are all philosophers, 'every man... is a philosopher', because we all have an interiority that we should

experience intensely if we want to get to the bottom of what it means to exist.

That is why, when Gentile took to the *Primato*<sup>[63]</sup> to close the *querelle* over existentialism, he was not entirely able to understand the exigencies that had been fermenting for more than a decade. He was unable to understand because, for him, his thought was really responding to a genuine desire for concreteness. He puts it clearly when he writes, in response to the criticisms of Armando Carlini,<sup>[64]</sup> that 'it is not thought that exists but he who thinks it', which is one principle of actualism on which there is general consensus, without any need for external verification. But what Gentile fails to realize is that his language, formed in a specific historical and cultural context, was already like an old wineskin that cannot hold new wine. It was not that actualism was truly out of date and incapable of engaging with the existential challenges of the new generations, but that is how it came across. According to Carlini, who certainly could not be accused of being averse to the deep significance of the philosophy of the act, Gentile needed to remember the value of the dialectic. And Nicola Abbagnano criticized Gentile for the empirical nature of concepts like birth, death and co-existence. These criticisms illustrate the true crux of the problem that had arisen between old and young: did the old philosopher already fear that perhaps history had not proved him right? And was he altogether wrong about that? And in order to satisfy cultural mores, the taste for sentimental literature made up of sitting-room representations that move the imaginary collective, we have to cede an aspect that every philosopher must claim to be inviolable: conceptualization.

This was the final battle for a man, and the world too, for whom philosophy was not some vague intellectual rumination but a robust life lesson.

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

<sup>1</sup> Università di Catania, Italy, antoniogpesce@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (London, Penguin, 2008). Kierkegaard's 1849 work is entitled *Sygdommen til Døden* in the original Danish and *La malattia mortale* in Italian.



[3](#) See Gustavo Bontadini, 'Gentile e noi', in Giovanni Gentile. *La vita e il pensiero*, edited by Fondazione Giovanni Gentile per gli studi filosofici (Florence, Sansoni, 1948), vol. I, pp. 103–24.

[4](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Genesi e struttura della società. Saggio di filosofia pratica* (Florence, Sansoni, 1946), p. 100. Henceforth cited as GSS. [Editors' note: the English version of this passage is quoted from H.S. Harris's translation: *Genesis and Structure of Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 160–1.]

[5](#) See Norman Stone, *La grande Europa 1878–1919* (Bari, Laterza, 1989), pp. ix–x.

[6](#) See *ibid.*, p. 36.

[7](#) *Ibid.*, p. 43. [Editors' note: the quotation is taken from the original English version. See Norman Stone (1999) *Europe Transformed, 1878–1919*, second edition (London, Wiley-Blackwell), p. 31.]

[8](#) See Stone, *La grande Europa*, pp. 18–19 and 26.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, p. 480.

[10](#) See Ferdinand Brunetière, 'Après une visite au Vatican', *Reveu des deux mondes*, LXV, vol. 127, 1 January 1895, cited in Luisa Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo. La cultura italiana e la Francia fra Otto e Novecento* (Turin, Einaudi, 1985), p. 3.

[11](#) Eugenio Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana 1900–1943* (Bari, Laterza, 1966), vol. I, p. 33. The tone of these worries is evident from direct participants in Raissa Maritain, *I grandi amici* (Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1991).

[12](#) Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana*, pp. 2–4.

[13](#) *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[14](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'La rinascita dell'idealismo', introduction to a course in philosophy held at Regia Università di Napoli on 28 February 1903, in *Saggi critici*, series I (Naples, Ricciardi, 1921), pp. 1–25, and now in *Frammenti di filosofia*, ed. Hervé A. Cavallera (Florence, Le Lettere, 1994), of which I cite p. 5.

[15](#) For an historical reconstruction, see Manlio di Lalla, *Vita di Giovanni Gentile* (Florence, Sansoni, 1975), p. 112; Daniela Coli, *Giovanni Gentile* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004), pp. 46–7.

[16](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'La rinascita dell'idealismo', pp. 11–12.

[17](#) Benedetto Croce, 'A proposito del positivismo italiano' (1905), in *Cultura e vita morale. Intermezzi polemici* (Naples, Bibliopolis, 1993), p. 42. My italics.

[18](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, in *Opere filosofiche*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Milan, Garzanti, 1991), pp. 453–682, cited from p. 470. Henceforth cited as TGS.

[19](#) This is not the conviction only of Gustavo Bontadini and of those who, initially, one could call spiritualistic Christians (Armando Carlini, Augusto Guzzo, Michele Federico Sciacca), but also of another Sicilian philosopher, who has given us a precise general exposition of actualism: Vincenzo La Via (1895–1982). For a brief introduction to his thought, see Antimo Negri, *Giovanni Gentile. II: Sviluppi e incidenza dell'attualismo* (Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1975), p. 52; and alternatively M. Manno in *Enciclopedia Filosofica* (Milan, Bompiani, 2006–10).

[20](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, I. Pedagogia generale, fifth revised edition (Florence, Sansoni, 1942), p. 18. My italics. Henceforth cited as SP1.

[21](#) See SP1, part I, ch. 3, §2–3.

[22](#) See SP1, part I, ch. 7.

[23](#) SP1, p. 42. My italics.

[24](#) Ibid.

[25](#) See SP1, p. 105.

[26](#) There is an ample literature on this issue. On Gramsci as a 'western idealist-style Marxist' see E. Garin, 'La formazione di Gramsci e di Croce', *Critica marxista*, 3 (1967), pp. 119 ff. On the Gentile school or in dialogue with him there is extensive marxist comment (see, for example, Rodolfo Mondolfi, Delio Cantimori, Galvano della Volpe). This theme is enriched, however, by Augusto del Noce, in works like *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* (Milan, Rusconi, 1992), pp. 121–98), *Il problema dell'ateismo* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990), pp. 576–7, and in *Giovanni Gentile. Per una interpretazione filosofica della storia contemporanea* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990). On the interpretation of Del Noce, see Massimo Borghesi, *Augusto Del Noce. La legittimazione critica del moderno* (Genoa, Marietti, 2011), pp. 204–34. Mario dal Pra has given the most balanced interpretation in a work of 1951: for Gentile, theory always has the last word (and, one might say, the first). See Mario Dal Pra, 'L'identità di teoria e prassi nell'attualismo gentiliano', *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, 6: 1 (1951), pp. 8–21.

[27](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx. Studi critici* (Florence, Sansoni, 1959), pp. 83 and ff.

[28](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

[29](#) 'One can neither understand nor value a philosophical system, nor place it in its real historical position, if one focuses exclusively on the author in question, and makes him effectively the historian of himself. Every system must be dissected and reconstructed. And reconstructed after the components have been analyzed in relation to the various elements in the primary construction, and after having selected the interpretation best adapted to the conditions of the time.' Giovanni Gentile, Rosmini e Gioberti. *Saggio storico sulla filosofia italiana del Risorgimento* (Florence, Sansoni, 1958), p. 42.

[30](#) TGS, p. 475; compare Carr translation (London, Macmillan, 1922), p. 18.

[31](#) See *ibid.*, p. 503; compare Carr translation, p. 53.

[32](#) *Ibid.*, p. 485; compare Carr translation, p. 30.

[33](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 530–1; compare Carr translation, pp. 151–2.

[34](#) See Aristotle, ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΑ, I, 2, 1253a25–29; compare Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders (London, Penguin, 1992), p. 61.

[35](#) See Antonio G. Pesce, *L'interiorità intersoggettiva dell'attualismo. Il personalismo di Giovanni Gentile* (Rome, Aracne, 2012), pp. 172 and ff., and Antonio Pesce 'La fenomenologia della coscienza in Giovanni Gentile', *Quaderni Leif*, 6 (2011), pp. 39–54.

[36](#) See SP1, pp. 208 and 250.

[37](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere*, vol. I, third revised edition (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), p. viii. Henceforth cited as SL1.

[38](#) See *ibid.*, p. 24.

[39](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere*, vol. II, fifth revised edition (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 288–289. Henceforth cited as SL2.

[40](#) See SP1, p. 97.

[41](#) TGS, pp. 658–9; compare Carr translation, p. 248.

[42](#) SP1, p. 176.

[43](#) SP1, p. 214.

[44](#) This is not the place to explore all the ethical and political implications of this concept. However one can understand that Gentile's ethical state is not the programme of twentieth-century totalitarianism, precisely because it implies the reciprocal relation of these terms, neither of which can be sacrificed. For a first approach, see Antonio G. Pesce, 'L'interiorità intersoggettiva dell'attualismo', p. 187 and ff.; and for a different perspective, see Alessandro Amato, *L'etica oltre lo stato. Filosofia e politica in Giovanni Gentile* (Udine, Mimesis, 2011).

[45](#) GSS, p. 33; compare Harris translation (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 98.

[46](#) In relation to mysticism, Gentile was prepared to concede everything to Croce on the problem of the distinction. What Gentile couldn't concede was the primary role of unity. Are we ourselves above all, or do we find ourselves in our deeds? Is our being primary, even when reflected in our deeds, or is it our deeds that define our being? The relationship between unity and distinction is played out on a knife edge: the one and the other together, but the problem is which is the initiator, just as in a game we are all players, though someone has to start the game. The difference between these two perspectives is given by a concept, the ego, that

Gentile adopts but Croce doesn't. This point is accepted by non-dogmatic Croceans. See Giuseppe Pezzino, *La fondazione dell'etica in Benedetto Croce* (Catania, C.u.e.c.m., 2008), pp. 289 and ff.

[47](#) [Translators' note: we take this phrase from p. 13 of H. Wildon Carr's translation of *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*. The Italian phrase is 'parlando a rigore'.]

[48](#) See TGS, p. 470.

[49](#) Ibid., p. 493; compare Carr translation, p. 41.

[50](#) SP1, p. 19.

[51](#) Giovanni Gentile, *I fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, fourth revised edition (Florence, Le Lettere, 1987), pp. 75–6. Henceforth cited as FFD.

[52](#) See *ibid.*, p. 73.

[53](#) See GSS, pp. 35–36; compare Harris translation, pp. 100–1.

[54](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2; compare Harris translation, pp. 106–7.

[55](#) See SL2, pp. 87, 289 and ff.

[56](#) SL2, pp. 247–8.

[57](#) See SL2, p. 15.

[58](#) See SL2, p. 15.

[59](#) See SP1, p. 235.

[60](#) See Giovanni Gentile, 'Concetti fondamentali dell'attualismo', *Nuova Antologia*, 1 August 1931, now in Giovanni Gentile, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, second revised edition (Florence, Sansoni, 1958), p. 27. Henceforth the collection will be cited as IF.

[61](#) SL2, p. 12.

[62](#) See Giovanni Gentile, 'Scienza e filosofia', *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 12 (1931), p. 81 ff, now in IF, p. 182.

[63](#) [Editors' note: *Primato: lettere e arti d'Italia* was a review, founded by Giuseppe Bottai and published between 1940 and 1943. Several of its contributors criticized Gentile's actualism from an existentialist perspective.] On this debate see Giovanni Invitto, 'La presenza di Giovanni Gentile nel dibattito sull'esistenzialismo italiano', *Idee*, 28–9 (1995), pp. 175–84.

[64](#) See Giovanni Gentile, 'L'esistenzialismo in Italia', in Giovanni Gentile, *Frammenti di filosofia*, ed. Hervé A. Cavallera (Florence, Le Lettere, 1994), pp. 119–24. See also Vito A. Bellezza, *L'esistenzialismo positivo di Giovanni Gentile* (Florence, Sansoni, 1954).

# Giovanni Gentile as Moral Philosopher

James Wakefield<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 73–103

**Abstract:** This essay assesses Gentile's contributions to practical philosophy, showing how a distinctive but idiosyncratic moral theory emerges over the course of his systematic works. Wakefield argues that Gentile's thoroughgoing anti-realism does not, as some critics have thought, leave him unable to distinguish reasonable from unreasonable arguments or good from bad reasons for action. While actual idealism veers too close to implausible relativism to have much use as an all-purpose philosophical outlook, argues Wakefield, it retains real power as a practical theory.

## 1.

Giovanni Gentile's pre-Fascist middle period, straddling the actualist manifesto 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' (1912) and the second volume of the *Sistema di logica* (1923), was marked by outstanding productivity and originality. In those twelve years, seven out of the nine volumes of his *Opere sistematiche* were published in at least one edition—only the *Filosofia dell'arte* (1931) and *Genesi e struttura della società* (1946) came later—and actualism grew from a concise outline of nineteen principles into an integrated system encompassing education, law, theory of mind and knowledge. The theory elaborated in these works was never recanted, and it provided, at least in Gentile's mind, the foundation for his later work as the 'philosopher of Fascism'.

Notably absent from Gentile's middle-period works is any book about moral philosophy. As early as 1913 he had assured his readers that he would soon write an ethics,<sup>[2]</sup> but no such work ever emerged. It is understandable that some intended projects had to be

dropped amid the intense productivity of the years that followed, and after 1923, when Gentile became a member of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, he had new responsibilities to oversee. Nonetheless, the absence of a book-length treatment of ethics is surprising in light of his major philosophical concerns. He had long-standing interests in moral philosophy and moral philosophers, especially Hegel, Kant and the Scholastics, and the core texts of actualism include regular references to the 'moral nature of spiritual reality', as well as the universal 'duty' to think. In this period, his most extensive treatments of morality appear in works dealing principally with other topics: the relation between the will and the law in *I fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, the problem of God's transcendence in *Discorsi di religione*, and the social nature of man, which figures as a recurrent if not central theme of the *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*. None of these discussions includes a detailed explanation of how practical problems ought to be solved, and their peculiarly integrated presentation makes it difficult to discern what Gentile's moral philosophy would have looked like if it were separated from the other elements of his theory.

Another problem, and potentially a serious one, is that when Gentile returns to the topic of ethics in *Genesi e struttura della società* (1946), he is concerned above all to explain why the state has absolute priority over every other source of authority. While there are some—H.S. Harris and Antonio Giovanni Pesce among them—who regard this book as Gentile's crowning achievement, it undoubtedly suffers as a result of the speed and trying circumstances in which it was written. In the death throes of the Italian Fascist experiment, Gentile felt the need to justify his dogged adherence to the regime in the two preceding decades, and to urge his compatriots to maintain solidarity through the precarious times ahead, when there would no longer be an authoritarian state to impose order from above. Readers judging Gentile's contribution to moral philosophy on the basis of this book have often thought that he equates moral goodness with uncritical prostration before the will of an all-powerful state, which is identified, on dubious grounds, as the arbiter of what each individual 'truly' wants. Some critics think the

pre-Fascist actualism offers no defence against this implausible conclusion. Gentile's insistent claims about the unavoidably moral nature of reality and the duty to think, continues the objection, are empty formalities unable to determine what individuals or states ought to do. A moral theory that fails to condemn the notorious excesses of the Italian Fascist regime, or even *requires* some such regime in order to generate substantive conclusions, must be a deficient theory, and cannot be worth taking seriously.

I do not accept this interpretation. While Gentile's theory is impartial with respect to the substantive principles and beliefs that we bring to bear on the practical problems we encounter, it does enable us to discipline our practical judgements and subsequent actions. Elsewhere I have elaborated a revisionist account of actualist moral theory.<sup>[3]</sup> Here my aims are more modest. I mean to chart the development of Gentile's moral theory in the pre-Fascist period of actualism, beginning with the early metaphysical statements of the doctrine (section 2) and later moving to the more elaborate version imbued with moral language (section 3). I shall then consider how successfully Gentile's pre-Fascist moral theory could help an actual person to decide how to behave without the need for an all-powerful state to determine the substantive content of morality in advance (section 4). Finally I shall comment briefly on some of the ways in which actualism might contribute to contemporary moral philosophy (section 5).

## 2.

Rik Peters has called 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' the 'birth certificate' of actualism.<sup>[4]</sup> While elements of the theory can be seen in earlier works, the nineteen articles of this essay constitute a recognisable model of the doctrine that was to come. The first volume of the *Sommario di pedagogia*, published a year later, contains more detailed and systematic treatments of several of the key concepts of actualism, including self-consciousness, the will and the relation between thought and language. The essay contains no direct references to morality, while the *Sommario* contains only a

few. Nonetheless, since these works so effectively and efficiently define the technical underpinnings of actualism, it is worth trying to make sense of them before turning to the more elaborate theory of the works that follow.

‘There is no philosophical or scientific investigation... [nor] thinking of any sort’, writes Gentile, ‘... without the spontaneous and unshakeable conviction of thinking the truth.’<sup>[5]</sup> This means that the thinking subject cannot think (affirm) that what she now believes to be true is in fact false. To do that, she would need to think two mutually opposed thoughts at the same time, which is effectively to think nothing. This is not to say that she cannot think claims, in the sense of mentally articulating them, while at the same time believing them to be false or otherwise while suspending judgement on their truth or falsity. Not all claims that are thought are believed. Thought, the object generated by the act of thinking, consists of linguistic constructs that have ‘interior psychic value’ for the thinker who employs them. This means, in other words, that to think is always to think *something*, and to be conscious that one is doing so. Words are only ‘real’ words if they mean something to the person expressing them, whether mentally or in some outward way as well.

<sup>[6]</sup>

In Gentile’s terms, the distinction between claims that are affirmed (consciously believed) and those that are merely thought (articulated without belief) is expressed as that between the concrete act of thinking (*pensiero pensante*) and abstract thought, or thought as the object of thinking (*pensiero pensato*). Concrete thinking is the eternal yet restless activity of consciousness, and it is this that the concrete subject—the thinker self-consciously thinking—is unable to doubt. Accordingly, concrete reality can be said to exist only insofar as the subject now thinks that it exists. Since she cannot transcend her own thinking in order to view the facts from a fully objective standpoint, she must assume, from moment to moment (or, as Gentile would have it, in the eternal present of the act of thinking), that reality is exactly as she believes it to be. Error and the unknown make sense only as abstractions: the thinker may coherently claim to have been wrong about her past beliefs, but only so long as she no longer holds



them. Likewise she cannot affirm claims about what she does not know unless she thinks she knows it.

Present thinking is not a static thought. It is instead an activity or process. The subject need not think that she now knows everything that there is to know, nor believe that none of the claims she now holds to be true might later turn out to be false. However, she cannot specify *which* of her beliefs are mistaken while she continues to believe them. In other words, by the time she realizes that a belief is false, she has ceased to believe it, with the result that it belongs to the abstract past, not to the subject's current, 'concrete' thought. In order to imagine that she might be wrong about some of her beliefs, she must consider her own thoughts *abstractly*, as though they belonged to someone else. Such abstractions do not belong to concrete reality, although they are needed for the subject to make self-conscious judgements *about* concrete reality. As such, abstract and concrete thought are dialectically linked. One is unreal, the other real; one static, the other constantly in motion. Only by reflecting on abstractions—only by articulating claims about and thereby constructing reality—can the subject evaluate claims about the world as she experiences it.

As described, Gentile's view looks very much like a form of presentist subjectivism according to which whatever the subject now thinks is true for that subject. There is no pre-cognitive material to which thought can apply itself, or, at least, if there is any such material, we are logically excluded from knowing anything about it. Instead the subject must create that material for herself, simultaneously generating a world and, by thinking about it, herself therein. Some critics have thought that if this were true, the subject would have total impunity over the form and content of reality. The self-evident fact that reality is not always as we want it to be, think these critics, shows that something is missing from Gentile's account of the relation between mind and world.<sup>[7]</sup> Moreover, if a subject's articulated and self-conscious belief in the truth-value of a moral proposition—the belief that *promise-keeping is good*, for example—were all that was required to make it true, such claims would, as the

logical positivists claimed, be doomed to emptiness, referring to nothing and liable neither to be true nor false.

The scant references to morality in the *Sommario* enable us to make a clearer distinction between actualism and logical positivism. Goodness, as Gentile conceives of it, is not a property of objects about which we can express claims. Instead it is identified formally with the object of the subject's concrete will. Rather than an unrealized intention, which is an abstraction, the concrete will combines action and intention in one: it is continually realized while the subject strives toward a desired end.<sup>[8]</sup> As such, the concrete will can never be satisfied. Once met, an objective is no longer willed, and the will to satisfy it becomes a correspondingly abstract thing of the past.

Goodness is identified with the endless realization of the concrete will. Gentile characterizes this as the *creation of reality*. 'Human action', he writes, 'concurs with the creation of [the will's] ideal reality, which, coming from man, is inconceivable except as [the] work of an author of nature, ... the constructor of a good (or of an evil).'[9] It is the very act of creation, not the thing created, that is good. The new reality, which is perpetually in flux, displaces the one that went before, and the thinker subject to it has a new will, new desires and new problems to solve.

Alongside its elaboration of actualism's technical conception of morality, the *Sommario's* discussion of education suggests in more familiar terms how a morally upstanding person relates to the world around her. The purpose of the school, writes Gentile, is not only to instruct the student how to read and write, recite facts and obey rules, but also to connect her<sup>[10]</sup> with 'the vast spiritual world that resides ... in all the books and monuments of human life.'<sup>[11]</sup> The teacher guides the student in order that she can think for herself. By means of his authority and the discipline imposed upon her, the student gains the skills and knowledge she needs to be an autonomous agent.<sup>[12]</sup> Education cultivates both the mind and the character, equipping the student with what she needs to make self-conscious, confident judgements about the world. The moral value of education is to be measured holistically, not in terms of its

component parts. A student who can recite the contents of her catechism, but who does not feel personally committed to applying these in practice, is not acting morally (at least so far as the catechism is regarded as an authoritative guide to morals).<sup>[13]</sup> This holistic conception of the value of education reflects the actualist conception of morality, in which goodness belongs to norms or reasons as a whole, at least so far as the subject recognizes and responds to them.

This gives us, within a short compass, the main features of Gentile's conception of morality. It is notable that *all intention-directed thinking* is considered to have a fundamentally moral character. This was to be explained in greater detail with Gentile's conception of the *etica del sapere* (ethics of knowing) in the *Sistema di logica*, but already in these early works we can see the outlines of the idea that trying assiduously to think the truth, to overcome error or otherwise think as well as one can, is an inescapable moral responsibility. In this way Gentile's position is distinguished from any kind of crude presentist subjectivism for which the truth (or goodness) is just whatever the subject now happens to think it is. Actualism's dynamic conception of thinking means that it is possible to accommodate both the principle that what the subject now thinks is true for that subject and the principle that the subject constantly corrects herself. As we shall see in the next section, the later works bring this idea into clear light by means of the distinction between 'universal' and 'particular' thinking and willing.<sup>[14]</sup>

### 3.

Thanks in part to H. Wildon Carr's translation, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* is the best known of Gentile's works in the English-speaking world, although its merits relative to his other systematic works remain a point of dispute.<sup>[15]</sup> Roger W. Holmes noted in 1937 that the *Teoria generale's* 'destructive criticism' of doctrines of transcendence was complemented by the 'constructive expression' of actualism in the *Sistema di logica*, and that the unavailability of the latter to readers without Italian had impeded

general understanding of Gentile's theory.<sup>[16]</sup> The situation has hardly changed in the intervening decades. These works are, in my view, the most impressive that Gentile ever produced.<sup>[17]</sup> Woven through both is a subtle moral theory. Early in the *Teoria generale*, Gentile writes that

we must establish, as the supreme aspiration of our being, a harmony, a unity, with everyone else and with all that is other. [Moral problems] arise... so far as we each recognise the unreality of our own being, conceived empirically as an ego opposed to the other people and things that surround us and through which our lives are actualized. However, while the problems arise on this ground, they are not resolved except when man comes to feel the needs of other people as his own, and his own life, therefore, not enclosed in the narrow compass of his empirical personality, but ever expanding into the active nature [*attuosità*] of a spirit that is at once above all particular interests and yet immanent in the very centre of his deeper personality.<sup>[18]</sup>

At first glance, these remarks might be thought to suggest that Gentile is embracing a kind of loose moral spiritualism according to which each person is a constituent of a nebulous whole, and goodness is identified with the subject breaking free of the 'narrow compass' of her merely 'empirical' individuality and attaining 'unity' with her 'deeper personality' through which she is connected to other people. This reading is not entirely wrong, but it is frustratingly vague and prone to misinterpretation. If this were the whole story, Gentile's moral philosophy would amount to a loose *conception* of morality rather than a substantive and practical *theory*.

We can sharpen this image of morality by regarding it from the distinctive standpoint of actualism. The subject of actualism, let us remember, is a single person. The unity of self-consciousness demands that each subject conceive of herself as an individual, persisting entity. This persistence is, or may be, something of an illusion. After all, any claim we make about our past or future existence must be made in the present. Yet in order to think of

ourselves as thinkers capable of evaluating and affirming or denying claims about reality, we must think of ourselves as agents, responsible for and causally related to our own thoughts. Thinking is something that we do, not something that happens to us. Unless we really are solipsists—and practically no one is—we must also assume that other people, including versions of ourselves in the past, future and merely possible realities, are (or will be, could be or were) subject to internal thought experiences comparable to and commensurable with our own. We believe this even though we are logically excluded from thinking others' thoughts directly. In order to think what someone else has thought, we must rethink it for ourselves.

What Gentile suggests, I think, is that to be more than merely 'empirical individuals', confined by our finite capabilities and imperfect knowledge, we must regard ourselves as particular subjects that are not social atoms, but individuals among others, all of whom, ourselves included, belong to the same reality and are subject to the same truth conditions. In other words, I must recognize that my interests, however important they are to me, may not be so important to somebody else, and that what I care about is not all that matters. The whole of what I now believe to be true is not the whole truth. While I must, out of necessity, believe it to be true at the time I think it, I recognize that I may later turn out to be mistaken. (For a true solipsist, each of these pairs of claims would be mutually contradictory. That Gentile can at least try to affirm both at once indicates quite how hard he tries to separate actualism from solipsism.) So the 'supreme moral aspiration' is identified with the subject's attempts to situate herself alongside others in a reality containing a multitude of subjects, but only one concrete truth. Even someone completely isolated from others must, if she is to attain even provisional certainty that what she believes (or does) is what she has good reason to believe (or do), regard herself as susceptible to criticism from positions other than her own, even if she must furnish the objections herself.<sup>[19]</sup>

These ideas are brought into still sharper focus in the *Logica*. Practically every doctrine before actualism, claims Gentile,

presented reality as something that persists independently of the activity of thinking, with many thinkers, separated in space, simultaneously thinking their private thoughts in time, one after another. If each thinker consists of a series of separate thoughts in a single private universe, how can we make sense of a single reality in which all are contained? Since each experiences her own life, and not the life of any other, how are we to make sense of norms of thought (reasons, logical laws) that are anything more than ephemeral fancies of particular subjects? Given the unavailability of a fully transcendent or objective standpoint, how can we ever say that *anything* is true? Earlier philosophers' 'transcendent' models of the world were intended

to compose and resolve the multiplicity of natural things, on which thought is focused, in one cosmos and a single being; and to bring together and reduce the multitude of men under the empire of a single thought, of a unique intellect, of an impersonal reason.<sup>[20]</sup>

Gentile's commitment to 'pure immanence' prevents him from countenancing the idea of a fully impersonal reason, provided that this is understood as a constellation of objective laws determining what course one must take when thinking correctly. To presuppose the existence of such a set of laws would be no more than baseless guesswork. He suggests instead that the 'need' for such a standard of 'impersonal reason' is bound up with 'the very nature of thought,' and is 'what drives men irresistibly toward one another, toward things, and toward the universe.'<sup>[21]</sup> The active, self-correcting dynamic of thought is what makes us persistently curious about the world, eager always to know the truth and reject falsity, to talk to other people and ask what they think about our ideas and the problems that have prompted them. Again: in order to believe anything, the subject must believe that she is right about everything she believes, but she must also recognize that she *could be wrong*. Unless this is to collapse into two conflicting claims—(i) [I believe that] everything I now believe to be true is true; *and* (ii) [I believe that] some of the things I now believe to be true may be wrong—it is

necessary to recognize that the various beliefs collectively referred to in each of these claims is constantly in flux. The set of beliefs that are permanently true are those *now* affirmed in *pensiero pensante*, not some specified or specifiable set of abstract *pensieri pensati*.

This can be expressed more formally. Actualism is distinguished from crude forms of subjectivism by the way in which it presents the activity of thinking as one by which the subject continually frees herself from the confines of her mere particularity or individuality.<sup>[22]</sup> For a crude subjectivist, such as a solipsist, 'what I now happen to believe to be the case' and 'what is the case' are mutually equivalent terms. In no sense can my beliefs be mistaken. Anything contrary to or otherwise not included in the scope of what I now happen to think is unreal and to that extent false. An actualist, for whom present thinking represents only a moment in an extended process, has greater room for manoeuvre. While actualism shares with crude subjectivism the assumption that what is now believed to be true *is true* (for the concrete subject holding that belief), it stresses the *provisionality* of what is now believed. There are better and worse reasons for belief, and those of which we are now aware, and which we use to justify our beliefs, may not be all that there are. To recognize her own status as a particular (fallible, finite) thinker among others, the subject must also distinguish this from something greater than herself—a 'universal' standard. Having understood that the truth is more than what she now thinks it is, she can set about discerning better and worse reasons, true and false beliefs, desires that she wants from desires that she does not. Thus she takes responsibility for her own constitution and her own life,<sup>[23]</sup> acts as a self-conscious moral agent, and is enjoined with a community of persons, rather than being isolated from them in her private subjective universe:

We make ourselves universal. But at the heart of universality, which is the negation of our individuality, we must rediscover our individuality. Yes, we lose our soul, only to rediscover it. Within the character of my family, of the state to which I belong, of humanity, of the spirit whose immanent reality I

come to grasp in my will, in my search for a more solid understanding, my personality is not suppressed but instead elevated, enlarged and invigorated.<sup>[24]</sup>

Rather than sacrificing her individuality to the laws of a transcendent reality—submitting uncritically to popular consensus, say—the subject frees herself from the confines of what is given to her, such as the world in which she finds herself, or her limited understanding of her experiences. She enriches and develops her self-conception as both an individual in the world and an agent capable of changing it. She is free so far as she is autonomous, submitting to laws and norms that she imposes upon herself.<sup>[25]</sup>

It should not be forgotten that these claims are not applicable only to the domain of ‘theoretical reason’, concerning judgements about truth claims and logical relationships between them; but also to ‘practical reason’, concerning judgements about the actions one ought and has most reason to perform. Gentile denies the distinction between the two—the norms for both are the norms of thinking, after all.<sup>[26]</sup> To understand actualism’s ‘moral conception of life’, he writes, it is important to recognize that

the spirit... is never really that pure theoretical activity that is imagined to stand in opposition to practical activity: there is no *theory* or contemplation of reality that is not also action and thus the creation of reality. Indeed, there is no cognitive act that does not have a value, or rather, that is not judged, precisely *so far as it is a cognitive act*, according to its exact conformity to its own law and whether or not it is recognized as being what it ought to be... If we were not the authors of our ideas, or rather, if our ideas were not purely our own actions, they would not be *ours*, we would be unable to judge them, they would have no value: they would be neither true nor false.<sup>[27]</sup>

These claims extend the theory of the unity of thought and action that we encountered in the *Sommario di pedagogia*. It is not immediately clear what Gentile thinks we, as thinkers, are morally



required to do. After all, thinking is universal and unavoidable. If thinking were morally praiseworthy in and of itself, and we were incapable of doing otherwise, then its moral value would be undeserved. The *evaluation* implicit in the claim would not be what it purports to be. Instead it would be a straightforward evaluation of the claim's similarity to the content of the subject's current thought, and since both sides of the comparison are the same, this would be invariably perfect. Our moral duty to think, as Gentile later styles it,<sup>[28]</sup> must be a duty *to think as well as we can*, remaining vigilant against the possibility of error, sensitive to reasons for thinking as we do (or for changing our minds), and conscious of the variety of ideas that are or only might be held by people other than ourselves.<sup>[29]</sup> By recognizing that we are finite, fallible thinkers, and that what we now know and think is not the sum of what we might know and think, we are spurred on toward an as-yet-unrealized future in which we know more and think better. This future, so far as we ascribe value to it and make it an end at which we aim, is continually realized in the dynamic of 'moral reality'.<sup>[30]</sup>

These remarks reinforce another recurrent theme in Gentile's moral philosophy. Goodness is something for which we must always aim but can never conclusively reach. New problems arise while old ones are still being solved. If the task of problem-solving were ever completed, if there were no longer any questions for us to answer, we would cease to think, and thereby cease to be moral agents. While the task cannot be completed, we must, in order to think and in order to become autonomous agents in worlds of our own creation, continue to strive toward that unattainable end. It is in the striving, not the object toward which we strive, that we find perfection; the value of life is found only in the living of it.<sup>[31]</sup> In 'Il problema morale' (The Moral Problem, 1920), Gentile expresses this idea metaphorically:

[...] we can talk about good and evil in this life, as if it were an infinite ladder that rises up, from the earth to the sky and from nature to spirit: [...] Every step we take up the ladder is good,

and every time we stop on a rung, when slowness or apathy of the spirit yields to nature, it is evil[.]<sup>[32]</sup>

The metaphor of the ladder again shows the subtle but nonetheless significant difference between Gentile's theory and an unbounded presentist subjectivism for which whatever the subject self-consciously does is good by virtue of her doing it. For the unbounded subjectivist, no act that the subject performs can be substantively wrong at the time it is performed. This is true of Gentile's theory only so long as the subject also reflects critically on her reasons for doing as she does, considering the reasons for *not* performing her action and justifying her selection to the best of her ability.<sup>[33]</sup> Thus she must continue to climb the ladder, overcoming 'disvalue' (*disvalore*) as she goes.

#### 4.

It may still be thought that Gentile's moral philosophy fails to show us what we ought and have most reason to do. From the unavailability of an objective reality beyond the ambit of the subject it appears to follow that the sole moral error in Gentile's philosophy is *hypocrisy*, which is a formal rather than substantive concept. Censure of another person, unless she is acting in a self-consciously hypocritical way, is meaningless. The actions of people whose conceptions of value differ from our own are not really morally evaluable: they are part of abstract 'nature'. We must shoulder their (mistaken) beliefs, desires and values, or even suppress or alter them as far as we can. A theory in which the truth about right and wrong—the norms of judgement, let us say—depends solely upon our existing convictions concerning rightness and wrongness cannot help us to reach the relevant convictions if we do not already hold them. If this were true, we would need some further theory to discipline our judgements before we could reach the convictions needed to discipline our conduct.

I do not think that this assessment can be right, but some more work is needed before we can show how Gentile's moral theory can

be put into action. Once established, this will tell us whether pre-Fascist actualism can provide us with a moral philosophy sufficiently robust to discipline the moral conduct of a subject faced with a plausibly narrow and difficult question about what to do. Since real decisions are rarely as clear-cut as artificial philosophers' scenarios—which, on the actualist account, can be nothing but unreal abstractions—it seems appropriate to plunder Gentile's biography for a real and relevant example with which to work. Consider, for instance, the

*Matteotti Crisis*. It is 1924. Giovanni<sup>[34]</sup> is a high-ranking member of the Italian Fascist government. Although he identifies himself as 'liberal by deep and firm conviction',<sup>[35]</sup> and considers democracy to be an essential feature of any just political institution, he believes that the Party has, over any of its rivals, the greatest chance of securing a unified national culture and identity for the people of Italy. However, he learns that pro-Fascist activists have been coercing members of the public to vote for the Party,<sup>[36]</sup> and have even kidnapped and murdered the prominent anti-Fascist politician, Giacomo Matteotti, who publicly exposed the use of these tactics. Now that the Party's illiberal tactics have been revealed, Giovanni must decide whether to remain loyal to it or withdraw his support in protest.

Would actualist moral philosophy offer Giovanni any guidance as he makes his decision? We have seen what Gentile thinks morality *is*, and, broadly speaking, what he thinks morality demands of us. As stated, these demands are formal and general: do your duty; think as well as you can; work to overcome your limits as a particular, finite individual; do not be a hypocrite; do not be selfish. There is little here that could decisively sway Giovanni's decision one way or the other. He cannot confidently do his duty without some way of determining what he is currently duty-bound to do, or, if he has several distinct, mutually incompatible duties, which of these is the duty that he ought to discharge. The demands for him to think as well as he can, to overcome his particularity and to avoid selfishness might prompt him

to reflect carefully on his decision—it will not be enough for him to choose capriciously—but they cannot help him reach a substantive conclusion. The demand for him to avoid hypocrisy might help in more straightforward cases in which he has no doubt about which course of action is the right one to perform, but here the correct course is not so obvious. (Remember that, at least for the purposes of this example, Giovanni does not know how the Party's role will develop in the future; and that he was, until the Matteotti crisis arose, unaware of the violence being carried out on the Party's behalf.) Giovanni has reasons to remain loyal to the Party as well as reasons to abandon it. Since he cannot do both, he must find a method of weighing these reasons and determining which course he has *most reason* or the *best reason* to pursue.

Given that Giovanni faces this dilemma as a particular individual with accordingly particular beliefs, interests and values, any account of how he might go about making his decision must involve a certain amount of speculation. The very fact that the Matteotti crisis strikes him as a moral problem suggests that he already recognizes that there are, or there might be, reasons in favour of more than one possible course of action. Consider first the case for withdrawing from the Party. Suppose that Giovanni thinks that the activists' threatening and violent behaviour undermines the integrity of the Italian democratic system and detracts from the government's legitimacy. This objection may have explicitly moral grounds (*viz.* the government is illegitimate, and to support it is to support injustice) or pragmatic grounds (the public perception of the government as unjust is likely to bolster opposition to it, potentially preventing it from achieving its aim of securing a unified national culture and identity). More simply, it may be that Giovanni thinks violence, and especially murder, is wrong, and that moral responsibility for the actions of pro-Fascist activists, carried out in order to further the Party's interests, is shared by all members of the Party. To condemn the activists' actions, he must condemn and dissociate himself from the Party. Given that he identifies himself as a liberal, he may also want to distance himself from an institution associated with illiberal acts.

Now consider the case for remaining loyal to the Party. Giovanni may believe that he has a moral commitment to the Party, either from explicit agreements (e.g. an oath of loyalty) or arising implicitly from past interactions (e.g. a responsibility to support the Party in exchange for the high-ranking position it has given him). Since he shares its aim of securing a unified national culture and identity—be this an end that is valuable in itself or a means to encourage Italians to treat each other as fellow members of a moral community—he may also regard this as a reason to go on supporting the Party. Even if he disapproves of the Party's illiberal practices, he may believe that he stands a better chance of tempering these tendencies if he remains within the Party rather than outside it.

There may be ostensibly non-moral reasons for Giovanni to stay or go. Several critics of the historical Gentile have noted that he stood to benefit personally from his continued support for the Party.<sup>[37]</sup> Perhaps Giovanni's position in government affords him a generous salary, great prominence in public life and the respect of his peers. It may also be that people who leave the Party are regarded by remaining members as traitors, and are accordingly shunned. If so, Giovanni's decision to withdraw his support could make his life significantly worse than if he remained or even if had never joined at all. Conversely, it may be that remaining loyal to the Party after the public exposure of its notorious practices will lead to him being held accountable for what it does in the future. (The historical Gentile's alienation from his peers and ultimately his assassination both illustrate how this scenario might play out.)

Listed above are some of the factors that might conceivably figure in Giovanni's decision. Some of these are straightforward value claims (e.g. that murder is wrong, or that it is possible for members of an institution to bear collective responsibilities for actions carried out in its name, or that a good citizen ought always to obey the state). Others are based on rational assessments of the expected consequences of each course of action. It is tempting to think that some of these considerations have no moral value. Choosing to remain loyal to the Party in order to maintain a steady salary, for example, might be regarded as a pragmatic, rational decision rather

than a moral one. What Gentile would want to emphasize, as I understand him, is that to detach moral reasons from other kinds of reason is to make morality into something abstract and unreal. Giovanni may ascribe importance to some set of rules—oppose injustice, love thy neighbour—and work assiduously to live according to them; but the value of these rules *comes from the fact that he cares about them* (or the ends to which adherence to those rules is a means), not from their content or some externally imposed status. They have no hold on someone who looks upon them as a mere ‘spectator’ without feeling personally committed to them.<sup>[38]</sup> What we conventionally think of as *moral* norms are no different in kind from norms of other sorts. If Giovanni acts out of self-interest, it is because he thinks a world in which his interests are satisfied is more valuable than its alternatives; to that extent he has a reason to act accordingly. But if he acts out of self-interest *at the exclusion of other reasons*, he has allowed himself to be ensnared in his merely particular concerns. He is not thinking and acting as a moral agent.

This does not solve Giovanni’s problem. Actualism demands that he reflect on his decision and avoid making his choice on the basis of merely particular reasons. His reasons can never be shown to be perfectly ‘universal’—he cannot assess the range of reasons that have not yet occurred to him, so he can never be certain that he has considered every factor relevant to the choice he is making. It might be thought, then, that Giovanni, the subject of actualism, can never justifiably act on any reasons that he has identified. He can never be certain that what now seems to him the best among the available options is the correct one in any final or decisive sense. To affirm any particular belief or pursue any particular course must be assumed to be premature.<sup>[39]</sup> If it is replied that the correct reason is nothing more than the best reason so far imagined, actualism looks vulnerable to the objection that Giovanni can *make* himself right by refusing to entertain alternatives to the beliefs he now holds or the will with which he now identifies. In the absence of an objectively or externally verifiable standard by which to ascertain that a given stretch of thinking is *sufficiently* ‘universalized’ to deserve moral

licence, a moral theory that is *norma sui* seems bound to collapse into relativism.<sup>[40]</sup>

Perhaps these imaginary objectors are expecting too much. Actualism cannot be forced to yield pseudo-realist moral precepts applicable to all possible subjects at all times. There is no reason to suppose that morality must consist of fully objective laws with which we are, at any given time, in either compliance or conflict. This does not rule out the possibility that Giovanni regards certain precepts as valuable, if only in a loose and unsophisticated way. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how he could begin to solve his problem if he did not. The choice, if he recognized it as a choice at all, would be like a choice between two or more signifiers whose objects are unspecified. 'Would you prefer  $\Omega$  or  $\Delta$ ?' is not a question we can answer, except arbitrarily, unless we know what these symbols signify and in what respects, if any, we consider one more valuable than the other. Likewise, Giovanni may be aware that there are people who live according to precepts that have no value for him, and unless he can determine *why* those people consider those precepts to be worth following, thereby situating them on the common ground of universal reasons, Giovanni has no reason to take them seriously. For him they are moral rules only abstractly.

How, then, is Giovanni to proceed? Remember that the determinant of his rightness or wrongness is his conviction that he has made the correct choice. If he brings about that conviction artificially, by purposefully ignoring certain relevant considerations that would otherwise weigh against his choice, he is deceiving himself, and his will to follow that conviction is merely an abstract, particular will. It may be more accurate, then, to say that the determinant of his rightness or wrongness is his *considered* conviction that he has made the correct choice. As I have argued elsewhere, it is the identification of this process of consideration or reflection with the creation of moral value that shows actualism to belong to the constructivist family of normative theories.<sup>[41]</sup> Giovanni must weigh the reasons for and against each possible course of action and decide which he can whole-heartedly endorse, conscientiously scrutinizing his beliefs and weeding out any that do

not have the support of good reasons. If, as seems likely in the case described, there is no solution that would satisfy every one of his convictions about what is valuable, he must choose the option that *best* satisfies them. Only thus can he act with *integrity*. Outside a purely moral 'kingdom of ends' in which there are no practical limits on the subject's freedom to pursue the course she is duty-bound to follow, such integrity is the best we can hope for.<sup>[42]</sup>

This formulation of Gentile's moral philosophy leaves it vulnerable to hijack by self-conscious 'social engineers'. In other words, actualism can make no stipulations about how orders of value come about. People are born into societies, cultures and institutional complexes, and their personal values and convictions are shaped by the contexts from which they arise. It makes no difference to a given socialized subject if the society in which she finds herself has developed organically or as the result of deliberate social engineering, with other people having pre-determined what she will come to regard as morally valuable and bringing this about by means of education and direct or indirect means of influence, including propaganda, the press, censorship and ceremonies.<sup>[43]</sup> It may be that the initial setup of these institutions, and the specification of the orders of values that persons will be led to hold, involves hypocrisy<sup>[44]</sup> on the part of the establishing party, but the *recipients* of the values—the people actually affected by the mechanics of social engineering—are not acting hypocritically unless they already subscribe to some other order of values that is at odds with the artificial substitute.

Several recent commentators have sought to show that Gentile's moral theory need not lead to this bleak conclusion. Alessandro Amato, for example, argues that the endless disagreement between individuals *who are nonetheless trying to articulate a common answer to their questions* is characteristic of Gentile's conception of 'ethicity' (*eticità*) within a political or social community. This recognition of a common cause, even if unanimous agreement is never reached, is the foundation for the state, society and the nation.<sup>[45]</sup> The restless, self-critical character of actualism serves as levy against arbitrary dogmatism and intolerance, for if we can never



finally be certain that our judgements are correct, we can never justifiably impose them on others without at least hearing their side of the argument.<sup>[46]</sup> Even within the state that Gentile offers us as the solution to the formal emptiness that appears to blight his theory, then, there should be room for criticism, reflection and change. His failure to make this clear leads to the flimsy justifications for authoritarianism offered in his doctrinaire work, which we see published during the dog days of Fascism, and which are only ambiguously recanted in *Genesi e struttura della società*. This is a regrettable symptom of his conversion to the Party doctrine.<sup>[47]</sup>

This interpretation has the support of Gentile's occasional asides on what a non-moral person would be like.<sup>[48]</sup> Rather than railing against conventional morality, the real moral deviant is someone who fails to engage with others' reasons at all, proceeding through life like one carried downhill by a slope, unchallenged by others, or else declining to accept any challenge with which they present him.<sup>[49]</sup> We might say that this distinction between activity and passivity replaces the traditional distinction between right and wrong in Gentile's theory. We can do the right thing—act morally—by engaging actively with others, presenting our reasons for scrutiny, trying to convince them that we are right but adjusting our own positions where we find compelling justifications for doing so; or else the wrong thing—act non-morally—by remaining detached, holding uncritically to our convictions and regarding other people not as thinking agents but as objects or obstacles to our will. Rarely, if ever, will we be *perfectly* right or *perfectly* wrong, but our constant sensitivity to these mutually opposed standards keeps us from living according to merely particular or abstract reasons. To do that is to stop climbing life's ladder, and that, for Gentile, is the antithesis of morality.

## 5.

Gentile's moral philosophy represents a radical variety of anti-realism, distinguished from other anti-realist doctrines by its rigorous adherence to the necessarily subjective standpoint of the thinker actively reflecting on the choices with which she is confronted. With

its rigorous adherence to the standpoint of the actively thinking subject, it places special stress on the contingency and provisionality of what that subject now believes, and, by extension, of concrete reality itself. As such the doctrine appears, to a greater extent than more recent versions of constructivism, vulnerable to the accusation that it can license *anything* that the subject wants or wills.

There is some truth to this accusation. It is certainly possible to imagine subjects with constellations of beliefs and desires that would license abhorrent actions (or actions that seem so to us). If the subject is a genuine sociopath, for example, who does not regard other people as thinking subjects equivalent to herself, she can scarcely do wrong according to her own standards; she lacks access to what we might, echoing Wilfrid Sellars and John McDowell, call the inter-subjective 'space of reasons'.<sup>[50]</sup> But such a person is unlikely to be concerned with acting morally, any more than a more conventional (non-sociopathic) person feels compelled to live according to the laws of, say, a fictional society she has conjured for her own amusement. Since the question of what morality requires does not strike her as one that she needs to answer, she has no need to know the best way to answer it. Actualism not unreasonably presupposes that its subject is not a sociopath; on the contrary, she is a social, political *and to that extent* philosophical animal.

Regarded in this way, beneath the recondite and sometimes awkward technical vocabulary in which the central tenets of actualism are expressed, their ordinariness and plausibility become clearly apparent. These tenets are the results of Gentile's painstaking attempts to reconcile what we can know with our actual experience of coming to know it.<sup>[51]</sup> His insistent claim that it is absurd to presuppose the existence of any reality that is independent of us appears at odds with the impersonal way we ordinarily think about the world, and in all likelihood it would be folly to abandon entirely the idea of a persisting empirical reality. We should not let the fact that Gentile expends so much effort in trying to sweep away transcendent 'absurdities' distract us from the fact that he also works hard to position his alternative doctrine, based on the method of

immanence, in such a way that the light of an external reality can get back in.

Actualism is of limited use to us as an exclusive, all-purpose worldview. An empirical scientist can accept what Gentile says about the necessarily subjective standpoint of our thought and experience of the world and continue to abstract from it in order to describe and explain the workings of reality. Gentile, of course, would say that the rationalized version of reality that the scientist describes is just a model, and as such an abstraction, rather than what it purports to be. But this claim does not amount to much. The scientist can justifiably shrug her shoulders in response. Gentile's claim is not *false*; it is merely trivial, relying upon an unconventional conception of what is to count as 'real' or 'unreal'. As a moral or practical doctrine, however, I believe that actualism has more to offer. It most vividly represents a variety of anti-realism that, at least at the outset, tries to make the fewest possible presuppositions beyond the fact and act of consciousness, while explaining how the subject is able to discipline her thinking according to standards that are both authorized by her and constructed in the course of self-conscious, self-critical reflection. It is a truly radical form of constructivism, and one that latter-day constructivists would do well to give close attention.

[1](#) Cardiff University, WakefieldJR@cardiff.ac.uk.

[2](#) H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 63.

[3](#) James Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism: A Study of Actual Idealist Moral Theory* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2015).

[4](#) Rik Peters 'Actes de Présence: Presence in Fascist Political Culture', *History and Theory*, 45 (1996), pp. 362–74, p. 365. Giuseppe Calandra thinks that the seeds were sown even earlier, arguing that 'L'atto del pensare' 'deepened' rather than 'expanded' the doctrine outlined in earlier essays, such as 'Le forme assolute dello spirito' (1909). Alessandro Amato notes that, despite having distinguished the concrete 'category' of thinking from the abstract 'concept' of thought before the end of the nineteenth century, Gentile was dissatisfied with his own attempts to formulate the active nature of thinking prior to 1911, when he delivered the lectures compressed and published as 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' in 1912. See G. Calandra, *Giovanni Gentile e il fascismo* (Bari, Laterza, 1987), p. 84; and A.

Amato, *L'etica oltre lo Stato: filosofia e politica in Giovanni Gentile* (Milan, Mimesis, 2011), p. 28.

[5](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 183–95, p. 183.

[6](#) 'Language is not thought's clothing,' writes Gentile; 'it is its very body.' A word is not only a sound or an arrangement of letters—it is a word only to the people who can read it, hear it and understand it. To someone who cannot read a passage of text, whether because she is illiterate or because she does not understand the language in which the words are written, the words on the page are words only abstractly; she might recognize them as signifiers for words, but they do not (yet) mean anything to her. See Giovanni Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, I, *Pedagogia generale* (Florence, Sansoni, 1959), p. 57. Cleto Carbonara has noted that actualism assumes the 'self-transparency' (*autotrasparenza*) of the act of thinking: if I know anything, I know what I think. See C. Carbonara, 'Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto nell' attualismo di Gentile', in Simonetta Betti, Franca Rovigatti and Gianni Eugenio Viola (eds.), *Enciclopedia 76–77: il pensiero di Giovanni Gentile*, vol. 1. (Florence, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1977), pp. 197–204, p. 202.

[7](#) Roger W. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile* (New York, Macmillan 1937), pp. 114–16.

[8](#) Gentile illustrates the distinction between abstract and concrete will with the example of 'the murderous will of an assassin': 'If I place myself outside the active subject, within that action I cannot help but distinguish the volition from its execution, and, having made it into two different things. I cannot help but abstract it, so that there can be ... a murderous will that does not or cannot cause an effect. The execution is a real fact in time and space. Volition is intention or forethought, [made] real in the spirit. But if instead I place myself inside the subject, the will is something quite different to simple intention. The will to murder is that unique spiritual act that is performed when the blow is struck. All this talk of premeditating, ... planning and preparing the action, if traced back to [the will], is inseparable from it. [Thus] the act of execution assumes its proper value and spiritual significance.' See Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, I, pp. 82–3.

[9](#) Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, I, p. 80. Note that Gentile includes indefinite articles alongside 'good' and 'evil' in the original Italian.

[10](#) Note that I use the female pronoun to match my convention when referring to a generic subject. Gentile tends to use the male pronoun, although the distinction is not always so obvious in Italian.

[11](#) Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, I, p. 238.

[12](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 128–9.

[13](#) 'The farmer who, having learned to read and write, sends blackmail letters', he claims, 'has been insufficiently well instructed'. Literacy is worth having only to the

extent that it is put to good use. See *Sommario di pedagogia*, I, p. 283.

[14](#) Antonio Giovanni Pesce has noted that in the *Sommario di pedagogia*, Gentile identifies ‘two distinct (or apparently distinct) ways in which we can understand the individual’: as a particular individual and a universal individual. That there are only *apparently* two such individuals should not be forgotten, however. They are both one within the act of thinking. It is this puzzling idea of the relation between *my* (particular) thinking and a world persisting independently of it which would later lead Gentile to the concept of the internal or ‘transcendental’ dialogue, in which these two elements of the individual come into play as the thinker constructs a reality that is not merely the ephemeral flickering of an individual, self-contained consciousness, but the interaction of consciousness with the world. See A.G. Pesce, *L’interiorità intersoggettiva dell’attualismo: il personalismo di Giovanni Gentile* (Rome, Aracne, 2012), pp. 155–60.

[15](#) A few examples: Maria Laura Lanzillo considers *Atto puro* ‘the truly definitive systemisation’ of actualism; Alessandro Amato calls the *Logica* Gentile’s ‘fundamental theoretical work’; Harry Redner identifies the *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* as Gentile’s ‘primary masterwork’ and *Genesi e struttura della società* his ‘secondary masterwork’, ignoring the *Logica* almost entirely; and Guido de Ruggiero admires the *Teoria generale* but considers the *Logica* to have added little beyond ‘abstruse and tiresome theology’. See M.L. Lanzillo, ‘Giovanni Gentile e il problema del “concreto” dalla *Filosofia del diritto* a *Genesi e struttura della società*’, in *Filosofia politica*, 14: 2 (2000), pp. 239–49, p. 242; A. Amato, *L’etica oltre lo Stato*, p. 46; and H. Redner, *Malign Masters: Gentile, Heidegger, Lukács, Wittgenstein. Philosophy and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (London, Macmillan, 1997), esp. pp. 25–52; G. de Ruggiero, ‘Main Currents of Contemporary Philosophy in Italy’, trans. M. Constance Allen, *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 1: 3 (1926), pp. 320–2, p. 327.

[16](#) Roger W. Holmes, ‘Gentile’s *Sistema di Logica*’, *The Philosophical Review*, 46: 4 (1937), pp. 393–401, p. 393.

[17](#) The question of whether *Teoria generale* is a greater or more ‘important’ work than the *Logica* is not one I am prepared to answer. It should be noted, though, that even in Gentile’s lifetime, the relative merits of these works, and specifically of which deserved to be considered Gentile’s ‘principal’ contribution to philosophy, were a matter of dispute among Italian scholars. See Flavio Lopez de Onate, ‘Attualismo, solipsismo, protagonismo’, *Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto*, 19 (1939), pp. 216–31, p. 216

[18](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 17–18; for the equivalent passage, see G. Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London, Macmillan, 1922), p. 14.

[19](#) This dynamic between subject and non-subject is the basis for Gentile’s idea of the ‘internal dialogue’, which is discussed in greater or lesser detail in *Diritto*, pp. 73–6; *Logica 1*, p. 97; and *Genesi e struttura della società. Saggio di filosofia*

*pratica* (Florence, Sansoni, 1975), ch. 4, pp. 33–43. It is also the main topic of my book, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*, esp. chs. 3, 6, 7 and 8. Since I discuss it at such length there, I have tried to avoid offering a crudely condensed version of the same here. For a detailed discussion of the development of the dialogical motif in Gentile's pre-Fascist philosophy, see A. Amato, *L'etica oltre lo Stato*, ch. 2, pp. 89–169, but esp. pp. 128–32.

[20](#) G. Gentile, *Sistema di logica* II, p. 96.

[21](#) Ibid.

[22](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', in *Discorsi di religione* (Florence, Sansoni, 1957), pp. 75–107, pp. 81–3; see 'The Moral Problem', §§3–4, herein.

[23](#) A similar thought has been expressed more recently in the works of Christine M. Korsgaard, who argues for a kind of Kantian constructivism. See especially her books *The Sources of Normativity*, ed. Onora O'Neill (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996); and *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

[24](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', p. 99; see 'The Moral Problem', §10.

[25](#) The conspicuously Kantian tenor of this thought is no accident. See Giovanni Gentile, 'Il problema morale', pp. 87–8; and 'The Moral Problem', §6, herein.

[26](#) Gentile explicitly distinguishes his view of the unity of spiritual value from Kant's, in which theoretical questions are separated from practical questions. See Gentile, *Diritto*, p. 64 and pp. 66–7.

[27](#) Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, p. 36; *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. Carr, p. 33; emphasis in original Italian.

[28](#) Gentile, *Genesi e struttura*, p. 44; compare Harris translation (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 109–10.

[29](#) Gentile, *Genesi e struttura*, pp. 45–8; compare Harris translation, pp. 110–13. Valmai Burwood Evans puts this well: on Gentile's account, 'to think is ... a moral responsibility. Man feels that he must or that he ought to think as he does think. Every resource of his reason must be employed in his thinking. It is a moral duty.' See Burwood Evans 'The Ethics of Giovanni Gentile', *International Journal of Ethics*, 39: 2 (1929), pp. 205–16, p. 215.

[30](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', p. 80; my emphasis. See 'The Moral Problem', §3, herein.

[31](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', p. 94; see 'The Moral Problem', §8, herein.

[32](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', p. 98; see 'The Moral Problem', §10, herein.

[33](#) Gentile explicitly confirms this. See 'Il problema morale', p. 98; see 'The Moral Problem', §10, herein.

[34](#) For the purposes of this example, I will refer to the subject facing a hypothetical decision modelled on Giovanni Gentile's actual decision as 'Giovanni'. I do so in order to distinguish this subject from the philosopher ('Gentile') whose philosophy is being applied to the example.

[35](#) The historical Gentile applied for membership of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (National Fascist Party) in May 1923, describing himself in his letter of application as 'liberal by deep and firm conviction'. The letter is reprinted in G. Calandra, *Gentile e il fascismo*, p. 8.

[36](#) These crimes are described in Giacomo Matteotti's book, *The Fascisti Exposed: A Year of Fascist Domination*, trans. E.W. Dicks (London, Howard Fertig, 1969), pp. 73–7. Matteotti cites examples of Socialists being imprisoned, deported or forced to drink castor oil as punishment for their opposition to Fascism. He also quotes a Fascist newspaper report describing militiamen forcibly entering citizens' homes 'to remind recalcitrants of their duty to vote'.

[37](#) Daniela Coli lists some of the accusations levelled at Gentile: he was, according to his critics, a 'most vulgar traitor', a 'political bandit', a 'racketeer' and a 'corruptor of the whole of Italian intellectual life.' See Coli, 'La concezione politica di Giovanni Gentile', *Logoi* (Castelvetrano, Edizioni Mazzotta, 2006), pp. 37–57, p. 37.

[38](#) G. Gentile, 'Il problema morale', pp. 90–2; see 'The Moral Problem', §7, herein.

[39](#) Consider Harry Redner's claim: 'It is not fair to say that [Gentile's] primary masterwork [*La teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*] advocated violence; it did the opposite, since it is hard to see how real action could emerge from it at all. ... Moral evil is only practical error, and "error is only error insofar as it is overcome...", hence error is only a stage on the way of progress... If error is inevitable in the course of progress, and moral evil is only practical error, then it is easy to see how a little moral evil might be justified as the necessary price for progress... [A] little violence might be just what is needed to help those who stumble on the path of progress. Thus a "filosofia del manganello" can be made to emerge as the conclusion to Idealist premises which dissolve action in thought and seemingly make it impossible.' See Redner, *Malign Masters*, p. 47.

[40](#) I have discussed the relativist implications of actualism in James Wakefield, 'Talking their Way Out of Relativism: Collingwood and Gentile on the Nature of Inquiry', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 13: 2 (2013), pp. 139–68.

[41](#) See J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*, esp. chs. 5–7.

[42](#) It should be noted in passing that this conclusion appears to be true for any constructivist doctrine that makes no concessions to realism. Of the recent Kantian constructivists, Christine M. Korsgaard has placed most emphasis on the importance of integrity in practical reason. See her *Self-Constitution*, p. 7. Another Kantian constructivist, Onora O'Neill, writes that 'the demands of practical

reasoning can be no more than a matter of *coordination* in using *available* materials. A convincing conception of practical reasoning[,] although highly abstract, still must start from the gritty realities of human life: it cannot provide reasons for anyone to adopt principles which they cannot adopt.’ See O’Neill, ‘Practical Reason: Abstraction and Construction’, in *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 38–65, p. 61; O’Neill’s italics. I must stress here that I do not think that Gentile is a Kantian constructivist, and nor do I argue so elsewhere. His constructivism resembles recent Kantian versions in several fundamental respects, but in others—chiefly the ‘thinness’ of his dynamic conception of the self—he plainly differs from them. His anti-realism exceeds anything that can be plausibly attributed to Kant himself.

[43](#) Gentile clearly recognized and even embraced this possibility. In order to ensure that the people of Italy share a single ‘consciousness’, he writes, ‘all the institutions of propaganda and education corresponding to Fascism’s political and moral ideals need to work at ensuring that the thought and will of one man, *il Duce*, becomes the thought and will of the masses. Hence the vast problem to which [the Party] devotes itself: to squeeze all the people, beginning with the little children, into the Party and the institutions it has created.’ See Gentile, ‘Origini e dottrina del fascismo’, in *Autobiografia del fascismo*, ed. Renzo de Felice (Turin, Einaudi, 2004), pp. 247–71, p. 268.

[44](#) It is worth noting in passing that what I call ‘hypocrisy’ is a close match for what Jean-Paul Sartre calls ‘bad faith’: both are characterized by indirect self-deception.

[45](#) Amato, *L’etica oltre lo Stato*, pp. 122–32

[46](#) Rik Peters similarly insists that, at least until the ‘shipwreck’ prompted by Gentile’s turn to Fascism, the actualist *norma sui* principle ‘teaches us to be tolerant and to take others’ thought seriously’. See Peters, *History as Thought and Action: the Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013), pp. 76–7.

[47](#) The idea that Gentile’s Fascist-era normative philosophy is fundamentally at odds with the tenets of actualism is argued forcefully by Gennaro Sasso in *Le due Italie di Giovanni Gentile* (Bologna, Mulino, 1998). Alessandro Amato offers a nuanced argument according to which the Fascist Gentile never directly *contradicts* his earlier work, but instead exploits certain ambiguities in it to accommodate the harsh facts of what the Fascist state did when its (nominally) totalitarian programme was in full swing.

[48](#) I use the ugly construction ‘non-moral’ to cover both *amoral* and *immoral*, which, for Gentile, amount to the same thing.

[49](#) G. Gentile, ‘Il problema morale’, p. 99; see ‘The Moral Problem’, §10, herein.

[50](#) It should be noted that neither Sellars nor McDowell stresses the intersubjective dimension of the ‘logical space of reasons’ in quite the same way that Gentile does



in my interpretation. Sellars introduced the term in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, eds. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 253–329. John McDowell takes up the phrase in *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. xiv–xvi and pp. 5–13.

[51](#) In a similar vein, Andrew Vincent remarks on the 'pared down, almost minimalist' character of actualism, especially when compared to the 'labyrinthine architecture' of other idealist systems. See his essay 'Gentile, Mind and Education', §2, herein.

# Gentile, Education and Mind

Andrew Vincent<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 105–136

**Abstract:** This essay explains and criticizes Gentile's attempts to connect his metaphysical theories with his ideas about education, and especially the relationship between education and nationalism. It begins with a critical examination of the distinguishing features of the view Gentile specifies in *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*. Vincent then considers Gentile's account of how this theory, for which mind is an act of perpetual self-creation, leads to a conception of education with an explicitly nationalist bent. His attempts to connect these are ultimately unsuccessful, argues Vincent; actual idealism does not give rise to any specific political order, and certainly not the kind of state-led nationalism that Gentile ultimately supported.

## 1. Introduction

The main focus of this essay is on the subtle interweaving between Giovanni Gentile's philosophy of mind and his philosophy of education. The essay opens with an outline of the background and certain key aspects of Gentile's philosophy of mind. The vital reference point here will be Gentile's book: *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*. This latter work is taken as a masterly account of the central arguments of actual idealism. The discussion then turns to a scrutiny of Gentile's educational philosophy and more importantly its relation to the key arguments of actual idealism. It then moves to a rapid overview of the concrete proposals for educational reforms, as well as considering very briefly their impact in Italy. Having examined the ways in which Gentile articulates philosophically his educational theory and practice, the discussion concludes with certain important

problems at the core of Gentile's arguments on actual idealism and educational theory, particularly in relation to his ideas on national pedagogy.

Before opening the main discussion, there is one initial important caveat to mention. As a comparatively recent Italian scholar noted in 1998, 'Giovanni Gentile has been a problem to Italian historiography for the last fifty years'.<sup>[2]</sup> This is, if anything, an understatement. The 'Gentile problem' is embedded in three tricky issues: first and most problematic is Gentile's incontestable quite direct participation with Italian fascism from the early 1920s till his death in 1944; second, and equally challenging, the irony of his broad cultural and, more importantly, educational impact on Italian culture—an impact which predates his fascist involvement; finally, his assassination at the hands of communist partisans in April 1944, which has generated very different cultural and political responses in Italy up until the present day. Aspects of some of these problems will appear in this essay. However, in the main body of the discussion, the issue of fascism is put to one side. This is not because I am offering any kind of apologia for Gentile, but because my discussion focuses on philosophical issues of both elucidation and critical assessment, particularly on various dimension of his philosophy of mind and education. If fascism does arise, it will do so indirectly, rather than being at the forefront of arguments.

## **2. Philosophical Context: The Ego and its Other**

Gentile's philosophy of mind is in many ways the most intuitively attractive aspect of his thought—certainly for anyone with inclinations towards some form of philosophical idealism. *Prima facie*, there is something quite pared down, almost minimalist, about 'actual idealism'. It has little or nothing of the elaborate labyrinthine architecture of many Absolute Idealist arguments. Admittedly Gentile's philosophy could look, in this context, like a form of extreme subjectivism or, more pointedly, subjective idealism. This line of thought also links closely to the most pervasive criticism of his

philosophical work, that is, as a form of extreme solipsism. There is, though, considerable opacity on this issue, which will be returned to.

However, in line with the above general interpretation, a number of scholars have also perceived definite parallels between actual idealism and the philosophies of Descartes, Berkeley, Kant, and probably most interestingly, Fichte. However, appearances can be deceptive. There are unquestionable subtle links, but they are often outweighed by differences arising from the central arguments of actual idealism. Thus, Gentile actually begins his *Theory of Mind as Pure Act* with a sympathetic critique of Berkeley. For Gentile, Berkeley was certainly entirely accurate in focusing, minimally, on the ideality of reality, consequently all notions of substantive materiality are regarded as intrinsically ludicrous.<sup>[3]</sup> A problem though for Berkeley was the implications of subjective perception. How could each subject perceive a singular or shared notion of the real. In trying to provide a unity for such finite subjects, Berkeley (for Gentile) distinguishes thought and *what actually thinks the world*; what actually thinks the world, for Berkeley, turns out to be an *absolute eternal thinking*, that is, God. As Gentile remarks, each 'human thought is only a ray of the divine thought'.<sup>[4]</sup> Gentile regards this as a flawed argument. The reason for this judgement will be outlined in a moment, although as Holmes remarks, one might still be tempted to describe Gentile's actual idealism as Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, but without any theological trappings.<sup>[5]</sup>

Kant also plays a pivotal role in Gentile's thought. Indeed, some interpreters have seen Gentile as a neo-Kantian constructivist from beginning to end.<sup>[6]</sup> Harris, for example, suggests that Kantianism rather than Hegelianism might be said to be the 'moving spirit' of Gentile's thought.<sup>[7]</sup> There is definitely something in this judgement. However a great deal depends on how exactly one reads the type, shape and extent of constructivism present in thinkers such as Kant and indeed Hegel, Gentile and Croce.<sup>[8]</sup> Gentile indubitably saw Kant as the real initiator of a movement leading to actual idealism. With Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* there was a definite aim to confine philosophy within actual experience (as Gentile saw it). For Gentile the linking together of sense and understanding within intuitions was

an enormous philosophical advance. Yet, in his view, Kant still remained hampered by a dogmatic inheritance, remaining captive to the idea that such intuitions were the result of an unknown noumenon—a concept which Gentile remarks ‘has no ground, once we have mastered the concept of thinking as transcendental thinking’.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus Kant’s intuitions arose from *outside* the mind and self (that is a Cartesian *res extensa* in a new intuitive shape). Intuitions *affect us*. They are mediated to the self. Intuitions do require concepts, but they are of necessity independent of the concepts. Intuitions thus arise from a given objective realm. Gentile finds this Kantian argument wrong-headed and he makes, unexpectedly, a parallel criticism of Hegel. The defect of Hegel’s system is ‘precisely that it makes whatever presupposes the “I” precede it.’ Gentile adds that even without this defect, Hegel’s system is, like Kant’s, ‘unfaithful to the method of immanence which belongs to absolute idealism, and turns again to the old notions of reality in itself which is not the thought by which it is revealed to us’.

<sup>[10]</sup>

The arguments which come closest to Gentile’s position are those of J.G. Fichte’s *Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*. On a number of levels he was, as Holmes notes, Fichte’s ‘spiritual brother’, although Harris is far less sure on this point.<sup>[11]</sup> Gentile although never expanding upon it, does note in passing some parallels between his own work and Fichte’s.<sup>[12]</sup> Their shared interest in a strong political philosophy of the state, a robust sense of nationalism, their intense focus on education and its possibilities, their parallel criticism of Kant’s noumenon, and finally the crucial role the self-aware ego or ‘I’ performs in both philosophies are evident. Thus the starting point of Fichte’s thought is the immediate intuited awareness of the ‘I’. From this ‘I’ or ego he derives the ‘not-I or ‘non-ego’. He then shows how this idea of the division (between I and not-I) is itself necessary for thinking to proceed and rise above ostensible contradiction. Thus, the process of initial identity, the posited difference and finally the resolved grounding, forms the central dialectic in Fichte’s account of knowledge.

Basically, whenever thought processes are threatened by the Kantian antinomies, Fichte shows how the ego rises above all such apparent contradictions. In effect, like Gentile, his whole *Wissenschaftslehre* project was a detailed exorcism of the Kantian noumenon—the other of the ego. For Fichte nothing in the world was incapable of being explained. The self-aware ego could now reclaim the seemingly alien external world as its own self-positing other. Philosophy's task was to account for the relation and struggle between the ego and the world. This method was taken up later by Hegel in a different format, although Hegel had his own deeply critical views of Fichte's 'I'. However, as a baseline way of proceeding, Fichte's dialectic method was also recognisable in Schopenhauer's and later Nietzsche's prioritizing of original self-awareness and willing, will being an exercise of power, that is bringing all sense of externality under the process of the ego thinking, willing and conceptualizing. Without pushing too far, this Fichtean thematic is also in part recognisable in Feuerbach's account of theology as disguised anthropology and even Marx's theory of reification. In this context the link between Gentile's actual Idealism and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* project are symptomatic of a much broader, if diverse, philosophical movement. However, it is still worth noting that the central thematic of Gentile's actual idealism does stalwartly reassert itself against Fichte. The central dialectic of Fichte's argument, whereby the ego posits the non-ego, does make the ego look like a definite abstract substance, something that ontologically precedes the process of positing or thinking. The ego thus subsists as an abstract idea independent of the momentary acts of thinking. For Gentile this would be the basic flaw in the Fichtean argument—as will become clear.

### **3. Gentile, Experience and the *Pensiero Pensante***

The core element of Gentile's Actual Idealism is experience.<sup>[13]</sup> Experience is understood in a particular manner, that is, as the ground of thinking. The thinking is related directly to 'mind', which is regarded as *atto puro*; that is, mind as its own act. All roads

converge here for Gentile; nothing is real save moment by moment absolute self-creation. This, for Gentile, completes the journey of Idealism, showing us the defects of Berkeley, Kant, Fichte and Hegel—particularly their defective accounts of the ‘other’ of the ego. Gentile referred to this basic principle as *pensiero pensante*. It is here that the object is resolved completely with the subject.<sup>[14]</sup> Nothing has value unless it is resolved within the immediate act of thinking. As Gentile put it: ‘To detach then the facts of the mind from the real life of the mind is to miss their true inward nature by looking at them as they are when realized’.<sup>[15]</sup> Something can therefore be known ‘only in so far as its objectivity is resolved in the real activity of the subject who knows it’.<sup>[16]</sup> In this sense there is nothing truly ‘outside’ us—although outside and inside is virtually a redundant distinction for Gentile. Every act of knowing, speaking or thinking about something *apparently* external to us becomes us in the very act of thought. Strictly speaking an outside can exist, but only insofar as we think it. Through the activity of thinking and knowing we overcome every form of otherness—even the ego as a substance (contra Fichte).

Yet for Gentile, we do unquestionably retain a strong sense of an *other*; however, this should always be seen as a mere ‘stage of our mind through which we pass in obedience to our immanent nature, but we must pass through without stopping’.<sup>[17]</sup> He does though acknowledge that we often get overly absorbed with this other, consequently in certain contexts we definitely think there is something which *must* exist outside of thinking. It is the frame of mind present in all forms of positivism, realism and materialism. It also keeps reappearing surreptitiously in philosophies such as Cartesianism, Kantianism and Hegelianism. For Gentile, in this frame of mind, when thinking of external objects, ‘we are not yet truly in their presence as spiritual existence’.<sup>[18]</sup>

Gentile makes an important distinction, at this point, between what he calls the empirical ego and the transcendental Ego. The empirical ego is regarded as material. For Gentile it finds itself in opposition to all other material things and indeed to other empirical egos. This is in contradistinction to the transcendental Ego in which, as he puts it,

the 'whole objectivity of spiritual beings is resolved... a subject with no otherness opposed to it'.<sup>[19]</sup> There is a clear conceptual parallel here between Gentile's distinction within the ego and his distinctions within both logic and thought. On an empirical reading 'thought' can therefore be seen to be *about* an apparent external object or a structured process of logical thought (thought considered, that is, as a *mental object*). Thus in the empirical ego any external array of objects or indeed abstracted logical thoughts would all be underpinned by the rationale of what Gentile called *pensiero pensato*. On the other hand, the *pensiero pensante* employs a noetic concrete sense of logic which is engaged with the actual activity of thinking, that is, reality producing itself. The concrete Ego would be transcendental in character. This latter sense of the ego is regarded as a pure constructive activity and the source of our criterion of truth.<sup>[20]</sup>

History is also given some substantial space by Gentile in various writings, something one would have expected from a colleague of Croce.<sup>[21]</sup> Like Croce, Gentile saw Vico as a key influence on this issue. History, in brief, comes under the same basic logical pattern (outlined above); it can be regarded abstractly or concretely. For Gentile, history becomes effectual 'by mentally reconstructing its reality, [so] there remains nothing outside it, no reality independent of history by which we can possibly test our reconstruction'.<sup>[22]</sup> Thus, as he argues, 'Strictly, history is not the antecedent of the historians' activity; it is his activity'.<sup>[23]</sup> Consequently 'Whoever does not feel this identity of self with history, whoever does not feel that history is prolonged and concentrated in his consciousness, has not history confronting him, but only brute nature, matter deaf to the questionings of mind'.<sup>[24]</sup> The latter would be an abstracted empirical history. There are consequently two senses of history, which correspond to the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical ego, and the two senses of logic and thought (mentioned above). Gentile sees these as 'history as mere multiplication of empirical facts', which Gentile designates as degrading reality, and 'history as the dialectic of actual mind'. In the latter historical facts become acts.<sup>[25]</sup>



Thinking, in all these various activities, is therefore considered as an act or a doing, or for Gentile, '*verum et fieri convertuntur*' (the truth and the act are interchangeable). The central point of Gentile's idealism is present here and it is often difficult to precisely formulate it, since by definition it must remain continuously in actual movement. Reality is not *what* is thought, but rather it is *the pure act of thinking itself*. This is the key difference from Fichte's ego dialectic. Gentile's is immanentist because there is no reality which transcends or stands outside the immanent activity of thinking. There is therefore a kind of permanent presentism in Gentile's Idealism. Idealism is 'the negation of any reality which can be opposed to thought as independent of it and as the presupposition of it'. It is worth underlining this latter—in some ways quite extraordinary—claim, namely that actual idealism for Gentile is presuppositionless. Mind is viewed as nothing but act, that is, present thinking. This process is 'constructive of the object just to the extent that it is constructive of the subject itself... In so far as the subject is constituted a subject by its own act it constitutes the object'.<sup>[26]</sup> As such, Gentile views the concept of mind as inexhaustible and distinct from every pre-established law, it is always its own work. In this sense the notion of experience takes on a peculiarly heavy burden. Mind simply is pure experience and nothing else, experience is not referring to any specific content, it is rather pure activity.

#### **4. Discovering Mind and its Ostensible Other**

Mind, it follows from the preceding argument, cannot be an object for empirical psychology, neurology, or indeed any other empirical discipline, because there is no pre-existent reality. For Gentile, one of the key difficulties of dealing with this argument is that language itself is full of metaphysical pitfalls concerning both the subject and object. This Gentilean argument is oddly reminiscent of Heidegger's critical discussion of the history of metaphysics and its misleading representations of being.<sup>[27]</sup> The way we ordinarily use language will frequently give the impression that objects can exist outside of acts of mind. In fact, as Gentile notes, language itself can become an

empirical object in disciplines such as linguistics, philology or etymology. For Gentile, however, 'Whatever language is then, we know it, not in its definite being (which it never has), but step by step in its concrete development'.<sup>[28]</sup> We have to grasp in all such disciplines, including the study of language, the point that we are never passive spectators. In thinking about mind

we shall never have found it and we shall always have found it. If we know what we are, we must think and reflect on what we are; finding lasts just as long as the construction of the object which is found lasts. So long as it is sought it is found.  
<sup>[29]</sup>

One can sense here the immensely slippery quality of Gentile's central arguments.

The sense of reality as 'other' (which Gentile variously equates with realism, positivism or naturalism) is in permanent conflict with the actualist conception of mind. There is even a sense in which any attempt to fix an objective understanding of actual idealism on the same abstract grounds, or to try to categorize actual idealism as an 'object of thought', involves an insoluble paradox. Mind, for Gentile, is not decomposable into parts; it is, as Gentile puts it, 'unmultipliable'. Any sense of the multipliable is linked directly to the abstractions of the empirical ego. The reality of mind (as transcendental Ego) 'cannot be limited by other realities and still keep its own reality'. Gentile thus describes consciousness as 'a sphere whose radius is infinite'.<sup>[30]</sup>

The pervasive realist momentum towards the empirical ego and the more severe rendition of the subject/object distinction also affects the manner in which Gentile thinks of both self-realization and self-consciousness. When we speak of self-consciousness there can be a peculiar logic at work. As Gentile comments: 'Even in self-consciousness the subject opposed itself as object to itself as subject'.<sup>[31]</sup> He continues, 'If the activity of consciousness is in the subject, then when in self-consciousness that same subject is the object, as object it is opposes to itself as the negation of consciousness. 'Consequently, he argues that we have to be

continuously aware that our whole experience ‘moves between the unity of its centre, which is mind, and the infinite multiplicity of the points constituting the sphere of its objects’.<sup>[32]</sup> The self-conscious subject—that is actual mind—cannot though be an object of experience, even though there is a peculiar sense, in self-consciousness, that the self can seemingly become an object for itself. All objects of experience are, in essence, refinable into the subject. When we think of multiple objects (even the self or thought as objects in self-consciousness), this is always a characteristic mode of expression of our *empirical ego*.

The above is clearly not an argument *against* the empirical multiplicity of objects. Mind is rather development, action and movement. All such development involves a burgeoning of empirical diversity. However, this diversity is, at the same time, a unification, insofar as it is an act (of thought). Thus the same logic of presentism functions here: as Gentile puts it, in a slightly convoluted manner, ‘*thought thought* supposes *thought thinking*’.<sup>[33]</sup> The act of thought is acting, becoming and development, which, figuratively speaking, moves outward and realizes itself in the multiplicity of objects. This sounds, in point, rather like the Hegelian notion of diremption, although there is no *Geist* or Absolute preceding or working through it.<sup>[34]</sup> It follows that nature only exists insofar as it is a term of the thought which presupposes it. As a pure empirical multiplicity it would be completely unknowable.<sup>[35]</sup>

The same basic logic of argument (outlined above) holds for concepts such as *space* and *time*. They do not exist apart from mind—a point that he thinks is, in part, anticipated in Kant. Space and time are part of a sense of empirical multiplicity, yet such a multiplicity again presupposes a unity in the act of mind. There is no pure time or pure space external to the act of thought.<sup>[36]</sup>

Interestingly, Gentile links his actualism to an account of human freedom. The argument, once again, is premised on the concrete logic. There is nothing before or after the act. Therefore it follows that *being* coincides with the *act*, the act is unconditioned, and therefore it is absolutely free. As Gentile comments ‘being, in the act of thinking, is the act itself. The act is the positing (and thereby is

free), presupposing nothing (and thereby it is truly unconditioned).’ Consequently, Gentile concludes ‘Freedom is *absoluteness* (infinity of the unconditioned), but in so far as the absolute is *causa sui*’.<sup>[37]</sup>

## 5. Brief Overview of the Argument to Date

The basic point of actualism is thus to indicate that all there is, is experience, and experience is the activity of mind as presently thinking. The task here of the thinker is to make conscious experience as clear and coherent as possible. Thinking is pure—as absolutely self-creative. Its existence is its essence. Thinking is its own foundation. This sense of being rooted in experience invokes both freedom as well as an account of morality. We are morally responsible for what we believe. This pure act, for Gentile, rescues freedom and morality from both realism and naturalism and restores a strong sense of agency. This is because thought always posits its own limits. As such I do not create an external world, by definition it *is posited* as external. Thus, if we see a limit to thought, we ‘think’ that limit. If we want to supersede this limit or change the boundary, then we also ‘think’ it and dedicate ourselves to a pattern or structure of thought which enables us to supersede that limit. Consequently, if we do see objective limits to thought, we posit them. If my body dies, it is thought positing, say, nature or disease as a mortal limit; that is, if cancer, severe stroke or old age kills me, then (insofar as *medical thought posits it*), I have thoughtfully posited a limit which kills me.<sup>[38]</sup> The actual problem of dying, or having a disease, is the same as the method (or not) for its possible resolution. Thus, blood poisoning or tuberculosis, in say 1900, was thoughtfully posited as a virtual death sentence; whereas the medical thought posited from the 1940s, concerning penicillin and antibiotics, entails at most physical discomfort, and a strong chance of complete recovery.

## 6. The Education of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Education

I turn now from Gentile's philosophy of mind to his educational thought. What is of interest here is the fact, as is well known, that Gentile was Minister of Public Instruction in Mussolini's first government between 1922 and 1924. In this position he instituted a broad-ranging reform of the Italian school system, which, in the words of one 1990s commentator, was 'a reform that long remained, and in part still is, the foundation of the Italian school system'.<sup>[39]</sup> Even Croce remarked, in 1923, at a time that he was already seriously opposed to Gentile's fascist leanings: 'we owe it to Gentile that Italian pedagogy has attained in the present day a simplicity and a depth of concepts unknown elsewhere. ... And this ... is due pre-eminently to the work of Gentile. His authority therefore is powerfully felt in schools of all grades'.<sup>[40]</sup> Gentile's reputation, although profoundly blighted by the war years, seems, in Italy at least, to have, in small part, made some minor recovery. The project to publish his *Opere complete*, which came to a stop in 1980, and was then rejuvenated with 15 volumes between 1988 and 1996, has signalled a renewed interest. From the 1990s there was also an *Istituto di Studi Gentiliani* (Institute of Gentilean Studies) set up to encourage Gentile studies, as well as a journal *Umanesimo del lavoro* (Humanism of Labour) dedicated to his corporative theories. In addition there was a noteworthy 1994 conference on Gentile in Rome, and, unexpectedly, an Italian postage stamp was issued in Gentile's honour, backed by a Presidential Decree under the then Berlusconi government and with the sponsorship of Pino Tatarella (the then Minister of Postal Services). The stamp bears the date 28 October 1994, which was, ironically (but maybe not), the anniversary of the fascist March on Rome.

Gentile's interest in education was by no means a flash in the pan. As Croce comments,

As far back as 1900 he [Gentile] published a monograph..., in which he showed that pedagogy in so far as it is philosophical resolves itself without residuum into the philosophy of spirit; for the science of the spirit's education cannot but be the

science of the spirit's development,—of its dialectics, of its necessity.<sup>[41]</sup>

In fact, Gentile wrote a number of works on education, for example, his *Sommario di Pegagogia* and *The Reform of Education*, amongst others. If one looks closely at his work, as Croce noted, it is clear that Gentile saw a very intimate connection between his philosophical writings, such as *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, and his understanding of education. In effect, put at its simplest, education was viewed as the process of self-creative mind itself, which (as indicated) is the core of reality.<sup>[42]</sup> This is a view he shared with Hegel and many other Idealists.<sup>[43]</sup>

There are two initial senses here of education. If education is regarded as simply a collection of a body of sciences or disciplines which require communication and instruction, then this is equivalent, in one sense, to the abstract empirical multiplication of objects discussed earlier (as a manifestation of the empirical ego). However, Gentile also believed that the process of education is intrinsically philosophic, in so far as it is concerned with the act of thinking itself and thus the life of mind (as corresponding with the transcendental Ego).<sup>[44]</sup> As Gentile comments 'Only philosophy can... give man the sense of the reality of the world system and of his own reality within this system, in such a way making not only life—that small part of life which is called the literary, scientific, and intellectual life of man—a moral thing, but moralizing the whole of his life; showing him in all its limitless vast extent the spiritual kinship of his being, in every moment of its process'.<sup>[45]</sup>

His book *Reform of Education* basically focuses on teachers (in fact it was delivered as a series of lectures to trainee teachers in Trieste).<sup>[46]</sup> Gentile casts the whole debate about education quite directly into his philosophic concerns.<sup>[47]</sup>

This has no direct bearing though upon formal training in philosophy; yet, at the same time, it is tied intimately to philosophical issues. It is in this context that Gentile indicated that every human being is at root a philosopher.<sup>[48]</sup> As he comments, 'special philosophical training can be effectual only if all education, from its

very beginning, wherever that may be, has been philosophic'.<sup>[49]</sup> In essence, he argues that the great philosophical disputes do underpin all pedagogic concerns, consequently all teachers should minimally be aware of, for example, the philosophical implications of naturalism, positivism and realism, over and against idealism. Realism is that doctrine which makes 'all reality consist of an external existence'. Naturalism asserts, variously, that 'nature alone exists'. Idealism asserts, on the contrary, that 'we discover the impossibility of conceiving a reality which is not the reality of thought itself'. Gentile stresses that all teachers should be aware that reality is 'this very thought itself by which we think all things'.<sup>[50]</sup>

Education can thus be conceived realistically or idealistically. Gentile insistently worries that the curriculum of Italian education is dominated by realism and positivism. On the contrary, the idealist-inspired teacher sees the curriculum as 'an immanent product of this very life, and separable from it only by abstraction'.<sup>[51]</sup> The realist teacher, on the contrary, views knowledge and schools as depositories of abstracted externalized knowledge. In this scenario all the sciences exist prior to school education. A realist teacher (at any stage of education) ministers to and instructs the ignorant in this externalized abstract knowledge. The realist vision of the school is consequently rooted, he suggests, in the library; ample quantities of books mean ample quantities of knowledge. This is because, for the realist, knowledge and education always reside *externally* or *abstractly* in books, that is, in something external to actual thought. The school or college is then perceived as a virtual temple to abstract knowledge and externalized thought, with the teacher acting as the official gate keeper.

Thus, contrary to appearance, the realist school curriculum is actually constructed on the basis of a philosophical argument. As Gentile comments, 'Methods, programmes, and manuals most conspicuously reveal the realistic prejudices of school technique'.<sup>[52]</sup> This fixed inertial sense of abstract knowledge tends, in reality, to exterminate thought. Books can torture as well as enlighten. Gentile thus considers textbooks, dictionaries of ideas, handbooks, companions, readers, and the like, as wholly redolent of the abstract

mind of the realist. Such texts strangle independent thought at birth. Gentile comments 'dictionaries and grammars go side by side with handbooks,—instruments of culture that are only too often converted into engines of torture. The abuse of these books, especially noticeable in the secondary schools, is not limited to them, but is infecting primary instruction'. Such books are the 'cemetery of speech'; in such texts 'words are sundered from the minds, detached from the context, soulless and dead'.<sup>[53]</sup>

Whereas the realist curriculum squats abstractly in the library, the actual idealist curriculum is attached to concrete thought; it grasps 'its existence entirely in the soul of the learner'.<sup>[54]</sup> This is clearly Gentile's logic of *presentism*. The curriculum needs to be renewed within this concrete mentality.<sup>[55]</sup> Knowledge, in this reading, is not found outside of actual thought. A book in any discipline, for example, only embodies what we think is there, or what we are capable of thinking there. If we consider that there has been a great tradition of literature, science and philosophy in the past, in fact we learn from this past *only* in so far as we think it.<sup>[56]</sup> Thus history 'is never compressed within the past... it exists in a past which is in the present'.<sup>[57]</sup> In essence, we construct history, it is a projection of our actual consciousness; it is we who 'awaken the past from its slumber and breathe into it the life of the spiritual interest'. Great cultural events, great literature or poetry are not things which exist as empirical objects external to us, conversely they are 'what we ourselves are making'.<sup>[58]</sup> The same point holds for all the natural sciences which constitute the established school curriculum. No science can exist outside of mind; as Gentile comments 'a science, which is supposed to exist before the spirit, becomes a thing, and will never be able to trace its way back to the spirit'.<sup>[59]</sup>

Gentile is not denying here that a curriculum embodies an empirical multiplicity of sciences. Even within any one science, an apparently singular entity such as a poem, mechanism or organic plant, can be endlessly subdivided, but in the end all such multiplicity presupposes one thing—thought. To think is to unify in the midst of manifold multiplicity. Gentile thus comments, 'Thought... establishes relationships among the units of the multiple, and thus constitutes



them as the units of the manifold, and as forming multiplicity. It adds and divides, composes and decomposes, and variously distributes, materializing and dematerializing... the reality which it thinks'. Empirical matter always implies infinite multiplicity. Such a multiplicity of things are, though, 'what we in our own thought counterpose to ourselves who think them', yet 'outside our thought they are absolutely nothing'.<sup>[60]</sup>

The most complete grasp of education lies therefore in philosophy itself, particularly Idealist philosophy. In this sense mind is a process of continuous becoming. It has no essence or kernel other than becoming. A curriculum, from this standpoint, is not embodied in libraries, lectures, academic authorities or textbooks, it is rather an endless active process of thinking and rethinking. When the curriculum embodies a rich culture, it is not because such a culture actually exists as an external abstract thing. If it existed, in this latter realist sense, 'it would have to be some "thing", whereas by definition it is the negation of that which is capable of being anything whatever. It is culture in so far as it *becomes*. Culture exists as it develops... It is always in the course of being formed, it *lives*'. It lives in the immediacy of acting, that is in thinking. In this context Gentile sees no essential distinction between will and thought.<sup>[61]</sup>

The stringent demand this educational vision makes on the teacher in the classroom is obvious. As Gentile comments, 'The antithesis between instruction and education is the antithesis between realistic and idealistic culture, or again that existing between a material and a spiritual conception of life'. The real teacher 'never bothers about... puzzling questions of pedagogical discipline'.<sup>[62]</sup> His task is to 'represent the Universal to his pupils'; thus 'scientific thought, customs, laws...are brought before the pupil's mind'. This does not mean that there is no role in education for something equivalent to textbooks and the like. However a text needs to be infused regularly with actual living thought. The educator must therefore 'transfuse into the pupil something of himself, and out of his own spiritual substance'.<sup>[63]</sup> In so far as the teacher is performing this active thinking role and inviting every moment the student to think with her, she is affirming for Gentile a deep faith in human freedom. To think,

in fact, is freedom. This is the power to self-mould and self-create. As Gentile puts it, 'Man, in so far as he thinks, affirms his faith in freedom'.<sup>[64]</sup> To enlarge thought is to expand reflection and control over ideas, consciousness and character. In essence, for Gentile, 'education is the formation of man'.<sup>[65]</sup>

## 7. Educational Proposals

Before discussing Gentile's proposals, it is important to note one frequently overlooked element in the relation between education and Idealism, which is as characteristic of Gentile as of Hegel, Fichte or T.H. Green on education. Education, in its broadest sense, refers not just to the institutional settings of schools or universities, but rather to the concrete development of the human being. Education, in this capacious sense, has no beginning or end, it is rather the life-long humanistic vocation of every human being. Thus, as can be seen clearly in Hegel, education begins in the family, moves to the school and university, progresses in civil society and the necessities of work, carries through in marriage and then citizenship within the life of the state. Hegel thinks of this in terms of an educational dialectic of universality, particularity and individuality.<sup>[66]</sup> Education, as such, is about active cultured thinking. Actual idealism and education (at the broadest level) are thus virtually indistinguishable. It is in this sense that Gentile argued that any basic curriculum had to be determined 'in accordance with the a priori logic of human nature'.<sup>[67]</sup>

However the focus in this present paper is on the formal education received in schools, universities, technical institutions and so forth. At first sight some of Gentile's proposals could appear slightly odd. As Minister of Public Instruction in 1923 he introduced, for example, religious education as compulsory into primary schools, although it was to be officially abandoned in all secondary schools, that is, as the mind of the student developed. The secular school would (at upper levels) be guided by philosophy and rational thought. Gentile described this primary school reform as 'the principal foundation of the public education system and the entire moral regeneration of the Italian spirit'.<sup>[68]</sup> The Catholic lobby did not like the policy because it

was limited to primary schools, secularists and liberals did not like it because it invited the church into primary education. Gentile's argument was, though, quite distinctively Hegelian here (in one sense). The nub was that religion invoked a certain aspect of the mind's development which was, in the longer term, a necessary step towards genuine philosophical truth at higher levels of education. Unlike Hegel though, for Gentile Catholicism was most adept at this early role and further it was most akin to what he thought of as the Italian *national spirit*.<sup>[69]</sup> Protestantism, for Gentile (and thus totally unlike German and British Idealists), 'offers much less power for fusion, for reducing the thinking mind to unity'.<sup>[70]</sup> This is another dimension of Gentile's thinking, which I will return to, that is, education being linked to the practices of the Italian nation.

Gentile's reforms encompassed many dimensions of formal education. Primary and secondary schools were comprehensively restructured, with a strict new unitary curriculum, although teachers were encouraged to explore and think critically within the given structure. He instituted detailed plans for the development of technical institutions, teaching subjects such as accountancy, agriculture and the fine arts, as well as a national structure of evening classes for manual workers.<sup>[71]</sup> Contrary to some critics, Gentile was keen to develop practical and technically based education for a significant group. The only proviso was that such technical education should still not be primarily about factual instruction, but rather about making students curious and thoughtful. Systematically considered, formal education could be seen as a dialectical process, beginning in the youngest children with an artistic play phase, moving through religion in the primary school. Religion was then dispensed with and natural science and finally a philosophic wisdom were revealed at the secondary and university levels.<sup>[72]</sup>

All students, though, no matter what the subject, had to be made fully aware of themselves as creators and not receivers. The ambiguity here was the role of the teacher. Teachers appear analogous to the core role of the state, that is, as the embodiment of force, authority and a higher sense of conscience and will. In this

sense the teacher embodies the universal and the student the particular.<sup>[73]</sup> Furthermore, Gentile saw subjects such as history and geography (particular knowledge) as essential together with mathematics and the natural sciences (universal knowledge) in curricula. The classical languages of Greece and Rome did, however, form a very central role in the curriculum, usually together with great poetry and literature; Harris indeed suggests that Gentile was 'unduly dogmatic' on this classics issue.<sup>[74]</sup> On a more basic mundane level—although deeply important to the educational profession—Gentile as minister consistently advocated better pay, training and working conditions for the teaching profession, more state investment in school buildings, reduced school and class sizes, to ensure more effective actual contact between teachers and students, and significantly (in terms of his fascist beliefs) no political criteria in the choice of teachers. Oddly many elements of this reformed structure of education remained until the late twentieth century.

## **8. Critical Conclusion: A National Pedagogy?**

For Gentile, education should have a distinctively national character. Indeed, he was fairly obsessive about the idea of 'national pedagogy', commenting that 'our educational reforms which are inspired by the teachings of modern idealistic philosophy demand that the school be animated and vivified by the spiritual breath of the fatherland'.<sup>[75]</sup> While Gentile admits that there are difficulties in defining the idea of a nation, he is also quite explicit in rejecting any biological, naturalistic or racial criteria, for obvious philosophical reasons bound up with his rejections of both realism and naturalism.<sup>[76]</sup> He further admits that nationalism is always 'protean', thus 'visible to the immediate intuition of every national consciousness, but it slips from thought as we strive to fix its essence'.<sup>[77]</sup> He does though come round to a definition which speaks of the nation as a 'spiritual energy whereby we cling to a certain element or elements in the consciousness of that collective personality to which we feel we

belong'.<sup>[78]</sup> He derives this idea (he indicates) from Giuseppe Mazzini.<sup>[79]</sup>

A nation is thus a mind-implicated thing, an 'energetic volition which creates, in the freed political power, the reality of its own moral personality and of its collective consciousness'.<sup>[80]</sup> It exists when it is willed and then thinks itself as a unity. It requires a state to realize the nation, though. Gentile also stresses here that education has crucial links with nationalism, as he states, 'The modern teacher knows of no science which is not an act of a personality... Concrete personality... is nationality, and therefore neither the school nor science possesses a learning which is not national'.<sup>[81]</sup> Gentile thus suggests that the human mind requires nationality to achieve concreteness and true personality and that education enables the individual to realize this; as he argues, we realize Italy 'in every instant of our lives, by our feelings, and by our thoughts, by our speech... indeed, by our whole life which concretely flows into that Will which is the State... and this Will, this State is Italy'.<sup>[82]</sup>

The argument seems to be that although the pure act of mind is pivotal, nonetheless we are not solipsistic agents. One major critical problem for Gentile, which begins with Croce's dismissal of actual idealism as a 'subjective mysticism', is the potential for extreme solipsism in actual idealism. This worry underpins, I would suggest, his ostentatious focus on nationalism in education. The solipsist criticism, to a degree, also haunts the philosophies of Berkeley and Fichte. It is worth reminding ourselves that they have their own resolutions, which, as we have also noted, Gentile rigorously criticized. Nationalism does provide an answer of sorts to critics of solipsism, that is, we are concretely creatures of a common nation. In abstraction, as empirical ego, I am one of many separate egos, however in concrete personality I am one of a national personality—that is, part of a collective. As Gentile notes, 'The nation therefore is as intimately pertinent and native to our own being as the State, considered as Universal Will, is one with our concrete and actual ethical personality'.<sup>[83]</sup> This claim then leads Gentile to the extravagance of saying that this concrete national will needs to be able to sacrifice itself to the whole, that is, 'welcoming martyrdom,

which in every case is but the sacrifice of the individual to the universal, the lavishing of our self to the ideal for which we toil'.<sup>[84]</sup> Apparently, for Gentile, this sense of being a national personality 'is of fundamental importance for those of us who live in the class-room and have made of teaching our life's occupation, our ultimate end', although it is not at all clear why this is the case.<sup>[85]</sup>

There is something distinctly anomalous in this whole Gentilean argument on nationalism and education. First, a mundane point: one could engage seriously with all the main arguments of *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, and even the *Pedagogia* and *Reform of Education*, without even a passing thought for nationalism, except of course, that these latter works explicitly raise the issue. That is to say, there seems to be no logical or philosophically obvious link between the core arguments of *atto puro* and nationalism, other than it might alleviate the philosophical problem of the solipsist charge. It is of course possible to argue, straightforwardly, that empirically education in any linguistic culture will predominantly utilize, initially, the language and educational institutions of that culture. This is a deadening truism. However, given Gentile's vibrant assertion of the need for the classics and classical languages at the core of the curriculum, this would hardly be an advert for even Italian, rather, if anything, European culture and languages. But, in general, none of this Gentilean nationalist rhetoric constitutes an *argument*, more a series of patriotic hurrahs.

Secondly, and much more seriously, the *atto puro* argument, outlined earlier, surely makes nationalism or statism as much subject to the potential radical flux of actual mind as anything else. Nationalism, and indeed the state, exist *only* in so far as they are immediately thought or willed. There are real risks here for Gentile's nationalist argument, particularly his reliance upon a strong sense of the nation. Primarily, there is no objective substance (by definition) to the nation—as Gentile admits. It only subsists in momentary thought. Even if nationalism was incorporated wholesale into an educational curriculum, both students and teachers, as 'creators' not 'passive receivers', would have to critically appraise and 'think' the nation, particularly in secondary school and university. This is *de rigueur* for

Gentilean education and forms the crucial difference between concrete education, as against abstracted empirical instruction. Further, the autonomy of agents is absolute, undetermined and unconditioned. It is clear then that, unless something is forced upon individuals—which is logically contradictory with the underlying thematics of actual idealism—then agents could potentially *think* nationalism is febrile, demeaning and just plain ridiculous. Cosmopolitanism (legal or moral), universal critical reason, social liberalism, constitutional proceduralist democracy, or strong pluralism, were *all* possible stances open to those in education in the 1920s and 1930s—even if they were unpopular at that moment with fascists and nationalists. It would though be perfectly logically consistent with actual idealism for the individual, for example, to learn Esperanto and ‘will’ normative cosmopolitanism. Despite Gentile’s tortuously florid blustering around nationalism, actualism is a profoundly wobbly base for nationalism and even more so for martyrdom.

Thirdly, what the central metaphysical arguments of actual idealism imply is that it is the individual transcendental Ego thinking, taking moment by moment moral responsibility for her actions and realizing concrete freedom in the act of thinking and self-creating that makes the world intelligible to us. There is *no* inkling here that the transcendental Ego is a constrained national ego. In fact, such an idea seems hard to locate with the logic of the transcendental Ego. If anything—vis-à-vis the solipsist critique—Gentile’s argument looks *prima facie* much more like a metaphysical libertarianism or philosophical anarchism (embedded radically in education), and comparable, if anything, to that of Max Stirner’s (Hegelian-inspired) *The Ego and its Own*. The damaging idea here, for Gentile, is that if one reruns his critique of earlier philosophers, then Kant’s noumenon, Berkeley’s God, Fichte’s substantive ego, or Hegel’s Absolute whole (prior to individual thinking), all fail *because* they become the ‘other’ which is (as it were) not thought, and therefore metaphysically defective. These arguments find their resolution, for Gentile, in the logic of *atto puro*. It seems reasonable then to ask Gentile whether his idea of nationalism is his very own personal

noumenon or God substitute—an ‘other’ which is not thought? Gentile would immediately reply, quite obviously, ‘no’; he would assert that nationalism only exists in the moment of thought, but then, I would contend, he opens up to the disabling critique developed (above) in point two, namely, that the pure act does not necessarily uphold nationalism.<sup>[86]</sup>

Serious Gentile scholars have consistently noted, from the beginning of Gentile studies, this solipsistic vein in Gentile’s actual idealism. Harris and Holmes, for example, both remark upon it. For some, such as Harris, the final Gentile work—*Genesis and Structure of Society*—does provide a fuller answer to this dilemma. It is here that we find Gentile making a solid attempt to make the philosophical link between the act of thinking, moral freedom and the social dimension, although why the social should be linked immediately to the national is not at all clear? The ‘social’ cannot be rooted (without further intricate elaboration) straight into nationalism, this would be scholarly absurdity. The ‘social’ is an immensely complex, multifaceted and contested concept. Harris, in his edition of Gentile’s *Genesis* book, is ultimately moderately forgiving of Gentile’s efforts. The Ego is now viewed as essentially a social communicating creature and not so much a remote transcendental Ego. In fact, Harris compares Gentile with George Herbert Mead on this issue. Yet this still does not get over the metaphysical hurdle, indicated earlier, of Pure Act theory. As Harris himself notes with candour, ‘the “method of immanence” forbids us to assume the reality of any community that we do not ourselves create, or of any truth that we do not ourselves successfully interpret’.<sup>[87]</sup> Such immanence is thus not a secure base for any strong sense of the nation, specifically for any society which incorporates, quite prosaically, self-conscious minorities or indeed strong regionalism (as in Italy).

An earlier reviewer of the *Genesis* book, in 1950, is not so forgiving as Harris. The British Idealist G.R.G. Mure thus remarks upon it as similar to reading a ‘drowned man’s last testament drifting shoreward from a wreck’.<sup>[88]</sup> The fundamental philosophical idea that he identifies with Gentile, which he sees as cut out of Hegel’s and Fichte’s work, is the original self-constitution of the Ego. This is the



fundamental act of self-distinction into subject and object. For Mure, this argument embodies a 'white radiance' which wipes out all differences. As Mure notes, 'This brilliant light tends to turn every difference empirical'.<sup>[89]</sup> Yet this 'sharp-edged clarity of Italian Idealism' he complains is as problematic as Toscanini conducting Wagner! This criticism pretty much corresponds with other early commentators on Gentile. For Bernard Bosanquet, writing in 1920,

The fact is, "the whole" cannot be, *in our sense*, a thought at all. It is a whole which lives in all its manifold appearances, and cannot be reduced to any one of them. The conception of a self-creative progressive real, which is pure thinking, destroys all meaning in "the whole". There is no whole, and the unending dialectic has no mainspring.<sup>[90]</sup>

Even J.A. Smith, his most sympathetic interpreter in Britain in the 1920s, saw almost too much purified unity in actual idealism: 'The one spirit or mind posits and cancels or supersedes all oppositions and distinctions,...: it makes and unmakes everything whatsoever including itself'.<sup>[91]</sup>

My own assessment is roughly that all the above commentators—Mure, Bosanquet and Smith—are generally accurate in their view of Gentile's central actualist argument. The argument is very powerful, but it is also deeply problematic, hovering on the very cusp of profound solipsism, at points appearing to tip over the edge, and then suddenly pausing and managing to retain a precarious balance. More importantly, despite Gentile's unbridled bombastic rhetoric, the actualist argument provides no philosophical succour to nationalism or nationalist curricula. Gentile's attempt at resolving actualism via nationalism is a philosophical failure. The argument simply does not work. Actual idealism does, however, still work as a very compelling if challenging view of education. The idea of education as a dialogic invitation to moment-by-moment continuous critical thinking and rethinking still retains real power and a robust meaning. But, as Mure noted, what one senses most clearly in Gentile's attempt to link actual idealism and education with nationalism is, in fact, a total 'wreck' of an argument.

[1](#) Cardiff University, VincentAW1@cardiff.ac.uk.

[2](#) Gabriele Turi, 'Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance, and Criticism', *The Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), p. 913.

[3](#) Berkeley's striking thought for Gentile is that 'when we believe we are conceiving a reality outside the mind, we are actually falsifying our belief by our simple presence in the act of perceiving'. See Giovanni Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London, Macmillan, 1922), p. 3. Nature is dead thought; nature needs thus to be assimilated to thought, otherwise nature conceived as thing-in-itself must be ever unknown. Reality exists only as the act of seeking it.

[4](#) Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 4.

[5](#) Roger W. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile* (New York, Macmillan, 1937), p. 31.

[6](#) This judgement might be due more to a recent constructivist reconfiguration of Kant in the literature since the 1980s.

[7](#) H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana and London, University of Illinois Press, 1966), p. 9.

[8](#) Rik Peters, for example, makes a distinction between Croce and Gentile as 'mild' and 'strong' forms of constructivism, see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: the Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero, and Collingwood* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013), p. 73.

[9](#) Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 5.

[10](#) *Ibid.*, p. 254.

[11](#) Holmes, *Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, p. 4; Harris, *Social Philosophy*, pp. 10–11.

[12](#) See, for example, Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 254.

[13](#) See J.A. Smith 'The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 20 (1919–1920), pp. 70–1.

[14](#) See Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 10.

[15](#) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[16](#) *Ibid.*

[17](#) *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[18](#) *Ibid.* I am interpreting Gentile's use of 'spirit' here as equivalent to 'mind' (as in the German Geist).

[19](#) Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 15.

[20](#) Thus, for example, in any experimental work on nature, 'it is we who dispose the causes for producing the effects'. Gentile is insistent here that the natural

sciences and indeed mathematics are wholly and completely thought constructions, that is, constructions of the transcendental ego. Gentile does though make an odd remark here. He indicates that we do not know the internal character of nature, in itself, and therefore that 'which ought to be the true and proper object of knowledge escapes us'. This sounds distinctly like a Kantian Noumenon or 'thing-in-itself'. I am sure that Gentile meant to say that the idea of an 'internal character' to nature would still have to be actually thought. See Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 16.

[21](#) See Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*.

[22](#) Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 16.

[23](#) Ibid, p. 51.

[24](#) Ibid. The intelligibility of history is the unity of 'the real to which it belongs on the one side and in the mentality of the historian on the other'. Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 50.

[25](#) As Gentile comments, 'The chronicler's history is history hypostatized and deprived of its dialectic; for dialecticity consists precisely in the actuality of the multiplicity as unity, and as unity alone, which is transcended only in the transcending actuality'. Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 208.

[26](#) All quotations from Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 18. Gentile notes 'the subject which resolves the object into itself, at least in so far as the object is spiritual reality, is neither a being nor a state of being. Nothing but the constructive process is.' Gentile *Pure Act*, p. 18.

[27](#) See Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 226–7.

[28](#) Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 17.

[29](#) Ibid., p. 23.

[30](#) Ibid., p. 28.

[31](#) The logic of this claim (which Gentile disagrees with) is very reminiscent of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological strategy of *epoché*.

[32](#) Quotations from Gentile, *Pure Act*, pp. 30–1.

[33](#) Ibid., p. 43.

[34](#) It is the 'act of the subject which is posited as such. In positing itself, it posits in itself, as its own proper element, every reality which is positive through its relation of immanence in the act in which the I is posited in an ever richer and more complex way'. Gentile, *Pure Act*, p. 106.

[35](#) Ibid., pp. 115–21.

[36](#) See *ibid.*, pp. 199 ff.

[37](#) Gentile also notes on the same page that 'the principle of every synthesis of condition..., eliminates even the category of conditionality from the concept of

mind, once more reestablishing the infinite unity of it'. See *ibid.*, p. 199.

[38](#) Presumably then Gentile posited his own death when shot in 1944!

[39](#) Turi, 'Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance and Criticism', p. 914.

[40](#) Benedetto Croce, 'Introduction', Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, trans. Dino Bigongiari (London, Benn Brothers Limited, 1923), p. ix.

[41](#) Croce, 'Introduction', p. ix.

[42](#) See Valmai Burwood Evans, 'Education in the Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', *International Journal of Ethics*, 43: 2 (1932–3), pp. 210–17, p. 211.

[43](#) See Andrew Vincent, 'Idealism and Education' in *Ideas of Education: Philosophy and Politics from Plato to Dewey*, eds. C. Brooke and E. Frazer (London, Routledge, 2013), pp. 237–51.

[44](#) 'It studies the means of aiding the growth of self-consciousness and unification in the lives of men'. Burwood Evans, 'Education', p. 211.

[45](#) Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia I*, p. 238, quoted in Burwood Evans, 'Education', p. 212.

[46](#) Gentile notes that teaching can often become mechanistic and dogmatic. See Gentile, *Reform*, 4. The remedy for this is something that Gentile thinks is more obvious in the university environment, namely, where *no* knowledge is regarded as ready-made, knowing is rather a continuous critical thinking activity.

[47](#) He describes education as aiming at 'concrete unity and truly real unity which is the life of spirit'. See Gentile, *Reform*, p. 239.

[48](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, trans. H.S. Harris (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1966), p. 156.

[49](#) Gentile, *Reform*, p. 240.

[50](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 73–4.

[51](#) *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[52](#) *Ibid.*, p. 153.

[53](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 157–9.

[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[55](#) That is, 'if it is ever going to conquer that freedom which has been its constant aspiration'. See *ibid.*, p. 139.

[56](#) Gentile maintains that 'we today are but one person with the men who thought before us'. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[57](#) *Ibid.*

[58](#) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[59](#) Ibid., p. 153.

[60](#) Ibid., pp. 106–7.

[61](#) Ibid., pp. 126–7. For Gentile ‘The will which qua will is not also thought, is in respect to thought which knows it a simple object, a spectacle and not a drama. It is nature and not spirit. And a thought which qua thought is not will, is, in respect to the will which integrates it, a spectator without a spectacle. If there is to be a drama, and a drama which is the spirit, it is inevitable that the will be the thought, and that the thought be the will, over and beyond that distinction which serves if anything to characterize the opposition between nature and spirit’. See *ibid.*, p. 133.

[62](#) Ibid., p. 190.

[63](#) Ibid., p. 36.

[64](#) Ibid., p. 51. ‘Thought proper consists in this affirmation of the object by the subject. Now the subject, that is, man, must be as free in the affirmation of his thought, by which he thinks something, as he must be free in every one of his actions in order that his action be truly his’. See *ibid.*, p. 49.

[65](#) Ibid., p. 57.

[66](#) See Andrew Vincent and Michael George, ‘Development and Self-Identity: Hegel’s Concept of Education’, *Educational Theory*, 32 (1982), pp. 131–41.

[67](#) Gentile quoted in Harris, *Social Philosophy*, p. 57.

[68](#) Gentile quoted in Turi, ‘Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance and Criticism’, p. 926.

[69](#) Nonetheless Gentile, to an extent to his own cost, openly opposed the Lateran treaties with the Catholic church in Italy that were put forward by Mussolini.

[70](#) Gentile quoted in Turi ‘Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance and Criticism’, p. 927.

[71](#) Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 926–7.

[72](#) See Renzo Titone, ‘The Development of Italian Educational Philosophy in the 20th Century’, *International Review of Education*, 4: 3 (1958), pp. 315–17.

[73](#) This raised a series of awkward questions about the role of force, discipline and authority in the classroom. There is an ambiguity here which is never really explained by Gentile, other than to indicate that the teacher symbolized an authoritative force enabling the student to perceive a truer sense of freedom, which is not that helpful. See Harris’s comments on this in his *Social Philosophy*, p. 96.

[74](#) Harris, *Social Philosophy*, p. 55.

[75](#) Gentile, *Reform*, p. 13.

[76](#) Gentile appeared contemptuous, up to 1944, of the racial anti-Semitism of the National Socialists.

[77](#) Gentile, *Reform*, p. 8.

[78](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

[79](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

[80](#) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[81](#) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[82](#) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[83](#) *Ibid.*

[84](#) *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[85](#) *Ibid.*, p. 32. Gentile notes ‘in the family, in the city, in any community, we constitute one spirit, with common needs that are satisfied by the operations of individual activity which is a social activity’. See *ibid.*, p. 33.

[86](#) Nationalism, as indicated, relates closely to the dilemma of the transcendental loneliness of the ego understood as pure act. The argument moves imperceptibly from an icy transcendental singularity to a warm collective national safety blanket. Fichte makes a similar move in his *Addresses to the German Nation*. Unquestionably Gentile’s nation and state are *in interiore homine*, rather than just *inter homines*, but again I fail to see the precise logic by which Gentile moves from the radical autonomy and supreme self responsibility of the Pure Act theory into the absorption and sacrifice of the individual into the collectivity of the national and state-based will. It undoubtedly served his fascist concerns by the later 1920s, but it does not explain the argument. It appears more as just bluster. For Gentile, the philosopher could not dwell in philosophy. She had to act in the world. As Croce observed on a number of occasions in the 1920s and 1930s, this highly suspect logic led Gentile to subject all cultural and educational concerns to the concrete demands of fascist politics, which of course logically contradicts his own actual idealism.

[87](#) Harris, ‘Introduction’, Gentile, *Genesis*, p. 50.

[88](#) G.R.G. Mure, review of G. Gentile, *Genesi e struttura della società*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1: 1 (1950), pp. 83–4, p. 83.

[89](#) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[90](#) Bernard Bosanquet, review of G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica* and *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, *Mind*, 29: 115 (1920), pp. 367–70, p. 369. Bosanquet continues (p. 370): ‘for myself I cannot follow the point of view which proceeds from the immanence of reality in experience, to the universe as self-creatively progressive by a pure act of thought in the human spirit. The question for me is “What is the spirit?” Is it not something larger than the pure act of thought? Does it not live, really and characteristically, in the splendour of

external nature as in religion and in the common will, and are all these a mere deposit or fossilization of pure acts of thinking?

[91](#) Smith, 'The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', p. 72.

# Gentile and Modernity

Daniela Coli<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 137–166

**Abstract:** This essay situates Gentile in the debate over the meaning and value of ‘modernity’ as interpreted by post-War commentators such as Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Leo Strauss. Coli shows how Gentile drew upon his predecessors as he developed his actual idealist conception of the relation between thinking, the thinker and the world. Gentile’s response to the multi-faceted problem of modernity combines reactionary and progressive elements: the central threads of western culture, he believes, can and should be retained, though updated, refined and reconfigured to rid them of the untenable falsehoods in which the old traditions, with their ‘methods of transcendence’, had left them tangled.

In the second half of the twentieth century we find many philosophers who, from their various theoretical and political positions, offer negative or critical judgements of modernity, interpreted as a unitary block running from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. Among these were Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In the first half of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger elaborated a radical critique of modernity and technology, and it is to Heidegger that the contemporary critics of modernism refer, even when articulating theoretical and political positions opposed to his. The author of *Sein und Zeit* broke with his teacher Husserl, who had departed from the mathematical sciences, from the Enlightenment and from Descartes, and cast his lot with the cult of reason. Heidegger, however, considered modernity a great danger, which claimed to be a substitute for God and tried to make itself the master of nature. In his last unfinished work, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*



*und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936), Husserl considered the risk that the modernity of Descartes and Galileo might degenerate into the barbarisms of science, but in reason he saw an antidote to nihilism.<sup>[2]</sup>

For the later Heidegger, western reason rather risks throwing us into ‘the future of the atomic bomb’, since it places man at the centre of nature, making him its legislator. For the German philosopher, this is the tragedy of the West.<sup>[3]</sup> The tendency of twentieth-century thought is centred, in general, on the refutation of the modern principle of subjectivity, theorized by Descartes and Hobbes, who discovered what had determined the crisis of scholastic metaphysics. Other contemporary philosophers, like Richard Rorty in ‘Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity’, ask themselves if it is legitimate to identify the subject with Nietzsche’s will to power. They wonder whether one can describe modernity as a process bound to conclude with the worldwide dominion of technology or whether modernity should not be interpreted as a process of liberation, recaptured and carried through to completion.<sup>[4]</sup> Jürgen Habermas, belonging to the second generation of the Frankfurt School, strongly criticizes modernity in *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*.<sup>[5]</sup> However, in 1985, he changes his mind and remembers that the philosophical discourse on modernity was developed a long time after modern philosophy was born with Descartes and Hobbes, after the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, and even after the Enlightenment, which is regarded by some as modern philosophy *par excellence*. For Habermas, the philosophical discourse on modernity was born with Hegel. For Hegel, modernity—conceived as untethered from the past and from traditional systems of reference, claiming clearly and emphatically to be ‘modern’—finds itself stuck down a blind alley. The first critic of modernity is therefore Hegel. Habermas maintains, in a discourse on modernity that met with a broadly hostile reaction, that there is no substantial change from Hegel and Marx to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille and Lacan to Foucault and Derrida. The accusation is directed against an argument that is founded on the principle of subjectivity; and it affirms that this argument condemns and dismantles all explicit

forms of oppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to replace them with the most unassailable dominion of technology.

According to Habermas, Nietzsche was the greatest interpreter of this problem, above even Marx. Nietzsche carries the critique of modernity to its most extreme conclusions, denying both reflection and the subject who goes about it, in order to point out the super-human, the all-too-human, in the will to power. For Habermas, the critique of subjectivity that points beyond the subject, and the critique of modernity that points beyond the modern to what is, in fact, an archaism, is propounded again by Nietzsche, Heidegger and then Derrida. In 1985, it struck many of Habermas's followers as paradoxical that he, Jürgen Habermas—widely regarded as the legitimate successor to Frankfurtian critical theory, which produced one of the most radical critiques of modern rationalism—became a defender of modernity. In reality, in *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Habermas noted, in his own, sometimes unclear language, that the German theory of modernity, elaborated by Hegel and further developed by Marx and Nietzsche, has nothing to do with the reflections of modern philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He also noted that German philosophy, from Hegel onward, caused a schism between modernity and the historical context of 'rationalism'. As a consequence, the processes of economic and political modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be regarded as a historical objectivization derived from the reflections of philosophers like Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and the French Enlightenment. In other words, Habermas discovered in 1985 that capitalism and totalitarianism were not derived from the philosophies of thinkers like Descartes and Hobbes, who were principally preoccupied with freeing themselves from scholastic metaphysics.

As Carlo Augusto Viano affirmed in 1984, up to a certain point in the history of philosophy, the category of modernity takes up and carries to its extreme the tendency to make purely argumentative use of that history: offering up one image of modernity rather than another just means arguing in favour of certain theoretical and

political positions instead of others. Nicolas de Condorcet initiated this tendency, which culminated in Hegel. From Hegel onward, the history of philosophy becomes ever more an instrument of the 'construction' of philosophy, an auxiliary instrument of doctrinal edification. Philosophy is no longer an instrument with which empirical reality is investigated and ascertained, and while knowledge becomes ever more specialized and less accessible to philosophers' speculations, philosophy lives in a state of crisis: the end of philosophy as *sapere totale* (the totality of knowing). Finding that the mathematical and experimental sciences are no longer accessible to them, philosophers retreat to the historical-social aspect of reality; they begin to construct grand historical and social tableaux, through which they end up losing contact with effective historical reality and limiting themselves to merely saying, as Hegel did, that every philosophy is 'its own time apprehended in thoughts'.

[6]

We should bear in mind that between 1935 and 1946, long before Habermas and his *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss addressed the problem that Habermas would later take up in his discussion of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. Despite his critical and negative theory of modernity, Strauss was well aware that, rather than finding meaning in the world and substituting it for Christianity, Descartes and Hobbes opposed the ancients and offered a different explanation of the universe. As Strauss writes to Löwith in 1946,

Condorcet and even Comte do not want to replace Christianity: they want to replace nonsense with a reasonable order. But already Descartes and Hobbes wanted that. Only when the quarrel had been basically decided were religion and Christianity brought in, and this subsequent interpretation of the modern movement dominated the credulous and insufferably sentimental nineteenth century. [7]

Like Hannah Arendt, Strauss knew that it was Hegel who had introduced metaphysics into the philosophy of history, and Hegel

who determined how the modern philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were later received.

We know that there are several strains of modernity: in philosophy, the modernity of Descartes is different from that of Hobbes, just as the modernity of Locke and Hume is different from that of Kant and Hegel. Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss maintain that the separation of philosophy from Christianity is the point of departure for modern philosophy. Arendt has it that Judaism and Christianity are the roots of the West, and condemns Machiavelli and Hobbes for having provoked the end of political and religious unity in Europe. She also sees Hegel as the author of a particular secularization of Christianity, which in the history of philosophy would result in positivism, the myth of progress and a whole series of ideologies and myths that culminated in the decadence of the West. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt accuses Hegel of having transformed metaphysics into the philosophy of history; of substituting progress for God; of interpreting the meaning of history as an end that is pursuable by human activity; and of ending up producing the hopeless realization that history is meaningless, thereby provoking alienation and unhappiness.<sup>[8]</sup> Strauss, by contrast, draws a clear distinction between Judaism and Christianity. For him, the West's original sin precedes the birth of Christianity. In *Jerusalem and Athens* he explains that the original sin of the West is philosophy. Strauss contrasts philosophy to Judaism, whose rules—unlike those of Christianity—one obeys without asking for a rational explanation. On these grounds, Strauss claims that Christianity, which has its own theology and philosophy, is responsible for modernity. For him, modernity is born from philosophers' criticisms of religion, and its father is Machiavelli. The Florentine does not object to the morals and politics of Christianity, but he does end up dismantling its theological basis. In other words, for Strauss, modernity develops out of Christian theology and philosophy, and concludes with the collapse of Christianity.<sup>[9]</sup> As we saw from the 1946 letter to Löwith, Strauss did not hold Descartes and Hobbes responsible for having introduced religiosity into modern philosophy and for having made the category of modernity a philosophy of history. Hegel initiates this

process, which is continued by Marx and Nietzsche, and culminates with the Frankfurt School. It has nothing to do with the philosophies of modern philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who wanted to be free of Ptolemaic metaphysics and to put man back at the centre of knowledge.

Giovanni Gentile's aim is not only to free Hegel from the rigid confines of his own system, but also to reform and go beyond it. Philosophy and religion both share the metaphysical problem. The problem originates and develops from all religions, and western philosophy originates from Christianity. Gentile's judgement differs from that of Arendt and Strauss because, for the Italian philosopher, Christian theology remained entangled in the nets of Platonism and Aristotelianism, which provoked the separation of modern philosophy from its Christian roots. Gentile puts this very clearly:

The modern age is precisely the slow and gradual conquest of subjectivism; the slow, gradual identification of being and thought, of truth and man: it is the foundation, celebrated over the centuries, of the *regnum hominis*, the establishment of true humanism. When it comes to religion, the Platonic opposition between truth and the mind, the absolute separation between the divine and the human, is first negated by Christianity, in the exhaustive elaboration of the dogma of the man-God. But, when it comes to philosophy, Christian theology remains caught in the net of Platonism and Aristotelianism. While modern philosophy carried on the work that Christianity had begun (to make the divine intrinsic to the human that had seemed to be opposed to it), Christianity was already entrenched in its traditions and had estranged itself forever and irremediably from modern thought.<sup>[10]</sup>

For Gentile, unlike Arendt and Strauss, the separation between religion and philosophy is inevitable and not in the slightest bit regrettable. He takes a positive view of the separation between religion and philosophy and the birth of modern philosophy because Christian theology and philosophy remained captive to Platonism and Aristotelianism and, just like the Ptolemaic conception of the

universe, it had lost contact with a real, physical world. Gentile does not break with religion. As Minister of Public Instruction in the first Mussolini government, between 1922 and 1924,<sup>[11]</sup> he was the author of a school reform which decreed that religion was to be taught in primary schools. In secondary schools and universities, however, religion was to be substituted by philosophy that rationally re-elaborated the universal principles of religion. So it ran counter to the *Concordato* of the Kingdom of Italy and the Church of Rome on 11 February 1929, which set out agreements of mutual recognition with the Holy See. As a result, for the first time since the unification of Italy, there were regular bilateral relations between Italy and the Church (originally sundered in 1871, following the armed capture of Rome). The architect of the accord for the Italian state was Benito Mussolini, leader of the Fascists and prime minister of the Italian government. Gentile was strongly opposed to the *Concordato* with the Catholic Church because he believed that it had compromised the sovereignty of the Italian state, and his books were added to the Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1934.

For Gentile, then, modern philosophy is the gradual conquest of subjectivism; and for him, this means that truth, in science and philosophy alike, is a human achievement. 'This is one of the most important truths of modern philosophy', writes Gentile in 1907;

and every one of these modern-day philosophers who speaks about action<sup>[12]</sup> and defends it wholeheartedly is doing the right thing. The truth is not a performance in which we can all participate on a passing fancy. No. It is our creation, our achievement.<sup>[13]</sup>

He continues:

The history of humanity proceeds by force of will, which is freed through civil, economic, political, religious and scientific struggles. These culminate in the absolute liberty of reason, whose ideal form, even if it were not completely realized, would signal the conclusion of history. But, since any ideal is realized in an infinite life, the end will never come; just as

perfect ethical liberty will never be a fact. This is why men will always struggle to humanize themselves and make themselves ever freer, with the perpetual rhythm of morality and philosophy.<sup>[14]</sup>

Gentile was an admirer of Hegel, whom he regarded as the author of a great philosophical synthesis, the crisis of which produced a series of specialized sciences, all in conflict with each other and lacking the capacity for a synthesis of the real. Gentile, however, did not maintain, as Hegel did, that history could have a conclusion, an end. Like Hegel, though, he maintained that philosophers' political theories could contribute to the creation of new history, so he is not averse to the philosophy of history. Interpreting Gentile as a neo-Hegelian would be deeply reductive because actualism is characterized by many features that are very different from those of Hegelian philosophy. Both Gentile's reform of the Hegelian dialectic and his separation from Hegel are founded on a reading of modernity entirely different from Hegel's.

While Hegel's criticism of philosophers like Descartes and Hobbes is directed at a concept of reason founded on the principle of subjectivity, Gentile takes a very different approach, re-elaborating in new forms the problems addressed by Descartes and Hobbes. In 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' (1912), he writes,

One cannot speak of the universality of the concept of man, of animal, of triangle or of number, because there are no such concepts either in heaven or on earth. Rather, there is the thought that thinks these concepts. And the thought that thinks these concepts cannot be thinking in general, the divine thinking of a God that is something other than us, if the only concrete thinking is absolutely ours and ours alone.<sup>[15]</sup>

Gentile here takes up a fundamental problem already addressed by Descartes and Hobbes, though with different results. In order to free himself from the Hegelian system, Gentile returns to the problems that Descartes and Hobbes had discussed in order to free themselves from the scholastic system. We know that for Hobbes,

science is an artificial system of names and syllogisms, of propositions, ordered and continually reviewed by the rational calculus, whose validity is controlled by logic. Now, for Hobbes the idea of a perfect triangle—the sum of whose angles is equal to two right angles—is a human creation, justifiable on the basis of the artifice of ‘scientific discourse’. For Descartes, however, the idea of a perfect triangle is conceivable only if joined to the idea of a perfect being: that is, to the idea of God.<sup>[16]</sup> As he explains in the *Discours de la méthode* (Discourse on Method), there is nothing in nature and in the world that corresponds to a perfect triangle, the sum of whose angles is equal to two right angles. So, in order to justify the existence of the triangle, Descartes, the philosopher of the *cogito ergo sum*, is forced to fall back on God and conceive of the mind as the mirror of nature, as Richard Rorty concluded.<sup>[17]</sup> Descartes, supporter of the *cogito ergo sum*, does not, however, accept the idea that men are their own creators. Though not religious, Descartes adapts to the morals of his time and thereby returns to God in the *Discours*. In answer to Hobbes’s theoretical refinement, Descartes, whose main aim was to legitimate the certainty of scientific truth, sets out a form of pragmatism that resolved the problem of scientific truth with ‘God’ as the decisionistic key—with an act of faith, as Hobbes would have said. Thus, when in the *Méditations* he comes to pose the problem of how man arrived at the concept of number or of extension, Descartes returns to God.<sup>[18]</sup> What interests Descartes is not the comprehension of the mental process through which men come to their representations, but the construction of a house that would never fall down, namely, science. Descartes and Hobbes resolve the same problem in their philosophies, but by different means: Descartes through the magnificence of God, and Hobbes by the introduction of hypothesis and convention. For Hobbes, if God, as theology, cannot be the object of science, but only a hypothesis sustained by faith, for Descartes the difficulty or impossibility of knowing either God or the soul stems from the way we are limited to the senses and the imagination. The positions of Hobbes and Descartes are irreconcilable, owing to the fact that Hobbes



separates science and religion, while Descartes considers God the guarantor of science.

When Gentile affirms that the concepts of man, animal, triangle and number are thoughts which are 'absolutely ours and ours alone', created by our thought, he reconnects to the problem that divided Hobbes and Descartes. Actualism certainly takes up many of Hegel's theoretical principles, but it is not limited to Hegelian abstract orderliness. Actualism tries to propose a dialectic oriented more toward the specific act of knowledge than toward acts that are closed within a system of fixed formulae. Gentile denies that we can speak of universality of the concepts of man, animal, triangle and number, because for him, universality—be it Platonic, Aristotelian or nominalist—is abstract. The concepts of man, animal, triangle and number are not concepts of a thought in general, nor of a divine thought, because the only concrete thought is the thought of the thinking subject. And so 'The only thinkable universality ... is that of our act of thinking'.<sup>[19]</sup> Gentile wants to go beyond the logic of abstract philosophy, rooting the act of thinking in its mental dynamism.

The originality of Gentilean thought lies in his breaking up of the abstract logic of formal thought. Rather than negate its abstract logic, he makes it relative in its demonstrative function, in order then to go beyond it and merge it with the concrete act of thinking, which is reflexive and not purely descriptive or deductive. For Gentile, affirming that our act of thinking is the only thinkable universality means that the act of thinking is posited as necessary; it is 'not the thinking of a particular thinker from whom other particular thinkers may diverge, but rather as the thinking of one who thinks for all of us.'<sup>[20]</sup> Gentile turns to Galileo to help explain further what he means by this. According to Gentile, Galileo writes that in the pure mathematical sciences, like arithmetic and geometry, the human intellect does not have the same perfection as divine intellect in understanding the totality of phenomena. Nonetheless what few things the human intellect is able to understand, it understands with a cognition that is equal to that of divine certainty because it recognises the need for understanding.<sup>[21]</sup> Now, concludes Gentile,

'instead we should say that not only pure mathematics, but every one of our thoughts (even the most trivial platitudes) are real in the act by which we think them.'<sup>[22]</sup> As we can see, Gentile's proposition is bold indeed, because his aim is to go beyond the very concept of subject as it is traditionally understood, enclosed in predetermined categories and therefore, in Gentile's view, abstract. For Gentile, subjectivity is an open-ended thinking process.

The subject is not bound to a reality that is located outside of thought—including the reality of categories fixed by philosophical thought—but it is the concreteness of *pensiero pensante* (thought thinking) that shatters and splits Cartesian dualism in order to orient it to the synthetic perspective of self-consciousness. So for Gentile, the dialectic becomes an activity that takes place inside thought, rather than outside thought, as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Gentile maintains that phenomenological objectivity cannot be thought of using absolute categories like Hegel's, because the categories continually change through the course of the act of thought thinking. What is more, he maintains that each of our thoughts, whatever they are—even the most trivial platitudes—are true in the act of being thought. Gentile's phrase, 'thought thinking', dismantles the metaphysical subject, because thought thinking continually redefines its criteria of judgement in the concrete act of knowing. But the phrase also comes to define a fluid, autonomous subjectivity, which is not defined in any logical form, except that which is given, continually thinking itself in a cognitive process that is always *attuale* (actual; of the present moment) and identical to itself, although its content is always changing. And since even 'the most trivial platitudes' that thought can think are real in the act of being thought, one can also claim that, for Gentile, the object of thought is, in its own way, real when it is thought (*pensato*), even if it does not have any external reality determined outside the act of thought that thinks it. From this we can make sense of the function of thought in art, in religion and in philosophy, which are the three forms of knowledge and active participation in the world between which Gentile distinguishes.

It is clear that this conception of thought might lead us, like Augusto Del Noce, to label Gentile a nihilist. Del Noce was an important Italian historian of philosophy and author of a considerable volume on Descartes in 1965, *Riforma cattolica e filosofia moderna* (Catholic Reform and Modern Philosophy). Among his other publications were *Giovanni Gentile: Per una interpretazione filosofica della storia contemporanea* (Giovanni Gentile: Toward a Philosophical Interpretation of History, 1990) and *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* (The Suicide of the Revolution, 1978), dedicated to Gentile and Antonio Gramsci. For Del Noce, Gentile travels in only one philosophical direction, working backwards through history from Hegel to Kant, and from Kant to Descartes. Del Noce, a Catholic, interprets Descartes very literally, and is convinced that Descartes' concern is that there is no order of truth and of essence that precedes the divine will.<sup>[23]</sup> Gentile's spirit as pure act, by contrast, would be nothing other than the Cartesian God made immanent, which is why he finds himself newly confronted with the problems of Cartesianism.<sup>[24]</sup>

For Del Noce, Gentile is a theological philosopher, and only a theological philosopher could orchestrate the death of theology, culminating in nihilism.<sup>[25]</sup> An actualist philosopher might agree with Del Noce's description of Gentile's philosophical trajectory—from Hegel to Kant and from Kant to Descartes—as well as his hypothesis that Gentile makes immanent the Cartesian God. However, an actualist philosopher thinks from a perspective different from that of Descartes, even if he starts with Hegel, and philosophizes in a historical and cultural context different from that of Descartes. He cannot, therefore, be labelled nihilistic, because he maintains that men create their own values or beliefs, and to create them, men have to strip away their natural egoism, for which they require a moral reform that enables all men to feel like parts of one organism. Gentile, contrary to what Del Noce supposes, in no way ushers in Nietzsche's superman or the will to power. We need only recall what Gentile writes in the *Concetto della storia della filosofia* (Concept of the History of Philosophy, 1907). After affirming that the truth is a creation of a human subject, Gentile goes on:

The truth is not a performance in which we can all participate on a passing fancy. No. It is our creation, our achievement, which demands all the powers of our soul. Above all else, it is a moral reform, which strips us of our natural egoism. ... Until each one of us is good enough to be able to recognize others as our equals; until we grasp the concept, and almost the sense of the humanity and spirit that is common to all of us; and until we grasp that the mind is the organ of truth; only then will we have mastered this organ, only then will we be able to get a sense of that truth which is the preserve of the good will.<sup>[26]</sup>

For Del Noce, Gentile is 'the theologian of nihilism: the kiss of death for theology, proof of Nietzsche's victory, which could not have been written by anyone but a philosopher-theologian who is convinced that he is one'.<sup>[27]</sup> When Del Noce claims that Gentile is the theologian of nihilism and proof of Nietzsche's victory, he means to say that for Gentile, as for Nietzsche, God is dead. Now, for Nietzsche, the death of God symbolizes the loss of any common reference point, the crisis of Europe, and the revelation of universal nullity. Nihilism, for Nietzsche, is the affliction of decadence: an affliction that breaks apart the subject and leaves it deprived of any will. The God that Nietzsche says is dead is in fact a God bereft of mercy, a God who is dead because He has become too merciful, too tolerant, almost a social rebuttal. The true God, the God that is not dead for Nietzsche, is the biblical God, a God with the capacity to become angry, to punish and negotiate with His people. In *Der Antichrist. Fluch auf das Christentum* (The Antichrist: A Curse on Christianity), Nietzsche affirms that, as long as Yahweh was only the God of Israel, then Israel was right, which is to say, its relationship with the rest of the world was right.<sup>[28]</sup> Israel's Yahweh was the expression of the awareness of power, of self-worth; he offered the hope of victory and salvation, with him nature could be trusted to give the people of Israel all that they needed, most importantly rain. Yahweh was the God of Israel and consequently of justice; all people follow this logic, Nietzsche thinks, which has both the awareness of

and will to power. For him, Israel loses its God, a national God, when Yahweh becomes the instrument of sacerdotal agitators, when a God that helps and gives counsel is substituted by a God that makes demands. For Nietzsche, Israel lost its God when its God became a means by which to impose ethical order on the world, no longer the God of justice in Israel, but the God of justice in the world. In other words, it lost its God when Yahweh becomes the Christian God, the God that pardons the penitent, or rather, as Nietzsche puts it, those who submit to the priest. Nietzsche is extremely hard on Christianity, the religion that emasculated the Germans, who had lost the old religions of their ancestors and the will to power.

Gentile, as the philosopher of immanentism, has nowhere near such a negative view of Christianity as Nietzsche. Nor does he connect religion with the will to power, a concept that does not exist in Gentile's philosophy. For Del Noce, Heidegger's philosophy of history, which comes up in his book on Nietzsche, corresponds especially well with Gentile's proposed philosophy of history. But the history is inverted, given that Heidegger sees history as a process that leads to nihilism. According to Del Noce, Gentile was not aware of sharing his position with Heidegger.<sup>[29]</sup> In truth, Gentile could not have realized it, because he considered himself a religious philosopher, a reformer, the philosopher of an ethical constructivism, who identified himself with Fascism, which for him was a spiritual revolution. Gentile would not have tolerated being defined as a nihilist, because he regarded his philosophy as a religious vision of life, opposed to individual egoism, which considered society a community of values in which the state is considered to be *in interiore homine*.

The word 'faith' appears frequently in Gentile's work. Actualism is in fact an approach to life and the world, in which 'faith' is fundamental. The reason Gentile did not really arrive at nihilism is that he encountered Marx, to whom he dedicated *La filosofia di Marx* (The Philosophy of Marx) in 1899.<sup>[30]</sup> Gentile agrees with Marx on just one point: philosophers make history with their speculations and their ideologies. From his encounter with Marx, Gentile emerges convinced of the distinctions between philosophy and history, and

between philosophy and politics. He is the Italian philosopher who most influenced Italian political thought of the twentieth century, because he influenced Gramsci, who had a notable success in Italy during the second half of the century. 'Gramsci's neo-Marxism,' writes Del Noce,

is supposed to be the reaffirmation of Marx after the "philosophy of the Spirit". Correctly understood, it is a reform of Hegelianism, from within Hegelianism itself, which was made necessary after Marxism.<sup>[31]</sup>

To confirm this hypothesis, Del Noce recalls *La rivoluzione contro il Capitale* (The Revolution against *Das Kapital*), which Gramsci wrote in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, and recalls Gramsci's assertion that the Bolsheviks were not Marxists. For Gramsci, in fact,

the Bolsheviks enact Marxist thought, which is the continuation of Italian and German idealistic thought, and which in Marx became contaminated by residues of positivism and naturalism.<sup>[32]</sup>

Gramsci overhauls the Marxism in Gentilean philosophy, cleansing it of positivism and naturalism. But the very close relationship between Gentile and Gramsci consists in the fact that Gramsci, like Gentile, believes that historical materialism is a philosophy of history. And so Gramsci is not concerned with 'structure' (the economy), as an orthodox Marxist would be, but with 'superstructure' (culture and philosophy). This is why Del Noce sees in Italy the suicide of revolution. He sees Italy as a country steeped in Catholicism, which has at its core the principles of community, of the necessity of stripping itself of the egoism of individuals in order to become one, of totality and of the *perfecta communitas fidelium* (perfect community of the faithful). So Del Noce's hypothesis that Gentile is the theologian of nihilism seems to be contradicted by his analysis of the relationship between Gentile and Gramsci, and by their similar conceptions of politics, though adhering to two different types of constructivism. And precisely because other Italian philosophers, in Del Noce's wake, have tended to assimilate Gentile with Nietzsche

and Heidegger, and to define him as a nihilist, it seems necessary to be more precise about the matter.

Though we agree with Del Noce over the path that Gentile follows (from Hegel to Kant and from Kant to Descartes), it is interesting to consider the problem of Cartesian deconstruction, which Gentile addressed in his theory of knowledge, from within the particular reform of the Hegelian dialectic by which he distinguishes between thought in act (*pensiero in atto*) and past thought (*pensiero pensato*). In his theorizing, Gentile often finds himself in the position of Thomas Hobbes with regard to Descartes—even though Gentile actually criticizes nominalist logic—when he proposes a dialectic that criticizes Hegel's, and is directed more toward the specific act of knowledge than toward a closed system of fixed formulae. If Hobbes's problem, which separates science and religion, was his escaping scholastic theology, Gentile's aim, which separates philosophy and religion, is to escape the steel cage of Hegel's system. As Enrico De Negri (who produced an exemplary translation of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in 1933) points out, Gentile undertakes an inversion of Augustine's approach by secularizing Christianity and transforming history into an eschatology intended to realize the reign of God on earth. Starting in 1904, Gentile observes in 'Origine e significato della logica di Hegel' (Origin and Meaning of Hegel's *Logic*) that Hegel's *Logic* must be read alongside the *Phenomenology*, for without it, the *Phenomenology* is 'a sphinx whose enigma not even Oedipus would have been able to solve'.<sup>[33]</sup>

Gentile responded as follows to those who regarded him as a neo-Hegelian:

Today one asks the neo-Hegelians whether they have the courage to come back and support Hegel's whole system, with its entire *Encyclopaedia*, that is, not only with its logic, but also with its whole philosophy and nature and the whole philosophy of the spirit. But the neo-Hegelians cannot bring the dead back to life: they can and must say that Hegel's thought is still alive, although Hegel himself is not. Hegel's thought is his new logic; his personal spirit had a certain

content, historically determined by experience, in the weave of which he could not help seeing the dialectical movement that his logic had uncovered in the innermost life of knowing and therefore of all knowing. But that should not be confused with the truth of his philosophy, through which he will live forever in the history of philosophy.<sup>[34]</sup>

By 1904, Gentile had already affirmed that the limits of the Hegelian dialectic and Hegelian logic were the same, and these, for Gentile, were also the limits of Hegelian philosophy. The limits of Hegelian philosophy are the limits of Hegelian logic, which Gentile defined as 'formal in the Kantian sense of the Critique of Pure Reason: as transcendental logic'.<sup>[35]</sup> For Gentile, given the formal nature of Hegel's logic, 'wanting the truth of logic to carry with it the truth of its content, which only empirical and phenomenological knowledge of nature and the spirit can impart, means not taking account of the profound difference between form and content.'<sup>[36]</sup> Gentile, then, does not completely reject formal Hegelian logic. Rather, he opposes the doctrines of nature and of thought, on which he focused his reform.<sup>[37]</sup> Gentile is interested in logic as a theory of knowledge and therefore a logic oriented toward a knowledge free of nature and of thought. His logic casts knowledge as the mediation of the thinking subject and thought object, for which knowledge is a continual process of the actuality of theory and practice. In order to understand Gentile's aims, one needs to bear in mind the narrow and continual debate that for many years, up until 1925, he had with Benedetto Croce, another reformer of Hegel. As Eugenio Garin notes, the two philosophers were very different. In Croce's work there is always

the tendency to present philosophy as a moment of critical reflection on research: questions of method, of classifications, of "categories" with the capacity to articulate experience and our reflections on experience, but never in "fixed tables".<sup>[38]</sup>

Gentile, on the other hand, tended toward the unifying act. During a discussion about the history of philosophy in July 1899, the young



Gentile responded to the more mature Croce apropos of the problem of whether speculative history is separate from the history of the imagination and the errors that occur in the mind of a philosopher.

These are two different histories. [There is no denying that they are different. You say: “There is only one type of history, only one good type...”.] In truth, I do not know how to decide which of them is right. Of the two distinct types mentioned above, I do not know how to refute either; but I see between them a certain relation that has never been seen by any of the supporters of either type: both sides are uncompromising. I say that both the empirical and the speculative type are legitimate; but the speculative type is legitimate only if it is understood in its own right and goes beyond the empirical type. Anyone who sets about doing speculative history must master the empirical: otherwise he makes a subjective and bizarre construction. Speculative history must be an elaboration of the empirical. Empirical history, therefore, must precede speculative history. Of course, real history is speculative, which is the empirical elaborated; but the empirical cannot by itself be denied. However, once we are clear on this point, I believe that about this we can agree.<sup>[39]</sup>

We can see here that Gentile, as an historian of philosophy, asks himself whether a philosopher’s history of philosophy must be different from the fantasies and errors that pass through the philosopher’s mind. Thought thinks these fantasies and errors and they are ‘true’ in the act of thought thinking, as Gentile goes on to affirm in ‘L’atto del pensare come atto puro’:

If error is the thought we cannot think, truth is the thought we cannot help thinking: two necessities that are only one necessity. *Verum norma sui et falsi*. Yet, meanwhile, we think thoughts to the extent that we inevitably think. That is another way of saying we think so far as we cannot think differently. Every act of thinking excludes another act of thinking (it does not exclude all other possible acts, but just the one thought

immediately preceding it). *Omnis determinatio est negatio*. And so I can only know the truth—I can only think, in other words—if I realize my own mistake and then free myself from it. The root of thinking and the fundamental law of logic lies in this living bond that joins (concrete) truth to (abstract) error.<sup>[40]</sup>

The history of philosophy is not, for Gentile, a well-structured body of doctrine intended to explore a sector of reality. Rather, it is the only way to understand human activity that in its various forms is essentially thought, a non-abstract thought, a concrete thought, and as such not dissociated from the empirical.

In 1907, Gentile announced the arrival of actualism when he wrote,

Philosophy is the absolutely human science: it is the essence of man. When it is implicit in human minds, it is the principle of every human prerogative; when it is explicit, it is the awareness of every human prerogative... There is an inevitable moment in the ideal development of the human spirit, which could have been called the eternal principle of philosophy: that moment in which the contrast between life and death, the difference between the world of being and of non-being, prompts man to ask himself: What is being?<sup>[41]</sup>

In the ‘Concetto della storia della filosofia’ (Concept of the History of Philosophy, 1907), the perspective that Gentile carries through to ‘L’atto del pensare come atto puro’ is already clearly apparent. The history of philosophy and philosophy itself are mutually equivalent, because ‘the history of philosophy outlines the history of humanity, the whole of history’;<sup>[42]</sup> ‘history is progress, and progress is cognition, or rather, it is the correction of errors, it is to continually go beyond oneself’;<sup>[43]</sup> and history is ‘man’s progress toward liberty’.<sup>[44]</sup> So philosophy is liberty: ‘every step toward true and proper liberty is a step forward for philosophy, for both the individual and for history’<sup>[45]</sup> and truth ‘is our creation, our achievement.’<sup>[46]</sup>

It is also important to make clear what Gentile means by ‘we’ or ‘us’: the we-subject of our thought is not, for Gentile, an ego opposed to the non-Ego (the alter-ego) or other Egos: this is not the empirical

ego of psychology, but the 'absolute Ego', '*autoctisi*', both being and consciousness of being, life and the performance of it: being insofar as it is consciousness of being. In 1912, in his essay on 'Il metodo dell' immanenza' (The Method of Immanence), Gentile clarifies this point:

The method of immanence, then, consists of the concept of the absolute concreteness of the real in the act of thought and in history. It is an act that transcends itself when it begins to posit something (God, nature, logical laws, moral laws, historical reality as a collection of facts, spiritual or psychic categories other than the actuality of consciousness) that is not the same Ego as the position of the self—what Kant called the I think. The method of immanence is both the point of view and the law of actual idealism. As such it has nothing to do with the homonymous method of a philosophy of action that believes itself able to move from the spiritual act by assuming that reality is outside it.<sup>[47]</sup>

For Gentile, experience is our very own way of knowing: in fact, for the actualist philosopher, experience was never regarded, as it should have been, as 'pure experience'. 'Truth,' writes Gentile, 'the object of knowledge, the universal that is essentially the thought itself in its realization, experience: all of these are one absolute and therefore pure experience, which is self-validating'.<sup>[48]</sup> It is not the experience of the empiricists, the fount of *a posteriori* knowledge; it is our own logical experience, 'a living, logical act, which creates its laws through the act of realizing them'.<sup>[49]</sup> And this conception of pure experience leads Gentile to this revolutionary conclusion: 'We always hold the truth in our grasp because we always think; and we never hold it in our grasp because we always think.'<sup>[50]</sup> Our thought process is the only truth. Actualism represents the discovery of this pure experience and the historical awareness of our limits, because we know that whatever discoveries we can make can always be surpassed, because people will always continue to think. The revolt against Descartes, nominally begun by Vico with his *verum ipsum factum*, had ended. In fact, Gentile called into question the entire

tradition which began with Descartes and concluded with Hegel. Gentile started all over again with the pure experience of the act of thought thinking (*pensiero pensante*), from a pure act understood as self-creation.

Gentile's close friend Benedetto Croce, with whom he often clashed, accused actualism of mysticism. But he did not recognise Gentile's attempt to go beyond Kant and Hegel after returning to Descartes and deconstructing him. The strange course that Gentile follows, from Hegel to Kant and from Kant to Descartes, concludes with the liquidation of the whole continental tradition that Descartes initiated. He called into question not modernity per se, but the model of modernity that Descartes had created. In Gentile, from the beginning, we can see his awareness of the need to establish a new basis for philosophy, as well as his dissatisfaction with all preceding theoretical systems. Actualism had overcome any conception of philosophy as a system of categories, because thought is equated with history and the reality that it created and tried to organize. As such, reality and history, as creations of thought, were no longer mysterious and hard to understand. Gentile's solution is paradoxically similar to that of Descartes' great adversary Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, what we know does not correspond to an objective reality, but to what our senses and our thought tell us. Thus the whole universe in which we live is an artificial universe, essentially created by us using mathematics and geometry. So for Hobbes, truths about things do not belong to those things, but to our claims about those things. The only eternal truth is our cognitive capacity, or what Gentile would have called our thought, because men will always think. Gentile holds that eternal truths do not exist, as they do for Hobbes, because there will always be new truths and new knowledge.

This young Sicilian came from Castelvetro, a small town in the province of Trapani, from a family beset by economic hardship due to the illness of Gentile's pharmacist father. Gentile managed to secure a place at the *Scuola Normale di Pisa*, the most elite institution in the Kingdom of Italy, and from there he went on to become a revolutionary thinker for Italy and one of the most

important people in Italian culture. He is known as the philosopher of Fascism, although he held the office of the Minister of Public Instruction only between 1922 and 1924, and no other political offices while the regime was in power, dedicating himself instead to teaching and cultural activities. Gentile set himself the problem of reconstructing an Italian philosophical tradition, although this is the least successful of Gentile's projects as a historian of philosophy. To reconcile philosophers of the Risorgimento, such as the irreligious Bertrando Spaventa, with the Catholics Antonio Rosmini and Vincenzo Gioberti, was a hard task. Moreover, these were minor philosophers, and it is understandable that Croce was doubtful about the value of these efforts; he told Gentile that these philosophers had little in common with one another. As has been noted, for European historians, after the death of Giordano Bruno, there is no longer any such thing as Italian philosophy. Croce and Gentile rediscovered Vico and Gentile presented him as a precursor of Hegel. In fact, Vico and Hegel had little in common, just as Gentile himself was not really a neo-Hegelian. Gentile's efforts were strategic: he did not want to isolate Italian thought and so reconnected it with that of the rest of Europe. From the seventeenth century onward, Italy—in contrast to Great Britain, which has been traditionally proud of the originality of its philosophy and its independence from those of the Continent—was fearful of becoming disconnected from modern European culture.

To Europeanize the Italian tradition, Gentile even reintroduced Spaventa's ill-fated theory of the circulation of Italian thought throughout Europe. Spaventa had maintained that modern philosophy was born in Italy during the Renaissance. The fact that the development of Bruno and Vico's ideas had been undertaken in Germany, by Kant and Hegel, should not, according to Spaventa, undermine the important role of Italian thought in the foundation of modern philosophy. This standpoint, as we have said, aimed not to isolate Italian thought but to reconnect it with that of the rest of the Continent. Spaventa's theory rested on the origins of modernity that were much discussed in European culture between 1800 and 1900. As has been noted, Italy was, for Jacob Burckhardt, the birthplace of

modernity. For him, there was a break between the medieval period and modernity. Karl Neumann had a different view. He started out with Burckhardt, but, because he was irritated by the fact that German culture was the product of classical antiquity rediscovered during the Renaissance in Italy, he offered a thesis according to which there was a line of stable continuity running through the Renaissance, the medieval period and German spirituality. For Max Weber, modernity began with the Protestant Reformation, to which we owe the spirit of capitalism. Political, cultural and nationalistic preoccupations are mixed up in all these discussions. Gentile takes up Burckhardt's thesis, affirming that Humanism constituted a revolution more profound than that of the Reformation, because the Humanists broke cleanly from the whole of medieval transcendence. But Gentile realized that the Humanists were never able to construct a new philosophy to set against the medieval transcendence they had criticized. Gentile held the Humanists to be philologists, and scholars, but not philosophers. Indeed, for him they were prototypical scholars; they represented the real affliction that beset Italian history, the cause of Italian decadence. As the historian Gioacchino Volpe argues, these afflictions were already visible to the philosopher of actualism by the end of the fifteenth century, with the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France and with the subsequent Battle of Fornovo. These events showed that the Italian rulers were unable to fight for the country and resist invasion. The archetypal scholar is Petrarch, and, in 1937, Gentile draws a contrast between this prototype of Humanism and Dante:

Dante is a man; and Petrarch is a scholar; an artist, yes, and an important one. But in accordance with his capacity to enclose himself within a restricted world, entirely his own, which, although it is his own universe, is not the great divine universe that bursts open in Dante Alighieri's soaring imagination. The spirit of the High Renaissance came from Petrarch—which lavished resplendent, immortal spectres upon an astounded Europe. But so too did the arid, bloodless progeny of the Baroque era: 'academicized', 'classicized'

literatures, which were concerned with pedantic issues of language, rhetoric and erudition. So we should also bear in mind that after literature comes anti-literature, and that academicism is countered by the anti-academicism of Giordano Bruno. Bruno, along with other natural philosophers at the time, moved away from Humanism, and worked hard to fill the lungs of mankind with great breaths of infinite nature. From the narrowness and particularity of the scholarly universe, *tout court*, they tried to make man into nature; to animate all of nature and make it fundamentally human. So academicism, as much as anti-academicism, is rooted in humanism.<sup>[51]</sup>

The contradiction between Gentile's characterization as the decadent scholar and as the 'the whole man' who was employed by the state comes right back to the matter of his attendance at the *Scuola Normale* in 1893. It is a distinction that can be seen throughout Gentile's interpretation of history and Italian culture. From a very early age, the philosopher questioned the problem of Italian decadence, a problem amply discussed by other Europeans. Marin Mersenne's circle—philosophers and scientists of modern Europe—regarded the burning of Giordano Bruno and the condemnation of Galileo as, in a sense, Italy's secession from Europe. They asked how, in a land such as Italy, a civilization like ancient Rome could have arisen. Dante and Machiavelli drew attention to the problem of the absence of a state, and lamented it. While the modern national states of Europe were being born, Italy remained divided into many conflicting states, and, after Napoleon, was governed by foreigners. Gentile began to reflect on Italian decadence because the first military outings of the newborn Kingdom of Italy were disastrous. The defeats at Custoza and Lissa in 1866, and above all the Battle of Dogali in 1887 and the Battle of Adua in 1896, where the Italians were defeated by the Ethiopians, were a shock to the nation. It was the first time a European army had been defeated by African troops. Gentile was twelve years old at the time of Dogali, and twenty years old at the time of Adua; like other students, he was shaken by these

events. Furthermore, on 29 July 1900, King Umberto II of Italy was killed by an anarchist. Italy was experiencing the first rumblings of anarchism and socialism; governments were short-lived; and many intellectuals began to worry about the stability of the new state. For Gentile, the cause of Italy's fragility was due to the Risorgimento being driven mainly by an exclusive elite which did not involve the Italian population at large—a diagnosis much the same as Gramsci's.

As an intellectual, Gentile faced the problem of creating a ruling class capable of unifying Italy. He dwelled on the figure of the scholar who had no sense of civic life and who—after the end of the Age of the Communes<sup>[52]</sup>—was symbolic of a civilization that was cultured, refined, rich and frivolous, but had no sense of national sovereignty, was incapable of defending its territory against foreign invasion, and was willing to let itself be governed by foreigners. These problems motivated Gentile to back Fascism, which is why he is usually remembered as 'the philosopher of Fascism' even though he was, above all, the philosopher of actualism. By the time Sicily was invaded by British and American troops in 1943, Gentile had been outside political life for many years and was detested by many members of the Party. He called on Italy to fight back against the invasion. He subsequently gave his support to the Italian Social Republic, the German puppet state. In his last public address, in Florence in 1944, he praised Hitler. It is often said that Gentile feared for his son, who was then imprisoned in a German concentration camp for failing to enlist in the army of Mussolini's Republic, but there is no documentary proof of this. On 15 April 1944, Gentile was killed by a communist commando as he returned home from a lesson. Since then he has been a controversial figure in Italian culture.

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

<sup>1</sup> Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy, Daniela.Coli@unifi.it.

<sup>2</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1970).



- [3](#) See Carlo Sini, 'Preface', in Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Sentieri biografici* (Milan, SugarCo Edizioni, 1990).
- [4](#) See Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity', *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985), pp. 161–75.
- [5](#) See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990).
- [6](#) See Carlo Augusto Viano, 'La crisi del concetto di "modernità" e la fine dell'età moderna', *Intersezioni*, IV (1984), pp. 25-39, p. 29. Viano's article explains the problems confronted by Habermas with great clarity. The quotation from Hegel is taken from his *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 11.
- [7](#) Leo Strauss's letter to Karl Löwith, dated 15 August 1946, can be found in 'Correspondence Concerning Modernity: Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss', *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (1983), pp. 105–19, p. 106.
- [8](#) See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London, Penguin Books, 2006).
- [9](#) See Raimondo Cubeddu, *Tra le righe. Leo Strauss su cristianesimo e liberalismo* (Lungo, Costantino Marco, 2010).
- [10](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 97–137, p. 114.
- [11](#) Having been Minister of Education in the first Mussolini government from 1922 to 1924, Gentile did not hold any further political office during the fascist regime.
- [12](#) Gentile refers here to Maurice Blondel.
- [13](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', p. 124.
- [14](#) *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- [15](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'L'atto del pensiero come atto puro', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, pp. 182–95, p. 189.
- [16](#) See René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. Étienne Gilson (Paris, Vrin, 1975), p. 36; see *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, eds. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 129.
- [17](#) See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980).
- [18](#) See René Descartes, *Méditations*, in his *Œuvres*, vol. IX, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris, Vrin, 1973), pp. 34–6; pp. 46–9 in standard pagination. See also *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, eds. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 31–4.

- [19](#) Gentile, 'L'atto del pensiero come atto puro', p. 189.
- [20](#) Ibid.
- [21](#) Ibid.
- [22](#) Ibid., p. 190.
- [23](#) Augusto Del Noce, *Riforma cattolica e filosofia moderna. Cartesio* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1965), p. 191.
- [24](#) Ibid., pp. 189–90.
- [25](#) See Augusto Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione* (Milano, Rusconi, 1978), pp. 12–13.
- [26](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', pp. 124–5.
- [27](#) See Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*, pp. 12–13.
- [28](#) See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (London, Penguin Classics, 1990).
- [29](#) Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*, p. 123.
- [30](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx* (Florence, Sansoni, 1974).
- [31](#) Del Noce, *Il suicidio della rivoluzione*, p. 126.
- [32](#) Ibid., p. 170.
- [33](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'Origine e significato della logica di Hegel', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, pp. 69–96, p. 71.
- [34](#) Ibid., pp. 71–2.
- [35](#) Ibid., p. 72.
- [36](#) Ibid.
- [37](#) Ibid., p. 74.
- [38](#) Eugenio Garin, 'Introduzione', in G. Gentile, *Opere filosofiche* (Milan, Garzanti, 1991), pp. 9–70, pp. 39–40.
- [39](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*, vol. 1 (Florence, Le Lettere, 2004), p. 192.
- [40](#) Gentile, 'L'atto del pensiero come atto puro', p. 187.
- [41](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', p. 102.
- [42](#) Ibid., p. 125.
- [43](#) Ibid., p. 126.
- [44](#) Ibid., p. 123.
- [45](#) Ibid.

[46](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', p. 124.

[47](#) Giovanni. Gentile, 'Il metodo dell'immanenza', *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, pp. 196–232, p. 232; see 'The Method of Immanence', §12, herein.

[48](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica', *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, pp. 233–262, p. 248; see 'Pure Experience and Historical Reality', §5, herein.

[49](#) Ibid., p. 249; see 'Pure Experience and Historical Reality', §6, herein.

[50](#) Ibid., p. 248; see 'Pure Experience and Historical Reality', §5, herein.

[51](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (Firenze, Sansoni, 1955), p. 12.

[52](#) [Editors' note: the term '*età comunale*' (Age of the Communes) refers to the period connecting the feudal period and the establishment of the autonomous city-states that characterized Italy through the Renaissance.]

# The Actuality of Gentile's Philosophy of History

Rik Peters<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 167–203

**Abstract:** This essay reconstructs Gentile's conception of history as the product of the eternal act of thinking. Peters charts the development of this distinctive position, presenting it as the product of a sustained attempt to unite past and present, fact and value, thought and action within a single theory. He argues that, despite a number of weaknesses that Gentile neglected to consider and the regrettable, dubious extremes to which he extended his theory in the Fascist period, it deserves greater attention from today's historians of philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

To some, the dedication of a collection of articles to Giovanni Gentile will seem an interesting initiative, to others an unhappy choice. Why should we spend time on an outdated and outlandish philosophy, written in a language which is only understandable to specialists, by a man who compromised himself by getting involved in Fascism? Perhaps some of these objectors would grant that Gentile's life is still interesting for historical reasons; no serious student of modern Italian culture can neglect Gentile's work in academia, his famous educational reforms, or the significance of his adherence to Fascism. But apart from those with a historical interest, who is still prepared to take Gentile seriously as a philosopher? Who still thinks that Gentile has something to say? Who really believes that actualism is still actual?

In the current philosophical literature, almost no one, apart from a few specialists, is prepared to stand up for the actuality of Gentile's philosophy. In Italy, renowned philosophers like Antimo Negri,

Gennaro Sasso and Hervé Cavallera have tried to revive Gentile's legacy, but so far these attempts have not led to a renewal of interest in his thought. Outside Italy, H.S. Harris's plea to have us regard Gentile's philosophy as a 'metaphysics of democracy' fell 'still-born from the press', Hayden White's references to Gentile's 'intuitions' were met by outright hostility, and James A. Gregor's claim that developing countries may profit from Gentile's political philosophy has not yet been borne out.<sup>[2]</sup> More recently, David. D. Roberts chose Croce, not Gentile, as a source of inspiration for his ideal of an open, mundane historicism.<sup>[3]</sup>

In my book, *History as Thought and Action*, I have presented Gentile, alongside Croce, de Ruggiero and Collingwood, as a representative of a 'pragmatic historicism'.<sup>[4]</sup> For at least three reasons pragmatic historicism is highly relevant for contemporary philosophy in general, and for the philosophy of history in particular. Firstly, in contrast to most contemporary philosophers of history, the four philosophers had firsthand experience of historical research, which made their contributions highly pertinent to historical practice. Secondly, not being plagued by the postmodern allergy to systematization, they studied history in a systematic way, exploring its relationships with other forms of experience, such as art and philosophy. Thirdly, and most importantly, the four philosophers were driven by their need to connect historical thought to action, whereas modern philosophy of history has largely neglected this subject.

Because of its radicalism, Gentile's actualism maybe even more relevant for contemporary philosophy of history than the philosophies of Croce, de Ruggiero and Collingwood. Whereas Collingwood saw his life's work as a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history, Gentile based his actualism on the *identity* of philosophy and history. With this doctrine he paved the way for Croce's *identity* of philosophy and history, but, unlike his friend, who saw philosophy as the methodology of history, Gentile stressed the immanence of philosophy in life. Moreover, whereas Croce always advocated a distinction, and Collingwood a *rapprochement*, between thought and action, Gentile boldly stated the *identity* of thought and action: to think is to act, and to act is to think. Only de Ruggiero followed

Gentile in this, but unlike his former master he could never develop a coherent philosophical system.<sup>[5]</sup> In short, for philosophers of history who seek to reinforce the relationship between thought and action in a systematic way, Gentile's actualism provides a good starting point.

This does not necessarily make Gentile's actualism a good finishing point, however. In *History as Thought and Action* and elsewhere I have shown how Gentile's radicalism led to extremes, both for better and for worse.<sup>[6]</sup> True, in his philosophy of education, his history of philosophy and his letters to colleagues he was a most empathic, understanding interpreter. Few philosophers before or after him have had his sensitivity to the relationship between teacher and pupil in the classroom, and few historians have equated his capacity to make past philosophies understandable. And it cannot be denied that Gentile matched his actions to his words: to his students he was the ideal teacher, inspiring many of them to follow his steps in the study of history and philosophy. However, there was a dogmatic side to Gentile's philosophy which manifested itself whenever he wanted to be judged in the right. In his history of philosophy, this dogmatism can be found whenever he presents actualism, or rather his interpretation of actualism, as the last word in philosophy. In his educational studies it can be found in his stress on the authority of the teacher. Finally, in his writings after 1922, Gentile's dogmatism reached a deplorable extreme when he rewrote history to present Vico and even Jesus as precursors of Fascism.<sup>[7]</sup>

In my book I have dealt with these discrepancies in Gentile's thought from a strictly historical point of view; my primary aim was to reconstruct the relationships between the four philosophers, not to evaluate their relevance to contemporary philosophy of history.<sup>[8]</sup> In this paper, I will reassess the value of Gentile's actualism from the perspective of the central problem of contemporary philosophy of history, which is the problem of fragmentation. This problem is best exemplified by recent handbooks in the philosophy of history which all deal with the covering law model, historical experience, hermeneutics, narrativism and 'presence' as accounts of the possible 'relations between past and present' without bringing these relations together in a coherent theory.<sup>[9]</sup> Even more significantly,

almost all recent handbooks overlook the relations of the present and the past to the future, with the result that the practical value of history gets no systematic attention.<sup>[10]</sup>

Given the pandemic fragmentation of contemporary philosophy of history, this paper evaluates the viability of Gentile's philosophical system as a starting point for a unified alternative. Focusing on its two central pillars—the identity of philosophy and history and the identity of thought and action—I will discuss their first form in Gentile's earliest works in section 2. In section 3, I will discuss the identity of philosophy and history in 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', which was Gentile's inaugural lecture in Palermo in 1907. In section 4, I will show how Gentile elaborated the identity of philosophy and history into a complete metaphysics of thought in his 1911 series of lectures 'L'atto del pensiero come atto puro', which also contains one of the first statements of the identity of thought and action. Focusing on the notion of *autoctisi*, I will argue that Gentile's metaphysics is best interpreted as an early precursor of contemporary theories of *autopoiesis*. In section 5, I will discuss how Gentile applied his autopoietic theory of thought to historical and practical education in his *Sommario di pedagogia*, which also contains the first elaboration of the identity of thought and action. In section 6, I will focus on two of Gentile's most important contributions to the philosophy of history: his path-breaking but almost unknown 'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica', which was his inaugural lecture at the University of Pisa in 1915, and the chapter on history in *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, which is much more familiar to English-speaking readers. Comparing the Pisan inaugural lecture to the chapter on history in the *Teoria generale*, I will argue that Gentile's main problem was that of striking a balance between subjectivity and objectivity within the self-creative, or autopoietic, act of thought. It is this problem Gentile tried to solve in his *Sistema di logica* by resolving thought and action into his *etica del sapere*, which is the subject of section 7. In the conclusion I will show that, in spite of its ambitious attempt to identify thought and action, Gentile's *etica del sapere* cannot satisfactorily counter the contemporary

fragmentation of the philosophy of history, though it provides a good starting-point for connecting it to modern systems theory.

## **2. 'Risorgere la Nostra Cultura': Philosophy, History and Action in Gentile's Early Development, 1897-1903.**

One of the most remarkable qualities of Gentile's philosophy is its consistency over time. From his first works to his last, he addressed the problem of the relationship between thought and action from the perspective of his ideal of safeguarding the assets of the *risorgimento*, which he always saw as Italy's heroic age of unification and cultural awakening. Significantly, in his first works, the unity between thought and action was not a problem, but a self-evident truth. In his 1897 *tesi di laurea, Rosmini e Gioberti*, Gentile explicitly aimed to preserve the heritage of the *risorgimento* by writing its history, and more particularly by writing the history of its philosophy.<sup>[11]</sup> The main practical goal of this history was therefore to 'relive' or 'revive' the past for the present. In line with this view of the function of history, Gentile distinguished sharply between concepts, which he identified with the contingent content of thought, and categories, which he explicitly saw as 'eternal forms' or 'functions' of thought, claiming that the content of thought can only be understood in the light of category.<sup>[12]</sup> Most importantly, in *Rosmini e Gioberti* Gentile had already established the doctrine of absolute immanence by which he identified philosophy with experience. For Gentile, experience was inherently philosophical; all human beings are philosophers, from the shepherds and farmers of his native Sicily to Rosmini and Gioberti, though all in their own ways.<sup>[13]</sup> The philosophy of the shepherds and the farmers is implicit in their activities, whereas the philosophies of Rosmini and Gioberti are explicit to themselves and inform their political action. But to all forms of experience philosophy is immanent: thought and action form a unity.

Between 1897 and 1903, Gentile elaborated this unity of thought and action in his educational works and his studies of Marx's philosophy.<sup>[14]</sup> In the latter he gave more coherence to the unity of thought and action by adopting the notion of 'praxis'. After tracing the



origin of this concept to Socrates, for whom knowing was a 'productive activity', and comparing it with Kant's notion of the *a priori*, Gentile explicitly identified the notion of 'praxis' with Vico's *verum et factum convertuntur* principle. By equating 'cognition' with 'praxis', says Gentile, Vico sought to reject Descartes' foundation of knowledge in immediate consciousness, pointing out that in order to do that, we first need to understand what consciousness is. This means that truth is not a given fact, but something that is discovered by creating it, from which it follows that 'making is the unavoidable condition of knowing'.<sup>[15]</sup> With the help of Marx, Gentile transformed Vico's *verum et factum* principle into a dialectic of thought and action in which the two terms are only vaguely distinguished: action is similar to thought in that it is inherently self-conscious, and thought is similar to action in that it is active, productive and creative.<sup>[16]</sup> In this context, he emphasized that in practice the object of the will and the object of thought coincide; what we shall do is what we know, and what we know is dependent on what we shall do. Praxis is thus strongly related to history; the product of man's praxis is society, the history of which should be studied in order further to develop praxis.<sup>[17]</sup> From this notion of praxis, it is only one step to Gentile's later theory of the self-creative act of thought in which volition and knowledge are completely identified. At the end of *La filosofia della prassi* Gentile proudly announced this step by citing Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it'.<sup>[18]</sup>

### **3. 'La Vera Filosofia è Storia': The Identity of Philosophy and History**

In line with Marx's thesis, Gentile himself set about changing Italy in the first decade of the twentieth century. In those years, he established his name as a campaigner for educational reforms, and as the co-founder of *La Critica* he became, along with Croce, a leader of a vast cultural revolution. True to the aims of his own philosophy, Gentile sought to reform Italy by studying its history, and in particular the history of Italian philosophy, publishing dozens of

articles on this subject in *La Critica*.<sup>[19]</sup> At the same time, Gentile further refined his own philosophy in a series of papers in which he gradually strengthened his own philosophical position. The unifying theme in these papers is, in Gentile's own terms, the resolution of reality into the act of thought, which leads to the view of reality as history. Logically, the resolution into the pure act of thought amounts to the 'method of immanence', in which can be seen a bold deconstruction of classical philosophical distinctions into a series of identities.<sup>[20]</sup>

The first of these identities was the identity between philosophy and history, first stated in 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', Gentile's inaugural lecture at the University of Palermo in 1907. Gentile himself saw it as a '*programma di lavoro*' (programme of work), and so it was: in the lecture, Gentile laid the foundation for his own position, which turns on the idea that philosophy creates itself out of its own history. This idea of self-creation would be the paradigm for the dialectic of thought in the 1911 series of lectures on 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro' (The Act of Thinking as Pure Act), which provides the basis for his constructivist conception of all forms of experience, including action, in his subsequent works. Moreover, the identity of philosophy and history was also the first bone of contention between Gentile and Croce, who, after some hesitation, adopted it in a different form in his own philosophy.<sup>[21]</sup> Given its importance in Gentile's development, the inaugural lecture deserves a longer discussion in order to draw out its account of the specific relationship between philosophy and history.

The first thing to notice in this context is that Gentile developed the identity of philosophy and history on the basis of his specialist experience as a historian of philosophy. Given this background, it is not surprising that he begins his lecture with the fundamental dichotomy between the philological and the philosophical approaches to the history of philosophy. According to Gentile, philologists tend to present the history of philosophy as something determined by social and biographical circumstances. Philosophers challenge this approach by presenting the history of philosophy as a single rational development which is not conditioned by historical

circumstances.<sup>[22]</sup> Gentile proudly enters this arena with the ambitious claim to possess one single concept of philosophy which unifies the philological and philosophical conceptions of the history of philosophy.<sup>[23]</sup> In his lecture, Gentile develops this concept from the problem of being, which he presents as ‘the eternal problem of philosophy’, thereby foreshadowing later existentialists.<sup>[24]</sup> According to Gentile, the problem of being necessarily arises for the human spirit, which he views as ‘the essential consciousness of being’. On the basis of absolute immanentism, Gentile claims that all forms of human experience are directed toward the solution of this problem; all our poetry, language, concepts, categories have been, and are still being, developed in order to solve the central metaphysical problem of being. From this it follows that the history of philosophy is nothing but our account of the past solutions to the metaphysical problem of being which is immanent in human experience.<sup>[25]</sup>

After this, Gentile offers a short overview of the history of philosophy in which he shows that the concept of being has been progressively interpreted in terms of history. According to Gentile the Greeks still formulated the problem of being in ‘objectivist terms’: they accepted being as ‘pre-existent’ to thought. Modern philosophy, however, slowly came to grips with the ‘subjectivist’ point of view; it was gradually realized that the categories with which we interpret our world are of our own making.<sup>[26]</sup> Gentile’s heroes of modern philosophy are Vico and Kant, since they pointed out that truth is not thinkable without the all-creative act of thought.<sup>[27]</sup> These two thinkers thus prepared the way to modern philosophy, which has completely replaced the notion of a static, non-human truth with the notion of dynamic, human truth:

Past knowledge makes way for knowledge *in fieri*, in eternal *fieri*; and to the ‘inhumane’, non-temporal, and non-mundane truth, succeeds human truth, which is temporal and mundane; the truth that is history.<sup>[28]</sup>

In modern philosophy, truth is seen as being formed in history, and this process of truth-formation, or ‘*scienza in fieri*’ is logically prior to finished thought, or ‘*scienza fatta*’.<sup>[29]</sup> On this basis Gentile states the

central thesis of his lecture, which is that philosophy and history must be identical:

Because, if modern philosophy is history, if it is the gradual conquest that the spirit makes of itself as activity of being, or as being that becomes: then, conversely, history cannot be anything but philosophy.<sup>[30]</sup>

In this passage Gentile weaves all the threads of his lecture together into a full-blown constructivism: the central problem of philosophy is the problem of being; modern philosophy is the gradual conquest of the concept of being in terms of history, and therefore the problem of modern philosophy is history. Vice versa, history is philosophy, because it is the account of this conquest. Philosophy, which is based on this history, must therefore be seen as the self-conscious conquest of the concept of being in terms of history, because, for modern philosophy reality is history.

On the basis of this constructivist view of reality, Gentile reconciles the philological and philosophical approaches to the history of philosophy. On the one hand, this history can only 'reconstruct' past thought on the basis of documents; on the other hand, it must take into account the logic within and between the philosophical systems.<sup>[31]</sup> The history of philosophy is therefore both 'deterministic' and 'teleological': on the one hand it shows the religious, artistic, and social circumstances that formed the philosopher, and on the other hand it shows how the thought of the philosopher participates in the ideal and eternal history of philosophy. Every philosopher must therefore study the history of philosophy to establish his own position.<sup>[32]</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Gentile claims that philosophy does not reach the truth by itself; as 'self-consciousness' it involves all forms of experience. From this it follows that the histories of art, customs, economics and the state can and must contribute to a single universal history, to be identified with the history of philosophy: '*la storia della filosofia compendia la storia della umanità, tutta la storia*' (the history of philosophy comprises the history of humanity, and indeed all of history).<sup>[33]</sup>

On this point, Gentile unites thought and action by identifying the history of humanity with the history of liberty:

The history of humanity moves forward, continuously spurred by the will, and liberated through civil, economic, political, religious and scientific struggles, toward the absolute liberty of reason, whose ideal, fully realized form, would seem to be the conclusion of history. But since any ideal is realized in an infinite life, the conclusion will not come; neither will perfect ethical liberty ever be a fact, and men forever endeavour to humanize themselves, to make themselves more free, in the ceaseless rhythm of morality and philosophy.<sup>[34]</sup>

Without doubt this statement greatly impressed Gentile's audience, because it opens an entire new field for philosophers. In order to realize the liberty of mankind, they should no longer limit themselves to history of philosophy *sensu stricto*, but expand their studies to the histories of art, religion, science, economy, and politics. From this viewpoint, philosophy can be found, as Gentile found it, in the poetry of Ariosto, the religious beliefs of children, the science of Leonardo and Galileo, and in the actions of political leaders like Garibaldi and Mazzini. It is only on the basis of these histories that philosophers may hope to unite thought and action in the infinite process of the liberation of humanity. In this way, Gentile forged an iron bond between philosophy, history and action. In the inaugural lecture, this was still a promise, but it would not take long before he developed it into a single identity of thought and action.

#### **4. *Autoctisi*: The Identity of Thought and Action: 1911–12**

Gentile gave the first systematic account of the identity of thought and action in the winter of 1911, in a series of lectures that were later summarized in 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro'. In this summary, Gentile states that reality is identical with the act of thought, which dialectically develops itself by reflecting its own as '*autoctisi*'.<sup>[35]</sup> Though this concept was to play an important role in all his subsequent works, most of Gentile's interpreters have preferred to

discuss it from the perspective of the dialectic of thought. Though not completely incorrect, this interpretation tends to exclude some essential characteristics of Gentile's dialectic. As H.S. Harris pointed out, '*ktisis*' was the word by which the Greek Fathers of the Church referred to the creation of the world *ex nihilo*.<sup>[36]</sup> '*Autoctisi*' can therefore be rendered in English as 'self-constitution' or as 'self-creation'.<sup>[37]</sup> By identifying the dialectic of thought with '*autoctisi*' Gentile wished to stress the self-creative dimension of thought in order to show its 'purity'. According to Gentile the act of thought is pure, that is, without presuppositions, because it creates its own presuppositions. Furthermore, because of this creativity, thought is identical with action, because both are constitutive of reality. This is the claim of the fifteenth thesis of 'L'atto del pensiero come atto puro', which carries the title 'Il pensiero come volontà' (thought as will).<sup>[38]</sup>

In *History as Thought and Action*, I have dealt with the logic of Gentile's metaphysics of thought. Here I wish to stress its relevance for contemporary philosophy. From this perspective, it is important not to underestimate the radicalism of Gentile's metaphysics. In fact, it is difficult to find an equivalent of Gentile's metaphysics in the history of philosophy. Fichte is the first to come to mind, but H.S. Harris has convincingly shown that Fichte's *Thathandlung* does not exactly correspond to Gentile's *autoctisi* because the *Thathandlung* still presupposes a substantial Ego outside itself, whereas Gentile's *autoctisi* resolves the Ego into the act of thought.<sup>[39]</sup>

The only example which comes really close to Gentile's metaphysics of the *autoctisi* can be found in modern philosophy of biology. In their recent book *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy*, Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant and Sean Watson discuss Varela's and Maturana's notion of *autopoiesis* as an idealist theory of self-organization of living systems, giving the following implications for the theory of cognition:

1. There is no representation in cognition. Neither we, nor any other organism extract information from a pre-given world and "represent" it to ourselves.

2. Cognition, then, is not *of* a world; rather ... cognition “brings forth a world”.
3. Cognition is, therefore, coextensive with life. To live is to experience.
4. Cognition runs far wider than mere “thought”. All living entities engage in cognition. Cognition is possible even in the absence of a brain or nervous system.
5. To know something new is to endure a change in structure. To change in structure is to “do something”. To know is to act: “knowing is effective action”.<sup>[40]</sup>

Dunham *cum suis* are quite surprised to find this autopoietic theory in biology, and point to possible predecessors like J.C. Smuts and A.N. Whitehead.<sup>[41]</sup> But given the many similarities between the characteristics of *autopoiesis* and Gentile’s *autoctisi*, it seems that autopoietic thinking was linked to idealism before these thinkers, and not in the context of science, but of history. Indeed, in spite of the fact that Maturana and Varela developed their ideas in the context of biology, whereas Gentile developed his ideas in the context of philosophy and history, the latter would have subscribed to each of the points in the above list.

Firstly, by identifying the dialectic of thought with *autoctisi*, he could reject the notion of thought as a representation of reality as the neo-Kantians and the early Croce still held.<sup>[42]</sup> At the same time, by identifying *autoctisi* with thought, Gentile could distance himself from thinkers like Dilthey, Bergson, and Bradley, who tried to explain reality in terms of immediate experience.<sup>[43]</sup> Secondly, the notion that thought is creative, in the sense that it brings forth a world, is central to Gentile’s notion of *autoctisi* and forms the basis for his identity of thought and action. Thirdly, the idea that cognition is coextensive with life and experience is identical with Gentile’s idea of absolute immanentism, which equates thought with experience of reality. Fourthly, since Gentile limited his notion of *autoctisi* to human thought, he would probably object to the application of the notion to the cognition of all living creatures. But he did hold that within

*autoctisi*, thought went all the way down to sensation, and all the way up to collective thought. In fact, the latter idea was the kernel of his interpretation of the Transcendental Ego as ‘the one who thinks for all’.<sup>[44]</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Gentile could not but agree with Maturana and Varela’s view that ‘knowing is effective action’, because, like *autopoeisis*, *autoctisi* describes how thought posits itself and its object in a single act which is constitutive of reality.

Also on the negative side, modern cognitive biology and Gentile’s idealism correspond for both have been accused of subjectivism and even solipsism.<sup>[45]</sup> This accusation is even more pertinent to Gentile’s philosophy, because, unlike Varela and Maturana, he still clung to the human subject as the centre of the autopoietic dialectic of thought. In what follows, I will discuss how Gentile addressed the charge of subjectivism in his philosophy of history, but first I will deal with the elaboration of his autopoietic dialectic of thought in the philosophy of mind.<sup>[46]</sup>

### **5. *Pedagogia e Filosofia: Rolling out Autopoiesis.***

The first field to which Gentile applied his autopoietic logic was education. In his first systematic work, the 1912 *Sommario di pedagogia*, he unrolls it over the entire philosophy of mind from sensation to action. This analysis results in the famous identity of philosophy and education which recognizes the relationship between teacher and pupil as a single process between two self-creative minds.<sup>[47]</sup> On this basis, Gentile points out that education is not a psychological but an ethical science, because it does not deal with the natural development of the spirit, but with the development of its ideals. Along these lines, Gentile draws some interesting conclusions, some of which are still relevant to modern education, such as the idea that teachers should try to understand the pupil in order to understand themselves.<sup>[48]</sup> Furthermore, the *Sommario di pedagogia* also contains some interesting remarks regarding historical education, in which we recognize the contours of Gentile’s later philosophy of history. The most important point he makes in this context, is that there are no given facts in history, because the object



of history depends on the historian's point of view. For example, seen from different points of view conceptions of Christianity will vary; in fact, Gentile remarks, there is not one Christianity, but a plurality of Christianities.<sup>[49]</sup> For this reason, the teacher of history cannot limit himself to teaching the facts of history. In order to understand Plato, for example, the teacher should expound the facts of Plato's life in order to 'actualize' his philosophy. Accordingly, the main function of 'living history' is not the representation but the actualization of facts, which is 'living history, ... the history of facts in the act; that is, the concrete act'.<sup>[50]</sup>

Most importantly, the *Sommario di pedagogia* contains the first full elaboration of the identity of thought and action. Starting from the problematic idea that we all distinguish between thought and will, or knowing and acting, and yet experience ourselves as one self, Gentile suggests that the distinction between thought and will is based on a false presupposition. Apparently, Gentile says, there is a distinction between 'psychic acts' which presuppose the world and acts which create it. We associate the first with 'thought' and the second with 'action'. But once we understand that the object of thought is nothing but the subject that objectifies itself, the distinction between presupposing and creating an object vanishes; thought does not presuppose reality but creates it.<sup>[51]</sup>

To illustrate this doctrine, Gentile gives the example of a murderer. Seen from the outside, we can distinguish between his intention to kill, and the action of killing itself; in fact, we can even recognize that the intention to kill does not necessarily lead to its intended result. But, seen from the inside, this distinction between intention and action cannot be made at all: 'the will to murder,' writes Gentile, 'is that unique spiritual act which is accomplished when the blow is struck'.<sup>[52]</sup> In other words, viewing them from the outside, we distinguish between thought and action, but, seen from the inside, the thought of murder and the killing itself form a single act; thought and action coincide. Gentile rightly notes that identity of thought and action leads to difficult dualism between an objectivist, outsider's view of action, and a subjectivist, insider's view. In this context, Gentile claims that the latter, which interprets the will as an act of

thought, is more 'real' than the former, which reduces action to an object. It is only from the inside that we can see the killing as a free, moral act, and not as a causally conditioned event.<sup>[53]</sup>

In spite of its clarity, this example raises some issues concerning the relationship between the subjective and objective points of view. Gentile obviously identifies thought with action to account for the morality of both; if thought is as free as action it can be judged as a moral act. But what does this mean in practice? Does it mean we should condemn the murderer even if he fails to realize his intentions, or should we conclude that, if he failed to carry out the murder, he never really had the intention to kill? Gentile's analysis throws no light on this, because he is talking of the act of thought *during* the killing, but given the fact that the example is given as an illustration for his claim that thought creates its own reality, it would follow that to think of a murder is equal to committing it. But apart from this absurd conclusion, Gentile's claim that thought does not presuppose reality, because, like action, it creates reality, presupposes that action is not conditioned by reality, that is, that all action is free. Obviously, this doctrine holds as long as we analytically identify thought and action on the level of the transcendental ego, but as soon as we recognize that the life of the mind comprises more than thought, this identification will crumble. This is what Gentile discovered when he applied his autopoietic logic to the practice of history.

## **6. Between Subjectivism and Objectivism**

In 1915, Gentile carried his absolute immanentism to an extreme limit in 'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica', which was his inaugural lecture in Pisa in 1915. As the title of this lecture indicates, Gentile claims that nothing transcends experience, which he equates with the act of thought. Reality is therefore experience and experience is history. This position raises the question about the status of experiences such as sensations, dreams, and fantasies. Obviously, though these experience cannot be equated with thought, they are certainly real in the actualist sense that we actually feel, dream and

fantasize. Gentile solves the problem by pointing out that dreams and fantasies are only real when we become conscious of them. A dream does not exist outside thought; while we dream we do not know that we are dreaming; it is only when we wake up that we know we dreamt. Likewise, poems do not exist in the abstract: the concrete *Divina Commedia* is not the product of a man who died in 1321, but the product of we who read, interpret and judge it. A poem or fantasy is therefore not 'given', but only exists in our thought. <sup>[54]</sup>

Up to this point, Gentile still repeats the doctrine expounded in 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', but when he gives an example of the way we read Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, he recognizes 'two moments' in our experience.

[W]hen I read *Orlando Furioso*, I am captivated by the vague imaginings of the poet, and I forget myself and everything else. At that moment I find myself drawn into a coherent world, which does not seem like a fabric of inventions, but as a weave of historical facts. All of a sudden, the spell is broken and I wake up; my previous interpretation would be turned upside down by a whole host of preconceived judgements formed by my culture or experience in which Ariosto's whole world would be relegated to his imagination. There are moments, in the genesis of experience that I do not reconnect to the whole of experience itself; or rather, I do reconnect them, but I do so negatively, characterizing them almost as if they were the superstructure of experience. And, of course, all this takes place in the heart of experience. <sup>[55]</sup>

Interestingly, this passage shows that Gentile recognizes that the reader can be 'enraptured' by the poem, which constitutes 'a coherent world' that makes him forget about his surroundings. Elsewhere, I have shown that this recognition of a highly subjective aesthetic experience of the past brings Gentile's theory close to the contemporary theories of sublime historical experience and the theory of presence. <sup>[56]</sup> But there is more to it than that. In the passage given above, Gentile points out that the stage of rapture logically and temporally precedes the reader's judgements of

Ariosto's poem. The aesthetic experience of reading the poem thus stands as an 'undetermined' part vis-à-vis the judgements that 'determine' it by relegating it to a larger whole. In other words, the aesthetic experience is an undermined 'that' for the judgements that determine its 'what'.

By this analysis of the aesthetic experience, Gentile, like contemporary theorists of historical experience, accounts for the highly subjective experience of the past. But unlike these theorists, he also indicates a way out of this subjectivity by showing how aesthetic experiences can be objectified by judgements which have 'already been formed' in the reader's culture. In his Pisan inaugural lecture he does not explain how this formation takes place, but it is clear that he wanted to ground the objectivity of the reader's judgements in 'culture', which may be identified with 'education'.

This reading is corroborated by Gentile's discussion of the 'historical antinomy' in the chapter on history in *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*. With the historical antinomy, Gentile summarizes the problem of the relationship between conditioned and unconditioned thought, which is central to his notion of *autoctisi*:

*Thesis*: "the spirit is history, because it is dialectical development"; and

*Antithesis*: "the spirit is not history, because it is eternal act".

[57]

In order to illustrate this antinomy, Gentile turns again to Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. When we read this poem, Gentile argues, two Ariostos present themselves. One Ariosto is spirit, the 'unconditioned conditioner of all conditions' and the 'act of thought that posits its own reality'. The 'other' Ariosto appears as a finite being conditioned by antecedent facts. The first Ariosto is the object of literary criticism, which judges in Ariosto the eternal beauty of his poetry. The second is the object of historical criticism, which is concerned with Ariosto as a historical fact, conditioned by space and time, and only understandable in relation to other facts. The first Ariosto is eternal, the second is historical.

As usual, Gentile solves this antinomy according to his method of immanence, that is, by resolving the antithesis into 'concrete thought'. He begins by repeating the argument of his Pisan inaugural lecture: the only Ariosto I know, says Gentile, is the Ariosto of the poem, which I read as a concrete individual; I can affirm as much of Ariosto's reality as I can 'realize' for myself.<sup>[58]</sup> Interestingly, this realization is very similar to what Gadamer would later call a 'fusion of horizons', and, like the German, Gentile stresses the importance of language for hermeneutics.<sup>[59]</sup> In order to 'realize' Ariosto's past, says Gentile, I must read the poem, and this means that I must know the language in which it is written. This language, in turn, can never be found in dictionaries, so I have to read what Ariosto himself read. And to know the language of any writer means to take the history in which Ariosto lived his life into account. At the same time, we cannot completely identify ourselves with Ariosto because the only Ariosto we know is the author of *Orlando furioso*, which we can only read from the perspective of our own concrete individuality. Gentile goes on to embed this individuality in 'ideal eternal history', which he describes as continuous history of criticism:

So true is this, that there is a history not only of Ariosto, but of the criticism of Ariosto, criticism which concerns not only the reality which the poem was in the poet's own spiritual life, but what it continues to be after his death, through the succeeding ages, in the minds of his readers, true continuators of his poetry.<sup>[60]</sup>

Again this idea of a continuous criticism of Ariosto's poem reminds us of Gadamer. Like the German, Gentile stresses how our reading of Ariosto presupposes previous interpretations: we read Ariosto in the light of the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or effective history of previous interpretations, which form the perspective from which we judge the poem. In this perspective, the subjective experience of the reader is linked to an objective, or more precisely *intersubjective* history, which Gentile calls 'ideal eternal history', which coincides with the history of philosophy. Philosophy thus provides the norm for the objectivity of our historical judgements.

'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica' and the chapter on history in *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* were Gentile's two major contributions to the philosophy of history before the *Sistema di logica*. Taken together, they account for the subjective and the objective dimensions of historical thought. In his Pisan inaugural lecture, Gentile tried to show how the historian, on the basis of his subjective experience of reading a text, reaches a judgement based on his previously formed culture, which may be equated with his education. In the chapter on history in the *Teoria generale*, Gentile specifies this notion of culture in terms of 'ideal eternal history', which is very similar to Gadamer's notion of effective history. Historical judgement can therefore be described as the act of thought which determines an undetermined 'that' into a 'what' on the basis of historiography. To put it in Gentile's own words, *res gestae* (deeds done) and *historia rerum gestarum* (history of the deeds done) coincide; the past exists only in function of historical thought. From this identity of *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* it follows that the sole norm for the objectivity of historical thought is historical thought itself.<sup>[61]</sup> Outside this there is nothing because concrete thought does not presuppose a reality outside itself; concrete thought is completely *norma sui*.

As many interpreters have pointed out, this position runs the risk of straying into subjectivism or even solipsism.<sup>[62]</sup> This risk becomes even more apparent when we consider that Gentile, unlike Gadamer, did not acknowledge effective history as a presupposition for our judgements, because concrete thought has no presuppositions outside itself. After *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, Gentile's problem was therefore to show how concrete thought can be objective without losing its purity, that is, without being based on presuppositions outside itself. This is the challenge Gentile took up in his *Sistema di logica*.

## **7. *Etica del Sapere: Closing the System***

That Gentile took the challenge very seriously is proven by the fact that it took him five years to complete the 669 pages of the two

volumes of his *Sistema di logica*. Moreover, to make his point, he introduced many neologisms which make the work extremely difficult to read. Probably for this reason, Collingwood found Gentile's *Sistema di logica* less 'inspiring' than the *Sommario di pedagogia*, and Roger Holmes, one of the most competent critics of Gentile's logic, dedicated an entire chapter to explaining the meaning of more than twenty key concepts included in the work.<sup>[63]</sup>

In *History as Thought and Action* I have interpreted Gentile's logic as an account of a philosophical learning process that learns from its own past.<sup>[64]</sup> Here I wish to stress its autopoietical character. When we read Dante's *Divina Commedia*, for example, we not only reflect on Dante's thoughts, but also on our own thoughts, including the principles on which they are based. In other words, by reading *La Divina Commedia* we not only revise our ideas about Dante and his poem, but also on our own ideas of poetry and aesthetics. The learning activity described in *Sistema di logica* is therefore thoroughly autopoietical. In this context, Gentile stresses that it is a free activity; it is therefore our duty continuously to revise our ideas in order to find the truth. This is the kernel of the *etica del sapere*, which Gentile saw as the culmination of the identity of thought and action; we are responsible for thinking the truth.

Since this doctrine sounds quite bewildering, we should keep in mind that from Gentile's viewpoint philosophical truth cannot be found in correspondence between thought and reality, nor in coherence between thoughts. In the first case, we would presuppose a reality which is not thought, and in the second case we would presuppose a thought that we do not think ourselves. The only norm that we can accept for truth is that we ourselves think it as true; concrete thought is *norma sui*. Being *norma sui*, concrete thought is free, and this commits us to take responsibility for thinking the truth: 'My truth is my truth, and I am responsible for it precisely because it is wholly mine, [a] reality whose origin is within me; that is, [within] my action, my self'.<sup>[65]</sup>

This definition of concrete truth has a definite subjectivist ring about it: I can only take responsibility for *my* truth, that is, the truth *I* can think according to *my own* principles. Obviously, this position

puts a heavy burden on the distinction between concrete thought and abstract thought, that is, the thought of others, based on principles which differ from my thought.

Gentile himself was well aware of the necessity of this distinction between concrete and abstract thought and he explicitly connected it to the freedom of thought:

In order to attain concreteness, historicity and positivity of liberty, self-consciousness not only requires the identity of the object and the subject of thought, but also difference: the hard and rigid opposition of thinking and thought, of concrete and abstract logos.<sup>[66]</sup>

Given the general autopoietic character of Gentile's philosophy, this hard opposition between concrete thought and abstract thought can only be made *within* concrete thought. The central question of the *Sistema di logica* is therefore that of how concrete thought can distinguish itself from abstract thought within itself. Gentile's solution to this problem is long, ingenious and complicated, but it amounts to the thesis that concrete thought distinguishes itself from abstract thought by positing the latter as a norm for itself.<sup>[67]</sup>

In order to buttress this thesis, Gentile introduces the concept of '*logos*', which he identifies with 'reality in its intelligibility'<sup>[68]</sup> or 'the ultimate truth about all reality' or as 'the presupposition of all thought'.<sup>[69]</sup> Holmes interprets *logos* as that which 'provides truth value for judgements' and adds that 'the truth values which it provides are ultimate in a metaphysical sense which makes logos synonymous with reality'.<sup>[70]</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the *logos* is not logic itself; it is the metaphysical basis of logic or that which provides thought with truth. In the *Sistema di logica* Gentile is not concerned with the truth of this or that particular thought, but with the metaphysical conditions for truth.

Gentile next distinguishes between abstract logos and concrete logos. Abstract *logos* is the truth-norm of abstract thought, that is, thought which is based on a norm that lies outside itself. Gentile's paradigm for abstract thought is formal logic, which is entirely built on norms outside itself. Its three fundamental principles are the three



Aristotelian laws: the principles of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded middle, which all presuppose abstract *logos*, the immutable reality that transcends our thought.<sup>[71]</sup> According to Gentile, the outstanding feature of this logic is its ‘circularity’; when we make a judgement according to the rules of formal logic, he writes, we move from the affirmation to the negation of its contradictory, and from the negated contradictory back to the affirmation.<sup>[72]</sup> For example, if we affirm the judgement that ‘virtue is knowledge’, we deny the judgement ‘virtue is not-knowledge’ and when we have travelled along all instances of not-knowledge, we affirm again that ‘virtue is knowledge’. For this reason Gentile compares the movement of thought based on abstract *logos* to a moving point in a circle which always returns to its starting point.<sup>[73]</sup>

According to Gentile, the force of abstract thought is its cogency and its weakness is its infertility; because of its circularity, it never develops new thoughts. Moreover, it can never escape scepticism. Abstract thought can never answer the question, ‘Why?’; in the end, it can only answer, ‘Because it is so’. If we ask, for example, ‘Why is virtue knowledge?’, the abstract thought can only give the answer: ‘Because it is not ignorance’. If we continue to ask: ‘Why is it not ignorance?’, it must answer again, ‘Because it is knowledge’.<sup>[74]</sup>

The logic of the abstract can therefore never justify its own premises; it is not *norma sui* and therefore it is bound to dissolve itself. Abstract logic can only proceed on the basis of truths about which we cannot ask questions; we have to accept them or not. This cannot be the procedure of concrete thought, which provides itself with its own *logos*.

Concrete *logos* is the norm of concrete thought, which is completely *norma sui*. The *logos* that provides concrete thought with value is the ‘I think’ or the ‘Ego’; when we think concretely, we must not only think, but also know *why* we think as we do.<sup>[75]</sup> For this reason, the Ego must continuously revise itself in a process that Gentile calls ‘*autosintes*’ (autosynthesis).<sup>[76]</sup> In this process the Ego continuously ‘objectifies’ itself into non-Ego in order to become a new Ego, or, to put it differently, the norm for truth is developed by the act of thought itself. So whereas the abstract *logos* moves in a

circle, the concrete *logos* breaks out of the circle and describes a spiral. In this context, Gentile compares the development of the concrete *logos* to a '*scala contrattile*' (flight of stairs) of which the lower steps disappear and the higher steps come into existence as one ascends.<sup>[77]</sup>

On the basis of this distinction between abstract and concrete *logos*, Gentile is able to answer the central question of how concrete thought posits abstract thought as a norm for itself. If we want to know Dante's poetry, says Gentile, we adopt it as a concept for our own thought, that is, we adopt it as a 'circular thought' which functions as a norm of our thought.<sup>[78]</sup> Gentile warns, however, that we do not really think the concept of Dante as something pre-existent to our thought; we should never forget that it is present thought which generates Dante as a norm for itself.<sup>[79]</sup> In another passage Gentile calls this norm '*idealità*' (ideality) which opposes itself to reality; the concept of Dante, which *pensiero pensante* generates for itself, functions as a regulative idea. *Pensiero pensato* thus has two functions in *pensiero pensante*; the concept is both the assumption from which we start, and the regulative idea at which we aim our thought.<sup>[80]</sup> We start from a concept and we aim at a concept, the 'new' concept of Dante that will be a self-identical entity with fixed predicates. *Pensiero pensante* must take both Dante as *pensiero pensato* and Dante as ideality into account.

As we have seen, Gentile finds the liberty of the act of thought entirely on its power to posit a concept for itself. The logical force of this concept lies in its 'circularity', which is in Gentile's view the basis of 'historical sense' by which the historian distinguishes himself from a poet.<sup>[81]</sup> Paraphrasing Gentile's own metaphor, we can say that the circularity of the abstract concept keeps concrete thought on track when it spirals upward. When we want to understand Dante's poetry, we do not begin from nowhere, but we start from a concept which reflects the history of interpretations of Dante as we learned it in our previous education. This does not mean, however, that we have completely surrendered to the circularity of the concept, since it is always we ourselves who posit it as a norm for our thought. On this basis, Gentile boldly concludes that history is always absolutely

subjective; not only are *res gestae* identical with *historia rerum gestarum*, as Gentile stated in the *Teoria generale*, but the *historia rerum gestarum* is also identical with the *historia sui ipsius*. In history, this means there is no past outside historiography, and this historiography coincides with the self-description of the spirit, or reality *tout court*. In short, reality is history, or, more precisely, historiography in the broadest sense of the term.

According to Gentile, this subjectivism does not lead to scepticism, because it is grounded in the 'autoconcetto' which is the product of the 'autosintesi', or the development of the Transcendental Ego. It is difficult to translate *autoconcetto*, but it can be interpreted as the history of the principles of thought. In the context of history, it refers to the principles of historical thought, or, in Collingwood's terms, the history of the idea of history.<sup>[82]</sup> It is on the basis of this history, says Gentile, that Mommsen rightly claimed that he knew more about Roman history than Livy; after all, Mommsen had 'thought more', and that, according to Gentile, is equivalent to saying that in the nineteen centuries that separated Livy from Mommsen, the human spirit had thought more. This example shows that Gentile identifies objectivity with intersubjectivity: Mommsen's history of Rome is more 'objective' than Livy's because his account of Rome's history takes into account the entire historiography, including the principles on which it is based, from Livy to the nineteenth century.<sup>[83]</sup>

Gentile saw the *autoconcetto* as the central pillar of his logic.<sup>[84]</sup> Seen from the perspective of his development, it is not difficult to understand why. From his earliest works, and particularly from 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', he had tried to balance the subjectivity of the self-positing act of thought with the objectivity, or more precisely the intersubjectivity, of the history of thought. In his Palermitan lecture he had identified this history with the *storia ideale eterna*, in his Pisan lecture with the 'culture' of the historian, in the *Teoria generale* with the history of philosophy, and finally, in the *Sistema di logica* with the *autoconcetto*. Translated into the language of the plain historian, this balancing between subjectivity and objectivity means that the historian who wants to understand Dante's poetry must take the historiography on this subject as the conceptual

starting point for his own reading of *La Divina Commedia*. By reflecting on the history of interpretations and his own reading experience, the historian develops a new interpretation of Dante's poetry. This interpretation does not necessarily cohere with previous interpretations of Dante's poetry, because that would infringe the freedom of the historian. Having taken the historiography into account, the historian can only accept his own interpretation of Dante's poetry, that is, the interpretations which are in accordance with truth norms to which the historian submits himself. This is the heart of the *etica del sapere*; the historian is morally committed to think the truth.

In spite of the ingenuity of this solution, the question remains whether Gentile's theory of the *autoconcetto* is strong enough to ground the *etica del sapere*. As we have seen, Gentile himself pointed out that the positive freedom of thought requires both identity and difference, and even a 'hard opposition' between concrete and abstract thought. What is this opposition between concrete and abstract thought? Gentile is clear about this. Concrete thought is *norma sui*; abstract thought is not. From this it follows that the Dante whom I posit as a concept, or as a norm for my own thought, is not a real Dante, but only an ideal starting point for my investigations of his poetry. But on this point there arises the question of how this ideal Dante whom I posit, can be different from my own Dante. Gentile would say: 'the Dante which you posit at the beginning of your investigations is a concept, it has no truth-value, and it does not develop. The only real Dante is the Dante you make while reading his poetry'. This reading is a process of thought which produces its own norms, that is, new concepts of Dante which will form new points of departure for new investigations, and so on into eternity. History is therefore an eternal construction of the human mind and outside this construction there is nothing.

Now the question is: are the identity and difference between past and present thought thinkable within this construction? We may begin with the identity. Gentile claims the full identity of the *pensato* and *pensante*. The basis of this claim is that concrete thought is *norma sui*, necessary and universal. In order to understand past

thought, the historian must think it as *norma sui*, that is, he must rethink past thought as it was thought in the past. In order to achieve this aim, the historian must place himself in the position of a past thinker and think his thought as universal and necessary. If the historian succeeds in doing this, he will see that the past thinker could not think otherwise in the given circumstances.

Obviously this argument is modelled on philosophical thought, which had always been the paradigm for Gentile's notion of *autoctisi*. And indeed this concept applies well to philosophy, since most philosophers develop their own thought by critically rethinking the thought of other philosophers for themselves. But the autopoietical model of philosophy is not so easily applied to other forms of experience, such as art and religion, which do not normally involve criticizing other works of art or other creeds. Gentile, however, held that art and religion are still philosophical because they develop self-critically. On this basis he claimed the immanence of philosophy in all forms of experience with the consequence that they could be 'resolved' into philosophy, and that their histories coincided with the history of philosophy. But this perspective on the histories of art and religion is based on the unwarranted assumption that there is a necessary connection between the forms of experience and the norms that underlie them so that the historian can always pierce through activities of artists and religious people to their underlying principles.

In my view, this assumption of a necessary connection between the activities of the mind and their norms is not valid. Gentile may be right that all experience necessarily presupposes some norm, but this does enable us to grasp the content of that norm. When we read Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, for example, we may feel that the poem is based on certain poetic principles, but since Ariosto does not mention these, it is quite difficult to find out what these principles are. Gentile always sought the principles of a poem like *Orlando furioso* in the general philosophy of the period it was written. But by this method he made poetry completely dependent on philosophy, thus overlooking the possibility that great poets like Ariosto might well write beautiful poems without taking the philosophy of their times into

account. In short, there is no necessary connection between activities like art, religion, science, on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. And from this it follows that the identity between past and present thought cannot be mediated by the history of philosophy.

This leads us to the problem of the difference between the past and the present thought. It is certainly to Gentile's merit that he raised this problem which confronts historians in their daily work; most historians are aware of the fact that they trying to do justice to the strangeness or otherness of past thought. In 'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica', Gentile still recognized the force of this otherness in historical experience as a 'first moment' in historical thought. But in the *Sistema di logica*, this historical experience is replaced by the abstract concept which concrete thought 'posits' for itself as a norm. Gentile is right that this positing is not an arbitrary act of thought because it is firmly grounded in the *autoconcetto*, but even the *autoconcetto* is not sufficient to do justice to the otherness of the past. The entire historiography on Ariosto and the history of aesthetics cannot substitute the sublime experience we can have when reading *Orlando furioso*. On the contrary, too much historiography may obfuscate our reading of the poem by explaining its otherness away. Even worse, too much philosophy may end in dogmatism; as soon as we claim that we have the only true interpretation of *Orlando furioso* because we have 'thought more', in the sense that we think 'we know the ideal eternal history of humanity', all discussion ends, and with it, the freedom of thought. That this may happen, even to the greatest champion of the freedom of thought, is proven by the moment at which Gentile began to identify the *etica del sapere* with Fascist action.

## 8. Conclusion

The question in the introduction was: Why spend so much time on a philosopher like Gentile? Is his thought still actual or can we safely set it aside? From the perspective of the fragmentation of contemporary philosophy of history, I can give a balanced answer. In

retrospect, some of Gentile's thought is clearly antiquated. In particular, the mind-boggling terminology of the *Sistema di logica* can be dispensed with if it cannot be translated into modern terms. Furthermore, Gentile's overvaluation of philosophy should be tempered by the fact that most historians can understand the past quite well without resolving it into the history of philosophy. Finally, insofar as Gentile's Fascist works contain any philosophy, they can be discarded; for historians, including historians of philosophy, however, they are absolutely necessary to understand Fascist ideology.

But at least one thing in Gentile's philosophy is still worth our time, and that is his radical attempt to unite historical experience, hermeneutics, historical thinking and writing and, finally, action, into a full-blown, systematic constructivism based on an autopoietic philosophy of the mind. In all his writings on these subjects, Gentile shows that he had first-hand knowledge of historical practice and that he had the philosophical acumen required to synthesize its many aspects into a systematic whole. This systematic approach is exactly what is needed to overcome the contemporary fragmentation in the philosophy of history. In particular, Gentile's aesthetics, which bears many similarities to Gadamer's, may provide a good starting-point for bridging the gap between historical experience and historical narrative. In this context, historical experience may be characterized as an expression of the interpreter's emotions, which forms the first step in an autopoietic dialectic of thought, which eventually leads to a new historical narrative.

But above all, Gentile's autopoietic logic may help to reconnect historical thought to action. As the logic of a learning process, the notion of *autopoiesis* can provide a new basis for the way in which human beings learn from their own past, thus turning history into 'effective knowledge'. This practical turn in history can profit by a further elaboration of the relationship between Gentile's notion of *autoctisi* and modern theories of *autopoiesis* as they are currently being developed in complexity studies and systems theory.<sup>[85]</sup> But before we can thus 'update' Gentile, we must first understand what

he had to say. After all, Gentile was right: *la vera filosofia è storia!* (history is the true philosophy!)

[1](#) University of Groningen, the Netherlands, R.G.P.Peters@rug.nl.

[2](#) H.S. Harris, 'L'etica del sapere', *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*, 27: 4 (1998), p. 615; Carlo Ginzburg, 'Just One Witness', *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedlander, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 82–97; for a comment on the controversy between White and Ginzburg, see David D. Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 246–55; A. James Gregor, *Giovanni Gentile: Philosopher of Fascism* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2001), pp. xiii–xiv.

[3](#) David D. Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, pp. 264–88; for a criticism of Robert's interpretation of Italian historicism, see Rik Peters, 'Italian Legacies', *History and Theory*, 49 (2010), pp. 115–29; for Robert's reply, see David D. Roberts, 'Recent Crocean Encounters Outside Italy', *Bollettino Filosofico*, 28 (2013), pp. 308–10. In his reply, Roberts seems to underestimate the importance of Gentile's interpretation of the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental Ego. On this topic see Marcello Musté, *La filosofia dell'idealismo italiano* (Rome, Carocci, 2008), pp. 65–6 and pp. 80–4.

[4](#) Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action. The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013), pp. 398–401.

[5](#) For political reasons, de Ruggiero was not offered the chair of theoretical philosophy which probably deprived him of the opportunity to elaborate a philosophical system of his own. See Clementina Gily Reda, *Guido de Ruggiero, Un ritratto filosofico* (Naples, Società Editrice Napoletana, 1981).

[6](#) Rik Peters, 'Talking to Ourselves or Talking to Others: H.S Harris on Giovanni Gentile's Transcendental Dialogue', *Clio, A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*, 27: 4 (1998), pp. 501–15; Peters, 'Actes de présence: Presence in Fascist Political Culture', *History and Theory*, 45 (2006) pp. 362–74; Peters, 'Nolite iudicare. Hayden White between Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile', *Storia della storiografia*, 58 (2010), pp. 19–35; Peters, 'Italian Legacies', pp. 115–29.

[7](#) Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 195.

[8](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.

[9](#) See Rik Peters, 'Torturing the Torturer: Interpretation of Evidence as Metarepresentation', *Metarepresentation, Self-Organization and Art', European Semiotics / Sémiotiques Européennes*, 9, eds. B.P. van Heusden and W. Wildgen (Bern, Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 13–25; Davide Bondi, *Filosofia e storiografia nel dibattito anglo-americano sulla svolta linguistica* (Florence, Florence University Press, 2013).



[10](#) With the exception of John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (London, Routledge, 2013), most recent writers on the philosophy of history treat the relationship between historical thought and practice as a 'rest category'.

[11](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti, Opere Complete*, XXV (Florence, Sansoni, 1958), p. xiii.

[12](#) *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

[13](#) *Ibid.*

[14](#) Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 29–32.

[15](#) Giovanni Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx* (Florence, Sansoni, 1974), p. 73.

[16](#) *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[17](#) *Ibid.*

[18](#) *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[19](#) Most of these were republished in Giovanni Gentile, *Storia della filosofia italiana* (Florence, Sansoni, 1969).

[20](#) For a discussion of this method and a comparison with Croce's, see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 77–8.

[21](#) For a longer discussion of this debate see Rik Peters, 'Croce, Gentile and Collingwood on the Relation between History and Philosophy', *Philosophy, History and Civilization, Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R.G. Collingwood*, eds. David Boucher, James Connelly and Tariq Modood (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 155–8.

[22](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', *Rivista filosofica*, XI (1908), cited from *id.*, *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, Sansoni, 1975), pp. 98–9.

[23](#) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[24](#) Luigi Pareyson points out that there is no real opposition between existentialism and actualism on this point in *Studi sull'esistenzialismo* (Florence, Sansoni, 1971), p. 276.

[25](#) Gentile, 'Il concetto della storia della filosofia', pp. 102–4.

[26](#) *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[27](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 115–6.

[28](#) *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[29](#) *Ibid.*

[30](#) *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[31](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3.

[32](#) Ibid., pp. 133–5.

[33](#) Ibid., p. 125.

[34](#) Ibid.

[35](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', *Annuario della Biblioteca filosofica di Palermo*, I (1912), cited from *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, p. 195. For a longer discussion of this dialectic, see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 71–7.

[36](#) H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 35 n. 21.

[37](#) Harris prefers the term 'self-constitution' above 'self-creation'. I will use both terms and translate them with 'autopoiesis' after this section.

[38](#) Gentile, 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', pp. 192–3.

[39](#) Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, pp. 10–11, and Harris, 'Fichte e Gentile', *Giovanni Gentile, La vita e il pensiero*, XI, (Florence. Sansoni, 1966), pp. 147–70; for a recent and acute discussion of the differences between Fichte and Gentile on the act of thought, see Angelica Nuzzo, 'Fichte's *Thathandlung* and Gentile's Attualismo: Dialectic and its Counter-Reformation', *Fichte-Studien*, 38 (2013), pp. 163–78.

[40](#) Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant and Sean Watson, eds., *Idealism. The History of a Philosophy* (Durham, Acumen Publishing Limited, 2011), pp. 234–5. The italics in the quotation are Durham's et. al.; the quotations themselves are Maturana's and Varela's.

[41](#) Ibid., p. 237.

[42](#) Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 21–2.

[43](#) See Gentile's criticisms of these thinkers in *Il Modernismo e i rapporti fra religione e filosofia, Opere complete XXXV* (Florence, Sansoni, 1962), in Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro, Opere complete III* (Florence, Le Lettere, 1987) and in Gentile, *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere, Opere complete V and VI* (Florence, Sansoni 1964). The best actualist criticism of contemporary philosophy, including Croce's and Gentile's, remains Guido de Ruggiero's in *La filosofia contemporanea* (Bari, Laterza, 1912), trans. A.H. Hannay and R.G Collingwood as *Modern Philosophy* (London and New York, Allen and Unwin, 1921).

[44](#) Giovanni Gentile, 'L'atto del pensare come atto puro', p. 190.

[45](#) Dunham et al., *Idealism*, p. 237; Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 90–1.

[46](#) Given the similarities between *autoctisi* and *autopoiesis*, and the fact that *autoctisi* has no equivalent in English, I will identify the two terms from now on.

- [47](#) Giovanni Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, I: Pedagogia generale, in *Opere complete*, I (Florence, Sansoni, 1970), pp. 126–8.
- [48](#) Ibid., pp. 135–6.
- [49](#) Ibid., p. 133.
- [50](#) Ibid., p. 166.
- [51](#) Ibid., p. 82.
- [52](#) Ibid., p. 83.
- [53](#) Ibid.
- [54](#) Giovanni Gentile, ‘L’esperienza pura e la realtà storica’ (Florence, Libreria della Voce, 1915), cited from *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, p. 253; see ‘Pure Experience and Historical Reality’, §8, herein.
- [55](#) Ibid., p. 259; see ‘Pure Experience and Historical Reality’, §10, herein.
- [56](#) Rik Peters, ‘Actes de présence: presence in Fascist political culture’, pp. 366–8.
- [57](#) Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, p. 192.
- [58](#) Ibid., pp. 196–7.
- [59](#) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1988), pp. 345–66; for a discussion of a practical application of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, see Rik Peters, ‘Constitutional interpretation: a view from a distance’, *History and Theory*, 50 (2011), pp. 117–35.
- [60](#) Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, p. 196.
- [61](#) Ibid., p. 51.
- [62](#) For an overview of these criticisms see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 90–2.
- [63](#) Ibid., p. 86.
- [64](#) Ibid., p. 88.
- [65](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, pp. 313–15 and p. 331.
- [66](#) Ibid., p. 40.
- [67](#) Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 87–90.
- [68](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, I, p. 20.
- [69](#) Ibid., p. 51.
- [70](#) Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, p. 34.
- [71](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, I, pp. 172–8.
- [72](#) Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, pp. 62–3.
- [73](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, p. 17.

[74](#) Ibid., pp. 19–20.

[75](#) Only here do I follow Gentile's use of capitals indicating the transcendental ego as Ego.

[76](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, p. 74.

[77](#) Ibid., p. 106. With this image of the *scala contrattile* Gentile foreshadowed Collingwood's notion of the scale of forms in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. See Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 318–21.

[78](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, pp. 30–1.

[79](#) Ibid.

[80](#) The distinction between assumption and presupposition is of paramount importance to understand the differences between Gentile's and Collingwood's metaphysics. See Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 387–8.

[81](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, p. 30.

[82](#) See Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 89. For the importance of the autoconcetto, see Musté, *La filosofia dell'idealismo italiano*, pp. 65–6.

[83](#) In his 1930 *The Philosophy of History*, Collingwood used the same example, but with a different interpretation. See W. Debbins, ed., *R.G. Collingwood: Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 139. For a comparison see Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, pp. 278–9.

[84](#) Gentile, *Sistema di logica*, II, p. 169.

[85](#) This step has already been taken. See Giuseppe Gembillo, *Le polilogiche della complessità. Metamorfosi della Ragione da Aristotele a Morin* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2008); Clementina Gily, *La didattica della bellezza. Dallo specchio allo schermo* (Soverio Mannelli, Rubbettino Editore, 2014).

# Collingwood, Gentile and Italian Neo-Idealism in Britain

James Connelly<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 205–234*

**Abstract:** This essay discusses the reception of Gentile's ideas in Britain before the Second World War, identifying the key figures and events that contributed to his enduring reputation. The central figure in Connelly's account is R.G. Collingwood, whose assessments of Gentile, sometimes enthusiastic, sometimes harshly critical, yet in fact deeply ambiguous, reflect the changing tenor of the debates over Italian neo-idealism in the Anglophone world.

## 1. Introduction

This chapter is not so much an examination of the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile or R.G. Collingwood as an exploration of the alleys and byways by which the Italian 'neo-idealism' of Benedetto Croce, Guido de Ruggiero and Gentile was received into the British philosophical world. It will be seen that Gentile's thought had a greater influence on British philosophy than is often realized; that perhaps the leading (but by no means the only) exponent of Gentile's thought was Collingwood. It will be suggested that Collingwood was distinguished from other exponents in that he was an original and creative thinker who, in drawing on Gentile, at the same time developed distinctive philosophical views of his own.

We shall see that the influence and reach of the philosophy of Italian neo-realism was largely limited to Oxford, London and their environs. The waters of the Cam remained unrippled by their thought. By the time neo-realism reached Britain, philosophy at Cambridge had already taken a distinct turn, with the dominance of

Bertrand Russell and Frank Ramsey, G.E. Moore and the increasingly looming figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The British reception of Italian neo-idealism was, in a sense, a local affair bifurcated along the new fault lines of British philosophy. It is not that philosophers in Cambridge read and disagreed with neo-idealism; rather, they were entirely untouched by it. Not even Michael Oakeshott showed any discernible interest: there is not a word about Gentile in any of his writings (published or unpublished) and precious little about Croce either. Thus, I largely endorse, with certain qualifications, G.R.G. Mure's comment that

outside Oxford I can recall little but a work of second-rate merit on Croce by the late Professor Wildon Carr of London University.<sup>[2]</sup> Cambridge, the home of logical positivism and symbolic logic, was never very sympathetic to any brand of idealism.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Early Oxford Reception of Gentile

Two important figures in the reception of Gentile were Professor J.A. Smith and E.F. Carr. Although one was an idealist and the other a realist, that distinction is of little consequence. What mattered most in determining receptivity to the neo-idealists seemed to be interest in aesthetics and philosophy of history, rather than philosophical allegiance *per se*.

Smith's inaugural lecture as Waynflete Professor of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy, delivered in 1910, was *Knowing and Acting*.<sup>[4]</sup> This was largely influenced by Croce, whom Smith had discovered while visiting Naples not long before.<sup>[5]</sup> In December 1913 Smith delivered a paper to the *Aristotelian Society* 'On Feeling'; although this does not mention Gentile explicitly, the thesis of the paper was Gentilean in origin. Discussion was led by the President, G. Dawes Hicks, and continued by (among others) Herbert Wildon Carr and Hilda Oakeley; all three for many years stalwarts of the Society.<sup>[6]</sup> Smith's first explicit reference to Gentile's actualism, which was also the first explicit reference to it in English, is in the *Quarterly*

*Review*, 1916.<sup>[7]</sup> More explicit exegesis of Gentile's philosophy followed in 'The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', delivered to the Aristotelian Society in January 1920.<sup>[8]</sup> Wildon Carr was in the Chair and opened the discussion; the ensuing discussion included A.N. Whitehead, Douglas Ainslie, Hilda Oakeley, and G. Dawes Hicks. The Aristotelian Society was where the Oxford philosophers met those based in London and was, with the *Hibbert Journal*, one of the key loci of the reception of neo-idealism in Britain.

Carritt, of University College, Oxford was a realist, belonging to the generation following Cook Wilson, who, together with colleagues such as H.A. Prichard, sought to spread the doctrines of realism in epistemology, ethics and political theory. Carritt was also Collingwood's tutor in philosophy, and remained a lifelong friend, despite their sharply diverging philosophical standpoints from 1916 onwards. Despite his avowed realism, he was a wide ranging philosopher who read Gentile and Croce in Italian, and in his 1914 *Theory of Beauty*,<sup>[9]</sup> was one of the first to refer to Gentile in print. Although his philosophical temper was not theirs, Carritt went on to translate Croce's *My Philosophy* and also the extracts from Croce and Gentile reprinted in his edited collection *Philosophies of Beauty*.<sup>[10]</sup> He also, in 1932, translated Gentile's *La filosofia dell'arte*, although this translation was never published.<sup>[11]</sup> This shows a considerable level of commitment to the work of philosophers in many ways uncongenial to his own philosophical outlook. The explanation lies in his interest in aesthetics—which also, after Collingwood's idealistic turn, bridged the gap between them.

Croce had an intellectual relationship with Collingwood spanning twenty five years. They corresponded from 1912 until the Second World War.<sup>[12]</sup> Collingwood's first published book, in 1913, was a translation of Croce's *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*. This was published by Howard Latimer, a publishing house co-founded (with J.C. Squire) by A. Howard Hannay, later described by Collingwood as 'one of my oldest friends.'<sup>[13]</sup> Ainslie, who translated Croce's most important philosophical works into English, played a part in discussions concerning the translation. Ainslie's translations were much criticized, although not by Croce himself. Collingwood was

asked to revise and expand Ainslie's translation of Croce's *Aesthetic* for Macmillan.<sup>[14]</sup> At around this time Ainslie 'lost his head over Mussolini', leading Croce thereafter to choose different translators. A few years later Ainslie visited Croce in Naples; on being asked whether he was still enthusiastic about Mussolini, he replied that he was, but 'only for Italy, you understand, not for England.' Croce replied 'May I thank you on behalf of Italy,' and dropped the matter.<sup>[15]</sup> In 1927 Collingwood's translation of Croce's 'Contributo alla critica di me stesso' was published by the Clarendon Press as *An Autobiography* with a prefatory note by J.A. Smith; he also translated a number of other pieces by Croce.<sup>[16]</sup>

In June 1923 Croce visited Oxford in order to receive an honorary degree. During his visit he met (among others) Smith, Collingwood, H.J. Paton, A.J. Carlyle and Cesare Foligno. Foligno was Serena Professor of Italian from 1919–40, and a fellow of Magdalen College who became an adherent of fascism, returning to Naples in his native Italy in 1940.<sup>[17]</sup>

In London, Croce met Hannay and Wildon Carr; Hannay was to become a key figure in the Aristotelian Society, becoming secretary in 1924; in many ways he acted as a link between London and Oxford. In 1921 Collingwood and Hannay published a translation of de Ruggiero's *La filosofia contemporanea as Modern Philosophy*.<sup>[18]</sup> This is notable as a comprehensive introduction to Italian neo-idealism and its antecedents; however, as it was first published in 1912, there were noticeable omissions, including reference to Gentile's *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, first published in 1916. Despite this, in their preface, Collingwood and Hannay remark that it presents 'a positive philosophical position of great interest, avowedly in continuation of Croce and in close agreement with Gentile, which sums up the progress of Italian idealism down to the writing of this book.'<sup>[19]</sup> De Ruggiero was himself, through his regular surveys of philosophy in Italy, a leading advocate of Gentile's philosophy as well as his own.<sup>[20]</sup>

*Teoria generale* appeared in English in 1922 as *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*.<sup>[21]</sup> The translation was by Wildon Carr, who acknowledged Smith's help; Collingwood also took part in



discussions of early drafts of the translation.<sup>[22]</sup> Wildon Carr, Professor of Philosophy at the University of London, was an indefatigable enthusiast for the works of Croce, Gentile and Bergson, and was a regular attender of meetings of the Aristotelian Society. He published with the Macmillan press, the leading publisher of continental philosophy—Croce, Gentile, Bergson and Unamuno—in the immediate post-war years.<sup>[23]</sup> It is also worth noting that Collingwood's first two philosophical publications were with Macmillan—*Religion and Philosophy* and 'The Devil'.<sup>[24]</sup> Further, he was a reader of manuscripts for Macmillan after the war until 1928 when he resigned on being appointed as Delegate to the Clarendon Press. Macmillan also published important works by realists such as Samuel Alexander and L.A. Reid.<sup>[25]</sup> At this time, the Clarendon Press was philosophically at a very low ebb; indeed, Collingwood's contributions, *Speculum Mentis* (1924), *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925) and *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) were notable contributions to raising the quantity and quality of their philosophical output.<sup>[26]</sup> Other noteworthy books in these years were few: they included H.A. Prichard's *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* in 1909 and John Cook Wilson's posthumous *Statement and Inference* in 1926.

In September 1930 the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy was held at Oxford. Hannay served as secretary to the organizational committee and the conference was attended by both Croce and de Ruggiero, who stayed at Collingwood's house; Croce stayed at Magdalen College, but was invited by Collingwood to visit whilst de Ruggiero was staying. Although Gentile's name was recorded as an 'active member' of the Congress, there is no record of him having attended. Indeed, it is not clear whether Gentile ever visited Britain; and there is no record of correspondence with Collingwood either, although the two men met on at least one occasion, in Rome in April 1927. This was the year Collingwood's translation of de Ruggiero's *History of European Liberalism*<sup>[27]</sup> appeared. Collingwood was wary, as he was now very suspicious of fascism and fascists: he wrote to de Ruggiero:

Gentile ... was very cordial and gave me a copy of the new edition of his *Studi Vichiani*; we spoke mostly of education in Italy and England, of the organization of elementary schools, and so forth; he asked me whether I had studied the present political situation in Italy, and I replied that a foreigner staying three weeks in a country could not hope to form a just opinion of its political situation; he spoke of you, as if to discover my present relation to you, and I said that you were one of my greatest friends and that I was staying in your house. Apart from these matters, we spoke altogether of education and things like that.<sup>[28]</sup>

### **3. Collingwood as an Exponent of Gentile's Philosophy**

Collingwood's account of his meeting with Gentile reveals one of the significant tensions in their relation. While Collingwood was never an uncritical follower of Gentile, he was greatly influenced by him and his philosophical approach in many respects became his own. He was also assiduous in promoting the work of the Italian neo-idealists to an English speaking audience. In the early years this took the form of direct exegesis and explicit statement; after the publication of *Speculum Mentis* in 1924 it was more indirect, as Gentile's thought became ingredient in his own. He generally no longer explicitly expounded Gentile's philosophy, and even where he did, it tended to serve as a vehicle for his own; more typically he used Gentile's language as a shorthand for thoughts which were later more fully developed and written out without explicit reference to Gentile. However, as H.S. Harris showed clearly,<sup>[29]</sup> and Rik Peters has recently shown in great philosophical detail,<sup>[30]</sup> Collingwood's work is replete with philosophical reference to, and resonance with, Gentile. It can be traced in writings from *Religion and Philosophy* (1916) to *The New Leviathan* (1942); it is visible in his lectures on ethics, delivered annually from 1919; it is clearly visible in his criticism of 'Croce's Philosophy of History' in 1920; it lies behind the scenes in *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933);<sup>[31]</sup> it is discussed in his

notebooks on metaphysics, 1933-4; and it springs forth in a review of Gentile in 1937.

Clearly Collingwood was interested in, and influenced by, Gentile. But how far can we endorse James Wakefield's remark that 'for a few years in the late 1910s and early 1920s, it would not have been far wrong to describe Collingwood as the foremost exponent of Italian-style idealism in the Anglophone world'?<sup>[32]</sup>

The 1923 joint session of the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society was held at the University of Durham in July. Among the symposia were two of especial interest for our purposes: one entitled 'Is Neo-Idealism Reducible to Solipsism', and another entitled 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism'. The first paper on solipsism was read by C.E.M. Joad, followed by papers by C.A. Richardson and F.C.S. Schiller. Direct reference is largely to Croce, although it is clear that 'neo-idealism' is intended to include Gentile and de Ruggiero.

Evelyn Underhill pressed the standard criticism that Gentile's philosophy had mystical tendencies. Collingwood, in his reply, which took the form of a careful exposition of Gentile, firmly rebutted the charge. Clearly, Gentile was well enough known that a session devoted to his philosophy was appropriate, but his philosophy not so well known that an accurate understanding of it could be assumed. It is also clear that terminology had not yet settled down: with the 'neo-idealism' of the first symposium being replaced by the 'new idealism' of the second. Indeed, W.R. Inge, the third contributor to the symposium, reveals how restricted detailed knowledge of Gentile's thought still was, and how the reference of terms had not yet settled. He noted in his diary that 'I read a paper to a congress of philosophers on "Can the New Idealism dispense with Mysticism?" It was a sad failure, because I had not realized that the New Idealism meant Croce and Gentile, whom I have not studied; Collingwood treated my paper severely.'<sup>[33]</sup>

In his response to Underhill, Collingwood quite frankly sides with Gentile and concludes with a sketch of 'the way in which a modern idealistic philosophy might carry out this programme'. The programme is Gentile's; Collingwood identifies with it, and was

happy to accept the label 'idealist' in a way in which later he was not. On this point wariness appears to have already set in; in *Speculum Mentis*, his contribution to the task just identified, which he was writing at the time and which he completed in August 1923, he commented that although he could have pointed out the affinities of his position with that of eminent writers, he had refrained from doing so because

I want my position to stand on its merits rather than on names of great men cited in witness for its defence. But if the reader feels that my thesis reminds him of things that other people have said, I shall not be disappointed: on the contrary, what will really disappoint me is to be treated as the vendor of new-fangled paradoxes and given some silly name like that of "New Idealist."<sup>[34]</sup>

Notwithstanding, it is plain to the informed reader (H.S. Harris, for example) that the account of the five forms of experience presented in *Speculum Mentis* 'is a blending of Crocean and Gentilian arguments' and that on further analysis it can be seen that it is a doubling of Gentile's absolute triad. First there is art (the subjective or imaginative and 'supposing' moment); this is answered by religion (the objective or 'assertive' moment); and finally there is knowledge, which itself has three moments, the subjective or questioning moment of science; the objective or answering moment of history; and the absolute synthesis which is philosophy. Harris goes on to assert that 'what is genuinely novel in the book is the analysis of the "act of thinking" as a dialectic not of subject and object, but of question and answer' and that this became the foundation of most of Collingwood's later work.<sup>[35]</sup> Thus, anyone following Collingwood's work at this point would clearly have seen that he was both an advocate of the philosophy of Croce, de Ruggiero and Gentile, and that he was engaged in developing his own philosophy along lines suggested, but by no means determined, by them.

#### **4. London, Reading and the Aristotelian Society**

Let us return to the contribution of another 1923 symposiast, the prolific Cyril (C.E.M.) Joad, who taught at Birkbeck College, University of London. His sympathies were with the realists, but he took a critical interest in the work of the Italian neo-idealists. Following his contribution to the symposium he published *Introduction to Modern Philosophy*, which contained a critical but fair and sympathetic account of Croce and Gentile in a chapter on 'Neo Idealism'.<sup>[36]</sup> In the introduction he comments that 'the important innovations which have been introduced into Idealist theory since the publication of Mr. Bradley's great work have been largely, if not wholly, due to the Neo-Idealist school of Italian philosophers, of whom Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile are the most prominent'.<sup>[37]</sup> Joad's book had been commissioned by Collingwood, who had responsibility for the philosophical contributions to the new series in which it appeared—*The World's Manuals*. This was intended 'to appeal to the widest circle of readers.' His own *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* was his own contribution.<sup>[38]</sup> In *Matter, Life and Value*, Joad distances himself from the neo-idealism of Croce and Gentile, and argues that where they see the mind as creating reality, he sees it as discovering it; however,

my view is at one with theirs in vehemently rebutting the conception of the mind as passive and dormant waiting for events to occur to and in it. For me as well as for them—and here I think that in learning from Gentile I part company from many of the neo-realists—the mind is continuous activity, so that, although my analysis of that activity limits it to a becoming aware of what is there, yet the impulsion to an ever more extensive awareness is a dynamic constantly impelling force.<sup>[39]</sup>

If Joad was engaging with the neo-idealism of Croce and Gentile from the realist side, Bernard Bosanquet was engaging from the side of Bradleian absolute idealism. In the last years of his life he made tremendous efforts to critically engage with the latest developments in idealism and realism, the results culminating in *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy*. This followed a number of

articles and reviews, including reviews of four of Gentile's books.<sup>[40]</sup> Bosanquet saw a philosophical convergence between contemporary forms of realism and idealism; for Collingwood, however, Bosanquet had mistaken Gentile's philosophy for a form of the philosophy of change associated with Henri Bergson.<sup>[41]</sup>

We should acknowledge here the work of W. De Burgh, Professor of Philosophy at University College, Reading from 1907-34,<sup>[42]</sup> who wrote a sympathetically critical account of Gentile's philosophy.<sup>[43]</sup> He was a friend of G. Dawes Hicks, the reviews editor of *The Hibbert Journal* for many years, and Professor of Philosophy at University College, London. The importance of the *Hibbert Journal* in the dissemination of neo-idealist thought should not be underestimated. For example, in an issue of 1921, we find (immediately preceding Collingwood's actualist criticism of Croce)<sup>[44]</sup> an article by Romolo Murri on Gentile and religion.<sup>[45]</sup> Shortly after, Dawes Hicks, in his survey of philosophical literature, welcomed Wildon Carr's translation of *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*; he followed up with critical comments on the translation, which demonstrated first-hand knowledge, in Italian, of Gentile's philosophy.<sup>[46]</sup> The same issue also contained a substantial review of Bosanquet's *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy* by R.F.A. Hoernlé.<sup>[47]</sup>

A year or so later, we find Angelo Crespi discoursing on actual idealism,<sup>[48]</sup> followed by his *Contemporary Thought of Italy*.<sup>[49]</sup> Crespi was not, for some, the best choice for the task,<sup>[50]</sup> but whether based on misunderstanding or not, he propounded the view that Gentile's actualism found its proper expression in fascism, which it, in turn, justified.

At the Aristotelian Society in London we find Camillo Pellizzi speaking, in March 1924, on religion and the Italian idealists,<sup>[51]</sup> and Hannay, Wildon Carr and T.P. Nunn in June 1925 discussing 'The Subject-Object Relation in the Historical Judgment', shortly after Collingwood's 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', to which Nunn refers.<sup>[52]</sup> Another assiduous attender at the Aristotelian Society was Hilda Oakeley who frequently presented papers, contributed to discussions and considered Croce, de Ruggiero and Gentile sympathetically.<sup>[53]</sup>

Outside the Oxford, Reading and London triangle we should mention John Laird, who taught in Scotland, Canada, and Belfast, and who reviewed the *Theory of Mind as Pure Act* and Lion's book on the *Idealistic Conception of Religion* perceptively.<sup>[54]</sup> As an expositor rather than critic, mention should also be made of the Welsh woman Valmai Burdwood Evans who helped disseminate Gentile's work to an international audience through her papers in the *International Journal of Ethics*.<sup>[55]</sup>

## 5. Oxford Connections

In Oxford, we find many others, not always the obvious figures, who were influenced by Gentile and Croce. For example, H.J. Paton, whose *The Good Will* was heavily influenced by Gentile, as he acknowledges.<sup>[56]</sup> Paton in turn had influence: he had been Gilbert Ryle's tutor. Many years later, Ryle commented that Paton:

was an unfanatical Crocean, which, at the time, was the main alternative to being a Cook Wilsonian ... In 1924 I spent some time acquiring a reading knowledge of Italian and a modest grasp of Italian philosophy by reading some Croce, but more Gentile, with the text under my nose and a dictionary in my hand ... Croce seemed to divide the spirit, whatever that was, into two houses, each of which was divided into two floors. Spirit, *qua* theoretical, split into Philosophical and Scientific thinkings, *qua* practical into moral and economic doings. The philosophical top-floor of the theoretical half enjoyed some sort of zenith-standing.<sup>[57]</sup>

It is noteworthy that the study of Gentile and Croce was deemed to be of sufficient importance to require learning Italian to read them. However, although he says he read more of Gentile than Croce, he does not say what, if anything, he learnt. Writing to Paton in 1926 he commented that

You may remember that when I left your tutelage, my position was, in the main, the product of Kant as shawn [sic] of his

things-in-themselves by Gentile, with a reservation in favour of giving some rope to the field of 'the Given', 'Nature' or 'Fact'. I missed in Gentile and Croce any satisfactory account of Natural Science, what it is and why its methods are objectively valid.<sup>[58]</sup>

Although he was moving away from the Italians, thanks to Paton, he had been influenced by them. It is not idle speculation to ask whether Gentile's conception of mind (although not the associated metaphysics) influenced Ryle's own, as expressed in *The Concept of Mind*. Perhaps he learnt more from Gentile than he explicitly acknowledged or even knew?<sup>[59]</sup>

An intriguing figure resident in Oxford at this time was Aline Lion. In March 1935, Isaiah Berlin wrote to a friend asking:

Who is Miss Aline Lion? ... I had a letter ... saying she wishes to talk about ... [dialectical materialism] and was called 'tu' by Mussolini and wasn't made a don at LMH<sup>[60]</sup> because she made mischief alla Romana.<sup>[61]</sup> Have you ever heard of her?  
<sup>[62]</sup>

Lion was a Frenchwoman who lived in Italy from 1913 to 1926, where she had studied with Giovanni Gentile, whose *Teoria generale* she translated into French.<sup>[63]</sup> She moved to Oxford in 1926 to write a doctoral thesis on Gentile's philosophy of religion under the guidance of J.A. Smith.<sup>[64]</sup> In 1928 she became a schoolmistress at Roedean College near Brighton, the school later attended by Collingwood's daughter, Ruth. While in Rome she met Mussolini and was deeply and favourably impressed by him. In early 1927 she published an article on 'Fascism: What it Believes in and Aims At'; this was the curtain raiser for her forthcoming book entitled *The Pedigree of Fascism*.<sup>[65]</sup> Despite an opening disclaimer, she was palpably sympathetic both to Gentile and to Mussolini, regarding the latter as the embodiment of the philosophy of the former. Her disclaimer ran:

I should, perhaps, say from the first that I am neither Italian nor Fascist. Yet, having lived in Italy from 1913 to 1927, I cannot but be conscious of the fact that the country has



undergone a deep change, and have come to the conclusion that it is a change for the better. My purpose in writing this book has been to bring to the knowledge of people possessed of a fair amount of general knowledge, the conclusions that might be formed by a specialist with regard to this change and the value of it. Incidentally I have endeavoured to discourage both those who would import Fascism, as it flourishes in Italy, into other countries, and those who would hinder the spread of that philosophy which, I hold, is its basis.<sup>[66]</sup>

The 'pedigree' of fascism, it turns out, was impressive indeed, including philosophical antecedents going back to Vico and beyond, and culminating in Croce, Gentile and Mussolini, each with a chapter of their own. Mussolini is treated both as politician and as philosopher: Mussolini's

connection with the greatest thinkers of his country and with Italian Idealism cannot be here demonstrated; but he has himself told the author that he could not conceive how people could doubt that fact unless they were idiots. For to move the people you want new ideas, and above all when you want to bring them to renounce some of their most selfish claims.'<sup>[67]</sup>

In sum, then, her account of Mussolini and Fascism was enthusiastic, almost fanatical. In the final paragraph of the book (which is almost identical to that of the article), she wrote that

If "Avanti" was not the motto of Socialism the Fascists could make it theirs; as it is, reintroducing faith and belief at the basis of man's life they seem to point to higher moral, political and economical conquests. The only motto that can befit the black shirts movement is therefore *Sursum corda*.<sup>[68]</sup>

What is the importance of a figure who might easily be written off as a deluded Miss Jean Brodie? One compelling reason for taking Lion seriously is not only that she had an influential readership,<sup>[69]</sup> but was also one of Collingwood's sources for his knowledge of fascism. She was a direct line to Gentile and, more remotely, to Mussolini. On

one side he had Croce and de Ruggiero, staunch anti-fascists; on the other side Lion, who represented Mussolini as the embodiment of Gentile's philosophy. For her, Gentile's philosophy simply was the philosophy of Fascism: in so far as he accepted this view, Collingwood was bound to have a very uneasy relationship with Gentile. Had he taken the view that there was no connection between thought and action, theory and practice, he could have maintained a greater distance; but he wanted a rapprochement between theory and practice and hence it is not surprising that he became rather reticent about his relationship with Gentile.

Politics aside, there was some philosophical sympathy between Collingwood and Lion. She was within his circle of friends and a visitor to his house. In 1933 Collingwood wrote that she had visited and had been reading *An Essay on Philosophical Method* about which she was excited. She had said that

there was nobody in the world except myself, herself and Gentile who could have done certain things in it so well—said she had been to Ross<sup>[70]</sup> and asked him: “who else is there at Oxford so good as Collingwood?” and he had not known *what* to say!—said that the only fault in it was that “it lacks *breath*—you sit too close over your work, you do not dominate your thought, it dominates you—you must take up golf!”<sup>[71]</sup>

Her enthusiasm for Collingwood later waned: in 1941 she published a curiously oblique review of *An Essay on Metaphysics*,<sup>[72]</sup> and in discussions with H.S. Harris after the war she spoke very contemptuously of him, saying that ‘He never had an original idea in his life. He got everything from Professor Gentile.’<sup>[73]</sup> Perhaps she really believed that; or perhaps she was too affronted by Collingwood's brusque repudiation of Gentile in his Autobiography to give him credit for originality.

## 6. Collingwood, Gentile and Fascism

We have already seen enough to tentatively agree with Wakefield that Collingwood was an active (perhaps the leading) disseminator

and expositor of Gentile's philosophy. He was also a creative thinker on his own account, and that is one reason why, in his later writings, he said little about the influence of Gentile: he wanted to gain a hearing rather than to be categorized and dismissed as a mere follower. But there is, of course, another reason: Fascism, to which we will return later.

Meanwhile, let us consider the positive influence that Gentile had on Collingwood. In this we should bear in mind that for Collingwood, influence was a two-way street rather than passive reception of another's view; the important issue, that is to say, is what one thinker finds in the thought of another which resonates with his own.<sup>[74]</sup>

For Collingwood, Croce denied the unity of the spirit through the rigid separation of its forms. While he owed much to Croce, especially in relation to the internal analysis of each form of the spirit, nonetheless the rigid separation falsified the whole and had to be overcome. What he found in Gentile was an insistence on the unity of the spirit. Collingwood set himself the task of working out systematically a view in which distinctions were retained but as concrete distinctions within an overall unity. This is exhibited in *Speculum Mentis* and methodologically justified in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Again, Collingwood's insistence on philosophy thinking its object as activity is Gentilean. This underlies the distinctive approach found in, for example, 'Economics as a Philosophical Science' and 'Political Action'.<sup>[75]</sup>

Both Croce and de Ruggiero noticed Collingwood's approach and criticized or approved of it accordingly. As Collingwood, through his translations, introduced de Ruggiero to an English audience, so de Ruggiero introduced Collingwood to an Italian audience in his *Filosofi del Novecento*.<sup>[76]</sup> This was published too early to include reference to his later work. De Ruggiero remarked that, although Collingwood's approach might seem familiar to Italian readers, nonetheless 'the reader has to pay attention both to his style of thought and its content, based on spiritual experiences which are new and irreducible to their Italian origin.' He discusses *Speculum Mentis*, refers to Croce's criticism of it, and comments that 'in divergence from Croce, he thinks that the main nexus of spiritual

activities results from a dialectic of opposites and not distincts; on this point he is in agreement with Gentile's view.' He then adds, in a critical reference to Gentile which mirrors Collingwood's own, that in the book 'we never come across the mere formalism in which the Italian idealistic school going by the name of actual idealism has ended and rests content.'<sup>[77]</sup>

Croce, while appreciative of Collingwood's work, took issue with the influence of Gentile. In 1921 Collingwood had concluded his paper on 'Croce's Philosophy of History' with the hope that Croce's philosophy could now 'reach the point of absolute idealism to which his successors Gentile and de Ruggiero have already carried his thought'<sup>[78]</sup> Croce bridled at this; for him his thought was already where it ought to be: he saw no need to travel that road. He said of Collingwood's criticism that it was:

identical to that which had been ringing in my ears and coming before my eyes for ten years or more in Italy ... These advocates of 'actual idealism', a sublime yet empty philosophy had accused me of not having raised myself to that sublimity, of not having dissolved all distinctions in the act and thereby of being both a realist and an idealist, one in contradiction of the other.<sup>[79]</sup>

Croce then demonstrated both an exalted view of his own status and that he saw de Ruggiero as a conduit of malign philosophical influence:

Having patiently explained why I could not accept this new revelation I expected it to fade away and fall into oblivion, as was its very nature and as in fact eventually happened. At that time the extreme and very radical theorist of actual idealism was De Ruggiero who having gone to England, informed Collingwood of his opinion and put him on guard against my philosophizing which was old-fashioned, naturalistic, empiricist and so on. Thus Collingwood ended his work with a salute to my two 'successors', that is De Ruggiero and his master and colleague.<sup>[80]</sup>

We have given above sufficient evidence of Collingwood's philosophical adherence to Gentile. Further examples are easy to find. For instance, in his lectures on moral philosophy delivered in 1923 (of which echoes can be found in the section on 'Absolute Ethics' in *Speculum Mentis*) he wrote that

the absolute will, which is pure action, absolutely free and absolutely rational, exhibits itself in this process which is at once a process of self-construction and self-dissolution, or of the simultaneous construction and dissolution of an external world of circumstances and laws.<sup>[81]</sup>

And a little earlier in the same lectures he had announced his opposition to realism and his adherence to Gentile's view of mind in the following words:

The definition of thought as mere receptivity, the mere apprehension of objects existing independently of such apprehension and wholly unaffected by it, is the realistic or intellectualistic definition of thought which has been superseded in principle ever since the time of Descartes. The most solid and incontrovertible fruit of modern philosophy is the principle that knowledge is the self creation of the knowing mind ... an activity identical with that which acts. The mind is its own process of knowing: and to pursue this process is therefore to create itself. The further question in what sense if any the mind in creating itself creates the world, need not here detain us. What concerns us is the necessity of understanding thought as self creation.<sup>[82]</sup>

Similar passages can be found in many places, within lectures and without, in published books and articles, and unpublished manuscripts. So his adherence to Gentile's philosophy, despite his criticisms of it, is clear and continuous.<sup>[83]</sup>

As suggested earlier, Collingwood, especially in his later writings, assimilated the thought of Gentile with his own. This he did in a dual sense: sometimes using Gentile's thought as a sounding board for his own, and thus finding his own thought in it; sometimes

expressing himself in Gentilean shorthand and later translating the result into continuous English philosophical prose. I shall give an example of each.

The published version of Collingwood's 1936 British Academy lecture on 'Human Nature and Human History' reveals the influence of Gentile but nowhere mentions him. For example, Collingwood casually comments that 'mind is what it does', a notion he attributes to Hume, who was 'right to maintain that there is no such thing as "spiritual substance", nothing that a mind is, distinct from and underlying what it does.'<sup>[84]</sup> It was clear that he did not want to publicly identify himself with Gentile. He wanted his audience to listen, and in the year of publication of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*,<sup>[85]</sup> the best way to ensure that it did was to invoke the name of Hume rather than Gentile. That he had Gentile in mind, however, is made strikingly clear in some of his preparatory notes for the lecture. In a summary statement of his thesis, Collingwood wrote:

... what is falsely called human nature is really human history. The fundamental theses of such a view would be something of this kind:

1. Human nature is mind. We are not talking about bodily nature: only of mental (with the proviso that mind always means embodied mind).
2. Mind is pure act. Mind is not anything apart from what it does. The so-called powers or faculties ... of mind are really activities ... Activity does not (a) exhibit or reveal the nature of mind, or (b) develop or explicate its unrealized potentialities: it is mind.
3. The pure act posits itself and its own presupposition at once. The past belongs to the present, not the present to the past. Whereas in nature the present is the caused effect of the past, in mind the past is the analysed content of the present. Thus what the mind is and what it does are its past and present respectively.

4. Past time therefore is the schema of mind's self-knowledge. It can know itself only sub specie praeteritorum. To know oneself is simply to know one's past and vice versa. The philosophy or science of the human mind thus = history.<sup>[86]</sup>

In the lecture as delivered the actualist language is replaced and the points amplified into a plain English narrative. The substance is retained, but the language discarded.

In the mid-1930s, Collingwood had the task of steering a volume of essays on *Philosophy and History* through the Clarendon Press. On its publication he wrote a lengthy review in which he singled out Gentile's paper 'The Transcending of Time in History'<sup>[87]</sup> for special attention:

One implication of the truth, that what the historian seeks to do is to discover the thought of historical agents, is worked out by Signor Gentile. He ... holds that all reality is historical ... What is indubitably historical is the life of the human mind; ... for Gentile, mind is the only reality ... Time is transcended in history because the historian, in discovering the thoughts of a past agent, rethinks that thought for himself. It is known, therefore, not as a past thought, contemplated as it were from a distance through the historian's time telescope, but as a present thought living now in the historian's mind. Thus, by being historically known, it undergoes a resurrection out of the limbo of the dead past, triumphs over time, and survives in the present. This is an important idea, and I believe a true one.<sup>[88]</sup>

Collingwood here read his theory of historical reenactment into Gentile and hence, in saying that it was both important and true, he was recommending his own position.

## 7. Fighting Fascism

In a retrospective of Croce, Arnaldo Momigliano wrote that:

It is difficult now to realize how suddenly the situation changed in Italy in 1925. After Mussolini's speech of 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1925, no illusion was possible as to the character of the new regime. In a matter of months, Amendola and Gobetti had been beaten to death, Salvemini had to run for his life, Gramsci was sent to a slow death in gaol. In April 1925 Gentile discredited himself with his 'Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti', and Croce became almost overnight the leader of the anti-fascist intelligentsia by drafting the answer to it.<sup>[89]</sup>

Collingwood, of course, was close to Croce and de Ruggiero and received their accounts of the developing political situation: hence his wariness on meeting Gentile in 1927. He was known as an ally of Croce and de Ruggiero, whose 1925 book, *Storia del liberalismo europeo* he translated in 1926.<sup>[90]</sup> Both de Ruggiero's writing of the book and Collingwood's translation of it were political acts. The word 'fascism' is mentioned in it once only, but it is clear that its political message is directed against the Italian regime, and that de Ruggiero is seeking to contribute to the revival of Italian liberalism, 'to a lively reawakening after a period of quiescence'.<sup>[91]</sup>

By the time of Collingwood's translation of *Liberalism*, then, the true character of fascism was clear and battle lines drawn, with Collingwood, Croce and de Ruggiero politically on the same side against Gentile on the other. But the philosophical and political battle lines did not coincide. Philosophically—ignoring nuance—de Ruggiero, Collingwood and Gentile were on the same side against Croce. Croce felt no dissonance in pointing to the errors in both Gentile's political activity and his philosophy; but for others, especially Collingwood, this was not possible. His position was to accept the value of Gentile's philosophy until the point that he had announced his formal allegiance to fascism and to denigrate his later work in so far as it was new rather than a restatement of his earlier views. Although it is conceivable that, speaking strictly philosophically, Gentile's work ceased to have value at this point, Collingwood's motive was political, not philosophical. His growing



commitment to the unity of theory and practice required him to assert that false theory led to bad practice and that bad practice arose from false theory: hence Gentile's later philosophy, but not his earlier, must be false. In this view he was assisted by his political and philosophical ally de Ruggiero, who began to distance himself philosophically from Gentile and also, ironically, by pro-Fascists, such as Lion, who conveniently *identified* Gentilean philosophy and fascist philosophy. For her, Gentile, Mussolini and Fascism were a unity; for different reasons it was convenient for Collingwood to think of them that way too. Hence, from the time of his translation of de Ruggiero's *Liberalismo*, Collingwood was opposed to both Gentile's politics and his philosophy, whilst adhering, awkward as it sometimes must have been, to much of his earlier, pre-Fascist philosophy.

And thus we find ourselves faced with the famous denunciation: 'There was once a very able and distinguished philosopher who was converted to Fascism. As a philosopher, that was the end of him. No one could embrace a creed so fundamentally muddle-headed and remain capable of clear thinking.'<sup>[92]</sup> The philosopher is Gentile, and the passage an accurate reflection of Collingwood's political antipathy; further, the claim was not new: in 1932 he had remarked to a friend that 'the most obvious and incontrovertible item in the count against Fascismo is that it has killed its own philosophy absolutely dead—if you doubt it read Gentile's *Filosofia dell'Arte* and blush.'<sup>[93]</sup>

Thus 'the foremost exponent of Italian-style idealism in the Anglophone world' became also one of Gentile's leading denouncers, unable and unwilling to shake off his philosophical influence whilst at the same time distancing himself from what many whom he respected philosophically (and some who he did not) saw as the inevitable political consequences of a flawed philosophy.

## 8. Conclusion

In the foregoing I have sought to give an impression of the dissemination and reception of Gentile's thought in Britain in the inter-war years. In doing so much reference (and it could have been

more) has also been made to Croce and de Ruggiero.<sup>[94]</sup> I have shown that interest in Italian neo-idealism in general, and Gentile in particular, was largely confined to the Oxford–London corridor. In my account, Cambridge is conspicuous only by its absence. Was this merely contingent? Could it have been otherwise? I suggest not. There is no space to develop the case, but clues can be found in the key personnel. The philosophical temper at Cambridge had already turned definitively against all forms of idealism. Idealists were few, and even those like Oakeshott who professed adherence seemed either unacquainted with or indifferent to the work of the Italians. A.C. Ewing, who wrote a broadly sympathetic account of idealism, largely confined himself to consideration of the earlier thinkers singled out for criticism by Russell and Moore.<sup>[95]</sup> It is as if, once idealism was deemed to have been refuted, there was seen to be little point in even considering or noticing a new generation of idealists, whatever their origins. McTaggart was rather a different sort of idealist—he famously asserted the non-reality of time and was hence unlikely to be sympathetic to a philosophy in which both time and history were central. The anti-idealists, Russell, Broad, Ramsey, Moore, Wittgenstein, mostly (not entirely) published with Kegan Paul in the *International Library of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Method*, whose very title indicates antipathy to neo-idealism. The one Cambridge philosopher who might have been most sympathetic to process or actualist thinking was A.N. Whitehead, who contributed to the discussion of Smith’s paper on Gentile in 1920: but his process philosophy was only fully developed after his escape to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1924, the year Collingwood’s *Speculum Mentis*, the first full length, independent presentation of a form of Gentilean inspired neo-idealism found in English, was published.

<sup>1</sup> University of Hull, J.Connelly@hull.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> H. Wildon Carr, *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce: The Problem of Art and History* (London, Macmillan, 1917).

<sup>3</sup> G.R.G. Mure, ‘Benedetto Croce and Oxford’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 4 (1954) pp. 327–31, p. 327. In what follows, I do not generally pass judgement on the philosophical quality of Carr’s (or anyone else’s) work; rather, I am interested in

those who acted as conduits for the transmission of Italian neo-idealism into the English speaking world.

[4](#) J.A. Smith, *Knowing and Acting* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910).

[5](#) See J.A. Smith, 'Philosophy as the Development of the Notion and Reality of Self-Consciousness' in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, second series, ed. J.H. Muirhead (London, Allen and Unwin, 1924), pp. 230–3.

[6](#) J.A. Smith, 'On Feeling', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 14, (1913–14), pp.49–75; for discussion, see H.S. Harris, 'Introduction' to G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 9.

[7](#) J.A. Smith, 'Philosophy and Theism', *Quarterly Review*, 225 (1916), pp. 291–312.

[8](#) J.A. Smith, 'The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 20 (1920), pp. 63–78. Other papers also bore the mark of Gentile, e.g. 'Progress as an Ideal of Action', in F.S. Marvin (ed) *Progress and History* (London, Oxford University Press, 1916).

[9](#) E.F. Carritt, *The Theory of Beauty* (London, Methuen, 1914), p. 158. The book contains much discussion of Croce, together with a chapter on the expressionist theory of art.

[10](#) B. Croce, *My Philosophy* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1949); E.F. Carritt (ed.) *Philosophies of Beauty* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1931).

[11](#) See the translator's preface to G. Gentile, *The Philosophy of Art*, translated by G. Gullace (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. ix–x. One of the best, and accessible, of Gentile's books available in English was *The Reform of Education*, trans. D. Bigongiari, with an introduction by Croce (Benn, 1923, originally published in the US by Harcourt, Brace in 1922). Gentile's other works were never translated: the only partial exception is the excerpts from his *Sistema di Logica* to be found in Roger Holmes's *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile* (New York, Macmillan, 1937). It seems that there was little enthusiasm for Gentile's *Sistema di Logica* in English-speaking circles and hence no pressure for its translation. Collingwood remarked to de Ruggiero that 'I agree that Gentile's logic is disappointing; I had hoped for something less thin and schematic, something with more sap in it; it does not, I find, stimulate one's mind so much as the *Pedagogia*.' (Letter to de Ruggiero, 2.9.26).

[12](#) See B. Croce, review of R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, trans. L. Rubinoff and A. Franklin, *Collingwood Studies*, 3 (1996 [1925]), pp. 188–93; B. Croce, 'In Commemoration of an English Friend, a Companion in Thought and Faith, R.G. Collingwood', trans. L. Rubinoff and A. Franklin, *Collingwood Studies*, 3, (1996 [1946]), pp. 174–87.

[13](#) Letter from R.G. Collingwood to Isaiah Berlin, 5.1.38. For full details of Collingwood's correspondence, see J. Connelly, P. Johnson and S. Leach, *R.G. Collingwood: A Research Companion* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014).

[14](#) The revised English edition, published in 1922, does not mention Collingwood's role; for details, see summaries of the correspondence with Macmillan in Connelly, Johnson and Leach, *R.G. Collingwood: A Research Companion*.

[15](#) Croce, 'In Commemoration of an English Friend', pp. 175–6.

[16](#) For further details with an evaluation of the relationship between Collingwood and the Italians, see J. Connelly, 'Art thou the Man? Croce, Gentile or De Ruggiero', in D. Boucher, J. Connelly, and T. Modood, *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R.G. Collingwood* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1995).

[17](#) For details, see C. Gily Reda, 'Considerations on Collingwood and Italian Thought', *Collingwood Studies*, 2 (1995), pp. 213–32.

[18](#) G. de Ruggiero, *Modern Philosophy* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1921. Hannay began the translation before the war and it was finished by Collingwood after.

[19](#) *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[20](#) The most important surveys are G. de Ruggiero, 'Main Currents of Contemporary Philosophy in Italy', *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 1 (1926), pp. 320–2; de Ruggiero, G. (1931) 'Philosophy in Italy', *Philosophy*, 6, pp. 491–4. See also 'Science, History and Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 6 (1931), pp. 166–79 (trans. R.G. Collingwood).

[21](#) G. Gentile *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H.W. Carr (London, Macmillan, 1922).

[22](#) Letter to de Ruggiero, 4.11.20. For details of this correspondence, see Connelly, Johnson and Leach, *Collingwood Research Companion*. In fact the translation they were discussing at this point was by J.B. Baillie, which was evidently superseded by Wildon Carr's.

[23](#) May Sinclair, in *A Defence of Idealism* (London, Macmillan, 1917) and *The New Idealism* (London, Macmillan, 1922) mentions neither Croce nor Gentile. In the latter she shows herself to be both well versed in recent developments in realism and yet blithely unaware of Italian philosophy, despite her insistence that a new form of idealism is needed.

[24](#) R.G. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1916), 'The Devil', in L. Dougall (ed), *Concerning Prayer* (London, Macmillan, 1916).

[25](#) For example, S. Alexander, *Space, Time and Deity* (London, Macmillan, 1922); L.A. Reid, *Knowledge and Truth* (London, Macmillan, 1923).

[26](#) For a detailed account of the Press, see W.R. Louis (ed.), *The History of Oxford University Press*, Vol. III, 1896–70 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).

[27](#) G. de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism* (London, Oxford University Press, 1927).

[28](#) Letter to de Ruggiero, 16.4.27. Croce notes that Collingwood and his wife spent an evening with him on this trip. Croce, 'In Commemoration', p.178.

[29](#) H.S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1960); H.S. Harris 'Introduction' to G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*; H.S. Harris, 'Croce and Gentile in Collingwood's *New Leviathan*', in D. Boucher, J. Connelly, and T. Modood (eds.), *Philosophy, History and Civilization*, pp. 115–29.

[30](#) *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood*, (Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2013).

[31](#) See the introduction to the revised edition of *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2005).

[32](#) J. Wakefield, review of Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action, Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 19: 2 (2013), p. 282.

[33](#) W.R. Inge, *Diary of a Dean* (London, Hutchinson, 1949).

[34](#) *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924), pp. 12–13. The book refers to Croce three times and to Gentile not at all. In the books published in his lifetime, Collingwood rarely names Croce and mentions Gentile only indirectly in his *Autobiography*.

[35](#) H.S. Harris, 'Introduction' to G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 18.

[36](#) C.E.M. Joad, *Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (London, Oxford University Press, 1924).

[37](#) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[38](#) Letter to de Ruggiero, 16.11.24; *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (London, Oxford University Press, 1925).

[39](#) C.E.M. Joad, *Matter, Life and Value* (London, Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 112–13.

[40](#) B. Bosanquet, *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1921); see also the following reviews: G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica* and *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, *Mind*, 29 (1920), pp. 367–70; G. Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, *Mind*, 30 (1921), pp. 96–8; G. Gentile, *Discorsi di religioni*, *Mind*, 30 (1921), pp.98–101; A. Gabelli, *Il metodo di insegnamento nelle scuole elementari d'Italia*; B. Spaventa, *La libertà d'insegnamento*; M. Casotti, *Introduzione alla pedagogia*, *Mind* 30 (1921), pp. 481–2.

[41](#) R.G. Collingwood, review of B. Bosanquet, *The Meeting of Extremes in Contemporary Philosophy*, *The Oxford Magazine* (1922), p. 271.

[42](#) For discussion of De Burgh, see A.P.F. Sell, *Four Philosophical Anglicans* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010). De Burgh knew both W.G. Collingwood, who was

Lecturer (later Professor) in Fine Art at University College, Reading from 1905–11, and his son, R.G. Collingwood.

[43](#) W.G. De Burgh, 'Metaphysical and Religious Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Sup. 4, (1924), pp. 1–18; W.G. De Burgh, 'Gentile's Philosophy of the Spirit', *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 4 (1929), pp. 3–22; W.G. De Burgh, 'Croce's Theory of Economic Action', *Philosophy*, 8, (1933), pp. 285–300; W.G. De Burgh, Review of R. Klibansky and H.J. Paton (eds.) *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, *Mind*, 45 (1936), pp. 514–25.

[44](#) R.G. Collingwood, 'Croce's Philosophy of History', *The Hibbert Journal*, 19 (1921), pp. 263–78

[45](#) R. Murri, 'Religion and Idealism as Presented by Giovanni Gentile', *Hibbert Journal*, 19 (1920), pp. 249–62.

[46](#) G. Dawes Hicks, 'Survey of Recent Philosophical Literature', *Hibbert Journal*, 20 (1921–2), pp. 565–71, p. 751. It is noteworthy how many British philosophers were both able and willing to read Gentile and Croce in Italian at the time.

[47](#) *Hibbert Journal*, 20 (1921–20), pp. 787–93.

[48](#) A. Crespi, 'Actual Idealism, an Exposition of Gentile's Philosophy and of its Practical Effects', *Hibbert Journal*, 24, (1925–6), pp. 250–63. Crespi taught at Birkbeck College, University of London.

[49](#) A. Crespi, *Contemporary Thought of Italy* (London, Williams and Norgate, 1926).

[50](#) See H.S. Harris, 'Introduction' to *Genesis and Structure of Society*, pp. 22–3

[51](#) C. Pellizzi, 'The Problems of Religion for the Modern Italian Idealists', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 24 (1923–4), pp. 153–68. Pellizzi taught at University College, London, and was founder and secretary of the Italian Fascio. He visited Croce in London in 1923 wearing a black fascist shirt.

[52](#) A.H. Hannay, H. Wildon Carr, and T.P. Nunn, 'The Subject-Object Relation in the Historical Judgment', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 25 (1924–5), pp. 267–88; R.G. Collingwood, 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 25 (1924–5), pp. 151–74.

[53](#) See, for example, H.D. Oakeley, 'Reality in History', *Philosophy*, 6 (1931), pp. 472–84.

[54](#) J. Laird, review of G. Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, *International Journal of Ethics*, 33 (1923), pp. 213–16; J. Laird, review of A. Lion, *The Idealistic Conception of Religion*, *Mind*, 42 (1933), pp. 529–38.

[55](#) V.B. Evans, 'The Ethics of Giovanni Gentile', *International Journal of Ethics*, 39 (1929), pp. 205–16; V.B. Evans, 'Education in the Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile', *International Journal of Ethics*, 43 (1933), pp. 210–17.

[56](#) *The Good Will: A Study in the Coherence Theory of Goodness* (London, Macmillan, 1927), p. 8. Although Paton is primarily known for his later work on Kant, he occasionally revisited his Italian phase: ‘although we can turn back and contemplate our own thinking, it then ceases to be thinking, and becomes merely thought. It is no longer thinking, but an object thought about and different from the thinking which thinks about it. In the terminology of Gentile it has ceased to be *pensiero pensante* and has become *pensiero pensato*’. See *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant’s Moral Philosophy* (London, Hutchinson, 1947), p.236.

[57](#) G. Ryle, ‘Autobiographical’ in *Ryle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. O. Wood and G. Pitcher (London, Macmillan, 1971), pp. 2–3.

[58](#) G. Ryle, letter to H.J. Paton, 14.4.26

[59](#) G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London, Hutchinson, 1949).

[60](#) Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.

[61](#) Presumably a reference to her fascist sympathies.

[62](#) Letter from I. Berlin to John Hilton, 14.3.35, in I. Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946*, ed. H. Hardy (London, Chatto and Windus, 2004), p. 118.

[63](#) G. Gentile, *L’Esprit Acte Pur*, trans. A. Lion (Paris, Felix Alcan, 1925).

[64](#) Eventually published as *The Idealistic Conception of Religion, Vico, Hegel, Gentile* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932). Collingwood steered the book through the press from initial submission in 1929.

[65](#) A. Lion, ‘Fascism: what it Believes in and Aims at’, *Hibbert Journal*, 25 (1927), pp. 208–28; A. Lion, *The Pedigree of Fascism* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1927).

[66](#) *The Pedigree of Fascism*, ‘Author’s note’; she also thanks Smith, Collingwood and C.C.J. Webb for their help.

[67](#) Lion, ‘Fascism’, p. 213.

[68](#) Lion, *The Pedigree of Fascism*, p. 234.

[69](#) Including T.S. Eliot, who included her book in ‘The Literature of Fascism’, *The Criterion*, 8 (Dec. 1928), pp. 280–90. He later wrote an approving reference for her. T.S. Eliot, *Letters*, Vol. 4, 1928–9 (London, Faber, 2013), p. 177.

[70](#) W.D. Ross, author of *The Right and the Good* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930).

[71](#) Collingwood to Ethel Collingwood, 13.11.33, in private possession. Collingwood never took up golf, although he visited St Andrews in 1938 to accept an honorary degree.

[72](#) *Philosophy*, 16 (1941), pp. 74–8.

[73](#) H.S. Harris, ‘Philosophy of Life’, *Clio*, 27 (1998), pp. 485–500, p. 487.

[74](#) See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 128.

[75](#) R.G. Collingwood, 'Economics as a Philosophical Science', *International Journal of Ethics*, 36 (1925–6), pp. 162–85; 'Political Action', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 29 (1928–9), pp. 155–76.

[76](#) G. de Ruggiero, *Filosofi del Novecento*, (Bari, Laterza, 1933).

[77](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 105–16.

[78](#) Collingwood, 'Croce's Philosophy of History', p. 278.

[79](#) Croce, 'In Commemoration of an English Friend, a Companion in Thought and Faith, R.G. Collingwood', p. 177.

[80](#) Croce, 'In Commemoration', p. 177.

[81](#) R.G. Collingwood, 'Lectures on Moral Philosophy [1923]', Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Dep. Collingwood 3/1, p. 77.

[82](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4

[83](#) For example, 'Aesthetic', in R.J.S. McDowall (ed) *The Mind* (London, Longmans, 1927); 'Human Nature and Human History' in *The Idea of History* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 221–2. For criticism, see the passage 'Gentile on History' from his notebooks on metaphysics, 1933–4, reprinted in R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History and other writings in the philosophy of history*, ed. W.H. Dray and J. van der Dussen (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 127–9. He criticizes Gentile philosophically, and ends by commenting that 'the problem of development ... has been wholly overlooked by Gentile, with the result that Fascist thought, egocentric and subjective, can rightly be called by Croce *antistoricismo*'. See p. 129.

[84](#) 'Human Nature and Human History', in *The Idea of History*, p. 222.

[85](#) A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London, Gollancz, 1936).

[86](#) See *The Principles of History* p. 220. Peters comments that 'these four theses expound the canon of actualism, no less and no more', Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 342.

[87](#) G. Gentile, 'The Transcending of Time in History', in *Philosophy and History: Essay Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. R. Klibansky and H.J. Paton (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1936). The translation was by E.F. Carritt.

[88](#) R.G. Collingwood, review of *Philosophy and History*, *English Historical Review*, 52 (1937), pp. 141–6, pp. 147–9.

[89](#) A. Momigliano, A. 'Reconsidering B. Croce', *Durham University Journal*, 59 (1966), pp. 1–12, p. 6.

[90](#) G. de Ruggiero, *Storia del liberalismo europeo* (Bari, Laterza, 1925). Collingwood's translation was published as *The History of European Liberalism in*



1927.

[91](#) G. de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism*, p. 342.

[92](#) R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London, Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 158.

[93](#) Letter to Isobel Henderson, 29.2.32, in private possession.

[94](#) For an outstanding philosophical account of the relation between the four thinkers, see Peters, *History as Thought and Action*.

[95](#) A.C. Ewing, *Idealism: A Critical Survey* (London, Methuen, 1934).

# The Method of Immanence

Giovanni Gentile<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 235–275*

**Abstract:** In this seminal essay, Gentile gives an account of the way in which western philosophy gradually shed the myth of a transcendent reality. ‘The Method of Immanence’ is an outstanding example of Gentile’s writing and one of the central texts in the actual idealist canon. In it Gentile displays boldness (as well as hostility to his opponents), historical erudition and remarkable single-mindedness as he works to set a host of ostensibly very different philosophers in a single tradition culminating in actual idealism.

## 1. Method and Philosophy

When speaking of philosophical method, it is worth clarifying precisely what we mean by it and how it relates to philosophy; because the method that we mean to sketch out here has nothing to do with the kinds of instrumental and canonical conceptions of the search for truth that have, since the time of Plato, usually been described as ‘method’. In fact, anyone working out a history of the concept of method could easily come to the conclusion that method is always conceived in a manner opposed to and in contradiction of what we call the method of immanence. Even in philosophies that tend toward immanence, philosophical method has always been the method of transcendence.

A brief discussion of some key points in this history will suffice to demonstrate the thesis. We begin with Plato because before him there existed neither any systematic foundation for the concept that he went on to formulate, nor any explicit recognition of the problem. Plato’s method of philosophy is the dialectic. The διαλεκτικὴ μέθοδος (dialectical procedure)<sup>[2]</sup> enables us to arrive at the truth by raising

things that are tangible and impermanent to the level of ideas. This supreme principle (ἐπ' αὐτήν τήν ἀρχήν), necessary for all that is conceivable, transforms the hypotheses of the particular sciences into the firm reality of philosophical knowledge.

But for Plato, the dialectic, as a science (the greatest of all sciences!),<sup>[3]</sup> is not the same as the dialectic of ideas. In the latter, all ideas are linked together in a reciprocal union (κοινωνία) and unified by the supreme principle of the dialectic. The former (the dialectic as a science) is an art that must be used in one's research (ἀναγκαῖον διὰ τῶν λόγων πορεύεσθαι) whenever one wants to identify correctly which ideas accord with others, or which ideas do not (τὸν ὀρθῶς μέλλοντα δείξειν ποῖα ποίοις συμφωνεῖ τῶν γενῶν καὶ ποῖα ἄλληλα οὐ δέχεται).<sup>[4]</sup> So the dialectic that Plato associates with pure philosophy (τῷ καθαρῶς τε καὶ δικαίως φιλοσοφοῦντι)<sup>[5]</sup> is a subjective process that does not, in fact, involve a real process, but rather a certain objective aspect of reality. Thus the objective dialectic of ideas is a dialectic without movement, which for precisely that reason provokes and teleologically accounts for the movement of the subjective dialectic, whose first conception in the *Symposium*, under the form of Eros, son of Poros and Penia (plenty and penury), has a transcendental purpose, which is in fact embodied in the process itself. If the φιλοσοφία (philosophy) of ideas were itself a process—a reality in the course of becoming—it would not differ in any way from the philosopher's dialectic; and the philosopher would miss the point of his aspirations, the φιλοσοφία, the σοφία (skill, wisdom), which is, for Plato, the whole point.

This concept of method undoubtedly drives all of Platonic philosophy. The idea turns on the curious presupposition of its own devaluation. This becomes clear when one considers that such a method leads to a specific goal and invests it with value, and, in doing so, the method itself acquires value. These ideas, which the philosopher strives to attain dialectically, are everything for Plato. They are being, truth, and the absolute, and outside these there is nothing. And without these ideas, the dialectical method—or the mind, thinking dialectically—arrives, in the end, in the wholeness of its multiplicity and in the multiplicity of its wholeness, at the absolute.

But apart from this there is nothing. And the Greek spirit, unable to conceive of the subjectivity of the real or of the subject's reality, seeing everything fixed in opposition, runs the risk of drowning in nothingness. Each time, however, one attempts to conceive of reality as the curtailed negation of one's own being, the spirit always falls back into that nothingness, for reasons as diverse as mysticism and materialism.

## 2. Plato's Method

The spirit is nothing but actuality. The mystic—like the materialist and, generally speaking, the objectivist—views reality as a kingdom to be occupied, a distant promised land. No reality emerges, whether he knows it or not, other than that which is presupposed by actuality and as such transcendent of it. The spirit is actuality because it is the self-conscious Ego. The particular character of this Ego distinguishes itself from what is not Ego, which is to say, from that which is an act (act in act, not a completed act, or a partially completed act, and part of the act of completing itself: pure act). Only the Ego is an act; and only when it is understood as an act can the spirit be understood by its own spirituality. In fact, the spirit is the Ego affirming itself continuously from one moment to the next as a determined Ego. Transcending *a parte ante* or *a parte post*, this act of self-affirmation makes sense of a spirit that might be more than the act itself, like, say, the power of the act, or else like the spirit that has already completed the act. We step outside the spirit in order to perceive it in its entirety—either to see how it will be or how it once was, but not what it is now.

So the spirit occupies an absolute present. The spirit that is past and the spirit that is future pivot in counterbalance around a present that is situated between them. However, neither is properly the living spirit, but a *quid mutum instar picturae in tabula* (something mute, like a picture on a tablet),<sup>[6]</sup> as Spinoza would say, in which the spirit recognizes its own (false) image. And precisely because the Ego is pure actuality, the Ego is not located in time, but time is located in the Ego.

On the other hand, everything that is conceived in opposition to the spirit in its actuality (that is, in this case, to the spirit that conceives of its own opposition)—whether this opposition is intelligible or sensible, a Platonic idea or empirical material, transcendent God or mechanical nature—cannot really be thought of as an act. The act is the subject; and the object, when one tries to conceive of it as an act, is more of a fact (*factum*).

In fact, the object itself, considered abstractly by someone who, as in the positions outlined above, puts it in opposition to the spirit, neither becomes, nor moves, but is. It remains fixed, immutable, immobile, even when what is thought about is something that entails movement, like life, thought or the spirit.<sup>[7]</sup> Plato, and Aristotle after him, understood this well. Nature, viewed as a process of continual becoming, is held to be the sole possible object of philosophical cognition (ἐπιστήμη) because of the distinctive quality of all its aspects (εἶδη), like its ideality of nature, *veritas aeterna*, as Spinoza said.

Now in reality, this eternal truth, or whatever you want to call it, will never be a fully determined truth, except as spirit, extension, matter and mechanism. In fact, whenever we attempt to name the spirit or reality, in its intelligible aspects at least (as in Plato, Aristotle, the Scholastics, Descartes, Leibniz) it will always be a reality that one cannot grasp in the very fullness of its determination. We cannot grasp it because the contradiction does not allow it.<sup>[8]</sup> To grasp it in this way—if it were conceived as something absolutely determined—it would have to go beyond itself, and so define itself from the outside. It can only be a consciousness that is not conscious of its own self; that is, a consciousness arbitrarily presupposed as such. In other words, it is a consciousness that is not and cannot be consciousness; consciousness viewed from the outside, as something outside the viewer (that is to say, outside consciousness); and from that perspective, consciousness is material.

And yet earlier I said that the Platonic dialectic is premised on the negation of its own value, or rather of itself. The Platonic method hinges on its own negation because it is a method of transcendence. It sets itself in opposition to the truth it strives to interpret.

### 3. Aristotle's Method

We do not get any further with Aristotle, either. The formal logic of demonstration reaches its pinnacle in the Aristotelian method. Now demonstration, or apodictics, like the Platonic method, has a double meaning, which relates to the double significance of thought in Aristotelian psychology. Thought has an objective dimension—as the hierarchy of forms of reality—and a subjective dimension—as awareness of that hierarchy (awareness that is basically thought about thought). The latter dimension depends upon the former, as both its basis and means of justification. The pure actuality of the intellect (which is what Aristotle calls *νοῦς ποιητικός*, active intellect) is reality itself, considered in its intelligibility, just like the ideal world of Plato. And beyond this actuality there is nothing but the limited power of the intellect, which only becomes the intellect when it corresponds to the active intellect. Hence the subject's relationship to truth as a thinking and learned subject—a serious thinker who is compelled to know—is not in the slightest bit affected by the Platonic condition. Cognition is premised on the absolute and eternal predetermination of the knowable absolute, and therefore it entirely and logically precedes the cognitive process.

The cognitive process negates itself, then, if reality is exhausted in the process of making itself knowable. Here again the object of knowledge transcends the subject. I have already set forth the consequences of such a state of affairs. Of these, the most important to bear in mind is the way this method devalues and negates the subject.

It is only from this perspective that we can examine the historical understanding of Aristotelian theories of analysis and demonstration. If the old sceptical critique of the syllogism comes to a comprehensive conclusion, it represents an appeal to principle. If it arrives at no such conclusion, it has no middle term and is a legitimate criticism of anyone who sought to turn the syllogism into an instrument of scientific research. In so doing, however, it fails to grasp the genuine significance of Aristotelian doctrine, which deepens the Platonic theory of the *κοινωνία τῶ γενῶν* (participation

of the classes)<sup>[9]</sup> and, by means of his Analytic, defines the essential relationships between concepts. These relationships are not formed by science, but discovered, and are already interconnected in a nexus alongside those also found in science. When Aristotle speaks of *μανθάνομεν ἢ ἐπαγωγῇ ἢ ἀποδείξει* (learning through induction),<sup>[10]</sup> what he calls *μανθάνειν* (learning) is not an original and creative process, but instead retraces the steps of the absolute real in order to make itself comprehensible. We introduce concepts and demonstrate them (going over and over the same thought, now in one sense, now in the opposite sense), connecting them together because these concepts are already intrinsically connected by threads revealed to us by epagoge (induction) or apodictics. Aristotle is not so much concerned with *μανθάνειν* (learning) as with what he is trying to learn.<sup>[11]</sup> He speaks of a process of knowing in itself and of a process of knowing that is ours. By distinguishing the necessary process of rational cognition, which shifts between the universal and the contingent (cognition that is not yet scientific), and which is led by the senses, we make the first (cognitive process) the aspiration of the second. For him, science can be immediate, which is to say, without process. It conforms to principles that constitute the essential laws of intelligence, principles that are impossible to demonstrate but remain at the head of any rigorous apodictic deduction. That being so, it would be the definition of the principle of contradiction. However, it can also be a process, in which case it is a demonstration.<sup>[12]</sup>

The guarantee of scientific knowledge, as *μάθησις διανοητική* (mental learning), throughout the whole scientific process, involves tying together terms in that epistemonical syllogism we call apodictic.<sup>[13]</sup> And this knotting of terms (that is, of intelligible things) is no different from Plato's *κοινωνία τῶν γενῶν* (participation of the classes), given its position in relation to the spirit as the object of scientific research. It all comes down to the intrinsic nature of truth itself, regardless of any relationship it might eventually have with the human mind in the course of history. Here again we have a static and invariable reality. Although forms for Aristotle have no substance beyond the individual, in nature each form is inextricably linked to

matter. Reality, as nature, is therefore an eternal process (γένεσις; origin, birth). Here again the process is represented as a fixed and transcendent image, losing any possibility of movement. This is because the whole of reality coincides with the νοῦς ποιητικό (active intellect), from which matter is excluded. Hence active intellect drives any possibility of conceiving of matter and subsequently action.

Once again, what we have here is not movement in intelligible reality. It is rather the idea of movement, which does not move.

In fact, nothing moves in pure thought, or thought about thought (νόησις νοήσεως or noetic cognition), which corresponds to the driving force that is immobile. And yet the most important of all principles in Aristotelian science (αὕτη δὴ πασῶν ἐστὶ βεβαιωτάτη τῶν ἀρχῶν, the most certain of all principles)<sup>[14]</sup> is the principle of non-contradiction: nothing can both be and not be. The principle of non-contradiction represents a new restriction imposed upon non-being, and further confirmation of the Eleatic thesis of the immobility of being. For Aristotle, being is the world of forms, thought as the object of μάθησις διανοητική (mental learning). This thought is certainly not the abstract unity of Parmenides, and, however constructed it may be, it is neither one thought, nor an immobile thought (since there cannot be anything other than this), and neither can we allow it any variation, because variation would amount to thought stepping outside itself.

So we see that the apodictic or analytic method of Aristotle, too, is valid only if we negate movement. It results in a method absolutely sealed within its own objectivity, leaving no place for method itself.

So this method, too, is absurd because truth resides outside it. In the Aristotelian school, the concept remains locked in the instrumental conception of logic.<sup>[15]</sup> As a result the entire corpus of the master's logical writings is given the name of ὄργανον (organon) and it is from here that the most curious theory of method emerged, which in the history of logic was to become so authoritative. The theory can be defined, in fact, as the theory of the instrumental method. In it, method is a kind of propaedeutic of scientific knowledge, almost self-consciously training thought before grappling with the business of cognition. I say 'most curious'



because it pushes the absurd implications of any method of transcendence to its limits. These implications cannot be asserted without *eo ipso* negating their own value, yet there are still plenty of logicians who claim that they are the most appropriate principles by which to teach the correct use of reason—as if someone who was not already using his own correct rational sense could learn any rational doctrine whatever! It is as if a doctrine could be ascribed the value of truth without even being in the vicinity of the only science that can have any real claim to truth!

#### **4. The Method of the Epicureans and the Stoics**

The Epicureans did away with logic, but in their canon they reproduced the concept of a discipline that is prior to philosophy, which, as they understood it, was divided into two subsets: physics and ethics. They boasted of being able to grasp *quasdam disputandi regulas, quibus quisque usus minime falleretur* (certain rules of debate by the slightest use of which they could deceive);<sup>[16]</sup> seeing their canon as anticipating a sort of theory of knowledge, which later came to be conceived as a theory that guaranteed the legitimacy of human cognition by revealing its limits. It was a theory worthy of the naïve empiricism of the Epicureans, conceiving of reality as something opposed to the spirit. They had to contrive a solution to the very serious (and, for that matter, absurd) problem of the relationship between the subject (spirit) and that object, which has little to do with the subject that contains it (understood as object, or brain, as the positivists of today would have it).

The Stoics fought against the peripatetic thesis of the instrumental method and the idea that logic is itself part of philosophy. They opposed that thesis for the very good reason that no art constructs its own instrument. To this the Peripatetics replied: So what? Doesn't a blacksmith make his own anvil?<sup>[17]</sup> Reduced to its essence, this would introduce a circular philosophical argument, which for us is an incontestable truth, but which was refuted by Aristotle, who would not have been able to admit it without undermining the basis of the method of transcendence.<sup>[18]</sup>

Rigorously understood, this argument concerns the identity of logic and philosophy (the art that makes the anvil and the art that makes the spade). It therefore includes logic in the system or process of philosophy, and the logical presupposition of the whole system by which logic itself is constructed. A further consequence of this is the negation of those immediate principles that are the point of departure for apodictics. But to Aristotle it seemed that, without those principles, thought would become lost in an absurd and endless process. Again, it concerns the abandonment of the postulate—vital for science, as Aristotle, all the ancients and others besides conceived of it—of a truth that was immobile and objective precisely because it was extra-subjective. The argument in question is rather more modest in scope, since the Peripatetics needed it to defend their transcendent conception of the instrumental method. Like the Stoics before them, they denied the possibility that art could construct its own instruments, given that logic, as ὄργανον τῆς φιλοσοφίας (an instrument of philosophy), would not have been μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας (part of philosophy).

In reply to their adversaries, the Stoics would have replied that the art by which the blacksmith makes his anvil is not the same as the art he employs in using the anvil, when you distinguish between the anvil as the product of art and the anvil as the instrument of art. Whereas if one wants to understand its genesis, the anvil assumes additional functions as it forges: it is the object of an undertaking or an art, and it is therefore useful to think of it not in terms of its instrumentality, insofar as it conditions and facilitates the art of the blacksmith. Instead one might think of it as part of the production of his art, and on a par with his other works. However, as the Stoics warned, it cannot fail to be part of or a part of a part of a science that is the material of study (as object or product) of science itself.<sup>[19]</sup> And as with logic, the object of philosophy can be neither reabsorbed into another science that is not philosophy, nor reabsorbed into the two elements that the Peripatetics ascribed to philosophy, distinct in theory and practice.

[Karl von] Prantl notes that the Stoics were driven to unify these various disciplines under the unique concept of philosophy by the

pantheistic tendency of their philosophizing. But although they managed to tear down the old barrier between logic and philosophy, they certainly did not manage to free themselves from the concept of instrumental logic. This is shown by the value they attributed to logic ahead of ethics and physics.<sup>[20]</sup> This explains why they prioritized logic in the practice of teaching, since logic was thought of as, if not the vestibule, then the part of philosophy destined to facilitate preparation for the rest.

However, the Stoics were not able to do this without assigning autonomy to both knowledge and the subject that was inconsistent with their pantheistic naturalism.<sup>[21]</sup>

## 5. Plotinus's Method

Plotinus's dialectic, which proceeds along the same lines as the Stoics', while at the same time evoking the Platonic position, makes clear the impossibility of conceiving of liberty of knowledge in a strictly objective and transcendent metaphysical intuition. The Plotinian dialectic<sup>[22]</sup> is the ontological arrangement of ideas in the κόσμος νοητός (intelligible world), which is νοῦς (mind, reason) itself. And Plotinus's νοῦς is Aristotle's νοῦς ποιητικός (creative intellect) made rigid and transcendent. The soul, he says, is like life, of which νοῦς is the visible object; it is the material of νοῦς.<sup>[23]</sup> Sensation is ours; but understanding is ours only thanks to the active participation of the intellect, which comes to us from on high. Τὰ δὲ τοῦ νοῦ ἐνεργήματα ἄνωθεν... Αἴσθησις μὲν αἰεὶ ἡμέτερον δοκεῖ συγκεχωρημενον αἰεὶ γὰρ αισθνομεθα· νους δὲ αμφοιβηται, καὶ ὅτι μὴ αὐ' τῷ αἰεὶ καὶ ὅτι χωριστός· χωριστός δὲ τῷ μὴ προσνεῦειν αὐτόν, ἀλλ' ἡμᾶς πρὸς αὐτόν εἰς τὸ ἄνω βλέποντας· ἄσθησις δὲ ἡμῖν ἄγγελος, βασιλεὺς δὲ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐκεῖνος (the Intellectual-Principle enters from above us □ we hesitate as to the Intellectual-Principle both because we are not always occupied with it and because it exists apart, not a principle inclining to us but one to which we incline when we choose to look upwards. The sensitive principle is our scout; the Intellectual-Principle our King).<sup>[24]</sup>

In this way, method, as a subjective process of reaching the truth, ends up being entirely negated, giving way to mysticism.

## **6. The Method of Christian Philosophy and of Bacon**

In Christian philosophy we find a wholly new perspective on the spirit, unknown in Greek philosophy, as subject and as liberty. But the new concept remained largely hindered by the great weight of Greek culture and its objectivist philosophy, which, as we have seen, centred on the idea of a reality in opposition to the spirit. The Christian version of reality is the moral reality of man realizing the will of God by redeeming himself of sin. For the Jewish conscience, God's will is already set apart from man and focused on itself: it is not a completed fact, but is in a continuous state of becoming. It is no longer a fact but an act. There are no longer things, only love, the life of the spirit and the creation of its true life. Man's centre is no longer outside him in nature, extended in space, but within him, gathered in his conscience in its unmultipliable unity, and set on establishing its own actuality. When anything transcending reality has been dealt with in relation to the spiritual act, there would no longer be any need to conceive of a science whose object is outside itself and its method, just as there would be no need to conceive of method as preparation for science. But the entire history of modern philosophy sees a slow and gradual critical awareness of the new position taking hold, brought about by the human spirit in Christianity. It is what we might call the rational development of a new truth.<sup>[25]</sup>

Meanwhile, the whole approach of the Patristics and the Scholastics represents a crystallization of the new Christian spirit cast in the old forms of Greek thought. First, take the constitution of dogma, which is all about expelling the religious life of the spirit in order to see itself from the outside. It is confined by a particular definition as the object of intellectual speculation, much like the intelligibles of the old philosophy, which are examined as such and deprived of any vestige of living spirituality. Secondly, with the scientific systematization of concepts—arising with the dogmas of the old heaven of the κόσμος νοητός (intelligible world), treated

along the same lines as the ὄροι (terms)—Aristotle set immediate and indemonstrable principles at the pinnacle of scientific knowledge. As a result, Platonism prevailed in the period during which theology was being formed, corresponding to the age of the Fathers, while Aristotelianism prevailed in the period during which philosophy systematized and coordinated new concepts from the old, corresponding to the Scholastics in the age of the Doctors. For both it is clear that the reality of thought, when faced with the ever-resurgent mysticism (so different in its ancient and Christian versions!), was overwhelmed by logical schemes of the extra-spiritual, transcendent world, which, though existing in and of itself, was presupposed by the activity of the spirit. During the medieval period, the concept of the instrumental method was thus reinforced ever more rigidly; and when in the Renaissance the spirit of Christianity sometimes appeared, in various guises, to contradict the very essence of the religion of Jesus, it forced itself free from its centuries-long enslavement by Greek logic. At that time there was much talk of new methods and of *recta ratio philosophandi*, from [Lorenzo] Valla's *Dialettica* to Bacon's *Novum Organum* and to Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. And the secret motive driving the new thinkers to bolster their philosophies with instruments and weapons, new and otherwise, did far more than the special doctrines that these thinkers had assumed to be the wonderful solution that would breathe new life into science. Historians of philosophy have not appreciated the importance of these protests, exhibitions and discussions of method that fill up the philosophical literature up until Leibniz, and had no way, for example, to distinguish between the insipid, scholastic pedantry of [Jacob] Acontius (who had no philosophy of his own to present) and Descartes' *Method*.

The significance of method should be sought not in the author's method but in his philosophy; method is, after all, an abstraction of philosophy.<sup>[26]</sup> Therefore method has no meaning whatsoever if we considered it in the abstract, as almost all methodologies do. For that reason, any method of transcendence is absurd, as we saw from ancient philosophy.

Bacon's assessment of his *Novum Organum* can be seen in its title; and reflects his instrumental concept of method. [Justus von] Liebig is right to deny the originality and fecundity of Bacon's doctrine; all those who compare the Englishman's precepts with the experiments of Galileo are right to do so. But the *Novum Organum's* mastery becomes clear when you look past its instrumental attempts to vanquish nature, wholly freed from the tangle of the Aristotelian intellect, to see the new position of the spirit. It gave rise to the expulsion of the old deductive logic as well as the proclamation of man's new role (*instauratio magna*) as *naturae minister et interpret* (the minister and interpreter of nature).<sup>[27]</sup> Bacon's new science is not what he fashions using his new instrument, but precisely the new instrument itself. It is the negation of Greek idealism and the first draft of a theory of science as the creation of man, where man is not subjected to the process of nature by simply contemplating it, but inserts himself within it by means of his intellect, thereby prevailing over it. It is the first great cry of man after freeing himself from the abstractions of an ideal truth and plunging joyously into the flux of the real. But as an empiricist and naturalist, Bacon did not arrive at the concept of the actuality of the spirit, which cannot be transcended without falling into the abstract concept of the world that is what it is, and can therefore be contemplated solely as the object of intellectual speculation. So with his Nature, which is there in front of the human mind, like the promised victory prize of scientific research, he too remains at the viewpoint of the instrumental method.

## 7. Descartes' Method

What we see here, for similar reasons, is the Cartesian point of view which is present in the *Discourse*, but appears more clearly in the posthumous *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. When in the *Discourse* he presents his four rules as the method by which to reconstruct the whole of knowledge, Descartes, who has already travelled the route along which method would have had to guide him, ingeniously presents these precepts as an antecedent to science. He

assures us that, with his method fully formed, he goes into training through the study of mathematics before preparing himself (armed to the teeth) for the study of philosophy. So when he comes out with his famous declaration, it is hard to know whether it is naïve or political: 'Now, before starting to rebuild your house, it is not enough simply to pull it down, to make provision for materials and architects (or else train yourself in architecture), and to have carefully drawn up the plans; you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress. Likewise, lest I should be indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgements... [so] I formed for myself a provisional moral code...' <sup>[28]</sup> He seriously believed that with these precepts—by not accepting anything as true unless he knew it to be so, by avoiding rashness and bias, and not including among his own judgements any that do not present themselves clearly and distinctly to the spirit, with no reason for doubting them—it is possible to reconstruct knowledge! And in fact, he understands clear and distinct ideas as those that are within the ambit of pure reason (that is: to reason unclouded by the passions or by the will), the object of intuition. He thus presents the spirit with the truth as straightforwardly objective. Of course, any idea that is evident is also true. But to discern truth from falsehood using these criteria one would need to know, firstly, which ideas were supplied by intuition (those simple, primitive ideas, which, as they are reflected by the intellect, have no need of affirmation by the will); and, secondly, which ideas are analogous to Plato's ideal world, which is not demonstrated by thought, but imposes itself upon thought and thus gives it its form. The latter clearly cannot be determined by the same precept that dogmatically presupposes a certain objective ideal content.

There are two processes in the Cartesian method: <sup>[29]</sup> intuition and deduction, which, if the mathematical analyses are correct, progressively extends the scope of intuition from primitive data to propositions that are not self-evident, but are links in longer or shorter chains of reasoning using the evidence supplied by the primitive data. So the whole method is a mathematical universal that is not distinguished from the Platonic dialectic except by this

difference: the terms of the dialectic are expressed as quality and those of mathematics are expressed as quantity—which is to say, an indifferent quality.

On the one hand, Cartesian mathematics makes a mockery of Plato's more immobile and solid reality, allowing an intellectualization of it, much like a purer mechanism (in which the anti-spirituality of Plato's ideas reaches the apex of its internal logic, which was, as I have called it, a materialistic logic). On the other hand, it conceals a new motif by which Descartes' rationalistic and mathematical idealism is directly opposed to Plato's realistic idealism. This new and profound motif is subjectivity and certainty, until then unknown in philosophy, which was wholly absorbed in theories of reality as truth. The intuition of evident or clear and distinct ideas or truths is the intuition of *cogito ergo sum*, which extends and stretches over ideal reality. This enactment is a (deductive) realization of the subject and has nothing to do with Platonic intuition. It is thought's intimacy that is realized in thinking, illuminating a world by dazzling light. Descartes opens his eyes to this world when, through thought, he sees himself as a thinking substance. Descartes' conclusion is to see analysis of the new world that he discovered when he felt the unshakable certainty of the Ego as an act of self-affirmation, thinking itself into existence and at once creating itself and establishing itself in reality.

But just because it assumes this intrinsic value, the Cartesian method need not be the main entrance point to philosophy, as he himself, his followers, and many historians of philosophy have believed. The principle of sufficient reason<sup>[30]</sup>—which arose in Leibniz's method, breaking the ideality of Descartes' new intelligible (and as such uniquely possible) world, in order to arrive at the reality in which the possible is brought about through enactment—is not a pure logical variation. The dynamic metaphysics of monadology benefits from allowing abstract reality (that immobile mechanism conceived mathematically according to the old logic of identity) to move. But all of this amounts to a moment, or the knowledge of a new metaphysical intuition that prepares the way but does not follow through.



## 8. Spinoza's Method

Spinoza, who most deeply understood the relationship between method and philosophy, also most fully advanced the Cartesian mechanical-mathematical conception of method. His speculations struck powerful blows against transcendence, and were also unique in the vigorous endorsement of the immanence of method within philosophy, although, on reflection, his particular variety of endorsement turned out to be wholly transcendent.

The study of method, Spinoza warns, is not boundless. That is: to find the best method for investigating the truth, we do not require a further method for investigating the method for investigating the truth; nor is there a need for a third method for investigating the second, and so on indefinitely, *tali enim modo nunquam ad veri cognitionem, imo ad nullam cognitionem perveniretur* (for by such a method we can never arrive at a knowledge of what is true, nor at any knowledge whatever).<sup>[31]</sup> Instead, method resembles physical tools, the fabrication of which, we could say, leads to an infinite regress. To beat iron we need a mallet, and to have a mallet we need to have made it; and for this we require another mallet and other tools, and so on *ad infinitum*. But who would claim that this argument proves that men are therefore unable to make tools? To overcome this problem, says Spinoza, you only need note that from the beginning, men were able to make the simplest things using their natural instruments, however difficult the process and however imperfect the results might be. Once these were made, they could be used to make other, more complex things, with less difficulty and more refined results, and so on, passing in stages from the simplest things to tools, and with these first tools they could build more things and more tools. Thus they could achieve more and more difficult tasks with less effort. The intellect constructs its intellectual tools with a vigour that is equal to its inherent skill. It thereby masters new skills by producing more tools, and uses these tools to investigate the truth. Thus it proceeds, step by step, until it reaches the apex of knowledge.<sup>[32]</sup> So, rather than arising all of a sudden, the method is gradually refined; and the true method, which the actuality of the

spirit refines, is the *vis nativa* (innate force), a method that is innate, *a priori*, and embodies the human intellect itself.

But here is the conclusion that Spinoza draws from all this. Any true idea is something other than what we think it is; a circle is not a circle but the idea of a circle. Unlike a circle, though, the idea of the circle has no periphery or centre, just as the idea of a body has no body of its own. Now, if the idea is something different, Spinoza says that it is in some way inherently intelligible, which is what renders it different. And yet the essence of the idea can be the object of another idea, and this second idea, considered on its own terms, will also be something real and intelligible, which is to say, it is the object of another idea, and so on indefinitely. So if there is Peter and the idea of Peter, there will also be the idea of the idea of Peter, and the idea of this idea, and so on indefinitely. *Quod quisque potest experiri, dum videt se scire, quid sit Petrus, et etiam scire se scire, et rursus scit se scire, quod scit* (this every one can find out for himself when he sees that he knows what is Peter, and also knows that he knows, also knows that he knows that he knows, etc).<sup>[33]</sup> But this does not mean that for Spinoza (as our own [Francesco] Bonatelli recently claimed in his theory of the infinite duplication of consciousness)<sup>[34]</sup> there is any need to transcend the idea (the intellectual act) in the infinite process of knowledge, in which the idea becomes wrapped up in itself, attempting in vain to devour its own tail. Quite the contrary: the truth of the idea of Peter does not derive from the idea of itself, so the spiritual actuality does not transcend itself because it would otherwise annul its very spiritual actuality.

*Unde constat, quod, ut intelligatur essentia Petri, non sit necesse, ipsam ideam Petri intelligere, et multo minus ideam ideae Petri; quod idem est, ac si dicerem, non esse opus, ut sciam, quod sciam me scire, et multo minus esse opus scire, quod sciam me scire; non magis, quam ad intelligendam essentiam trianguli opus sit essentiam circuli intelligere* (Whence it is certain that in order to understand the essence of Peter it is not necessary to know the idea itself of Peter: which is the same thing as if I said that it is not necessary to know that I know, in order to know, far less to know that I know that I know, no more than in order to understand the essence of a triangle it is

necessary to understand the essence of a circle).<sup>[35]</sup> The difference between a spiritual act and the act of becoming aware of a spiritual act is as great as the difference between a spiritual act and any other spiritual entity. It is as different as thinking a triangle and thinking a circle into being. From here it follows that certainty cannot be arrived at from outside the truth. Spinoza claims, in his scholastic language, that certainty is nothing but its own objective essence, or rather it is the act of offering an object up to the intellect: *modus, quo sentimus essentiam formalem, est ipsa certitudo* (the mode in which we feel formal essence is certainty itself).<sup>[36]</sup>

The problem of certainty is not, and need not be, any different from the problem of truth. There would be no way to acquire certainty of a truth about which we were not certain, or that was not already immanent in our subjectivity, because otherwise the path would stretch out endlessly before us. In other words, as we would put it, if the object is not the same as the subject from the outset, then the former (the object) can never be touched by the latter (the subject) and the two can never enter any kind of relationship. *Unde iterum patet, ...<sup>[37]</sup> neminem posse scire, quid sit summa certitudo, nisi qui habet adaequatam ideam<sup>[38]</sup> aut essentiam obiectivam alicuius rei; nimirum, quia idem est certitudo et essentia obiectiva* (Whence it is also clear... that no one can know what is the greatest certainty, unless he have an adequate idea or the objective essence of anything, that is, certainty is the same thing as objective essence);<sup>[39]</sup> certainty, as we would now put it, and representation. Truth, therefore, has no need of any outwardly distinguishable signs to make it acceptable as truth.

Conclusion: method does not lead us to the truth. However, once we have grasped the truth, it can point us toward a true method, or rather contains one. The true method does not entail seeking truth's distinguishable features after grasping ideas in order to eliminate doubt. After all, the method presupposes that one already knows a truth, and so it can only consist of the analysis of this truth, as you might analyse the character of the rule that the intellect must follow in its own way. *Methodum nihil aliud esse, nisi cognitionem reflexivam aut ideam ideae; et quia non datur idea ideae, nisi prius*

*detur idea, ergo methodus non dabitur, nisi prius detur idea* (method is nothing else than reflective knowledge or the idea of an idea: and inasmuch as the idea of an idea cannot be granted unless the idea itself be granted first, therefore the method will not be granted unless the idea be first granted).<sup>[40]</sup> But this reflexive cognition is not drawn from outside the ranks, because it is endowed with special prerogatives and has the capacity to confer certainty onto other cognitions. It is one cognition among other cognitions: *ad probandam veritatem et bonum ratiocinium nullis nos egere instrumentis, nisi ipsa veritate et bono ratiocinio. Nam bonum ratiocinium bene ratiocinando comprobavi, et adhuc probare conor* (for proving the truth and good argument we never lack good instruments or truth itself and good argument. For I have proved good argument by good arguing, and thus I still endeavour to do).<sup>[41]</sup>

This thesis clearly expresses the doctrine of the solid circle of thought, which no method can transcend, since the method cannot be anything other than thought. The thesis resolutely confirms the necessity of conceiving philosophical method as a moment of philosophy itself, or the identity of method and philosophy.

For Spinoza that identity is grounded in the most profound identity of thought and being, of the idea *adaequata* and the idea *vera*, or *conventientia ideae verae sum sua ideata*. If thought is the measure of itself, it is immediately true; and as such the *esse obiective* coincides with the *esse formaliter*; as such the *substantia*, as *essentia*, (which is posited in the intellect, that is, in the self-same *quatenus res cogitans*) is *causa sui*. If for a moment one were to separate thought from being, thought would need (as Spinoza saw very clearly) something beyond an instrumental method to pursue the truth. But doubts about such a detachment never enter Spinoza's mind. *Si ...*<sup>[42]</sup> *forte quis scepticus et de ipsa prima veritate et de omnibus, quas ad normam primae deducemus, dubius adhuc maneret, ille profecto aut contra conscientiam loquetur, aut nos fatebimur, dari homines penitus etiam animo obcaecatos a nativitate aut a praeiudiciorum causa, id est, aliquo externo casu* (and if... there is still some sceptic who remains doubtful of this first truth and all the things which we have deduced according to its standard, then

surely he must be speaking contrary to his real opinion, or we must confess that there are men purblind as regards the mind, either owing to their birth or some prejudices, that is, some external cause).  
[43]

But doubts do not occur to Spinoza, not because he has already established truth in certainty, but rather because he has established certainty in truth. For him, the subject does not master truth; instead truth masters the subject and absorbs it. His neo-Platonizing conviction is that the true *ordo philosophandi* must come from divine nature, *quia tam cognitione quam natura prior est*, in order to arrive at the world in which he finds himself.<sup>[44]</sup> The movement initiated by Descartes began with man (*cogito*)<sup>[45]</sup> with all his imperfections, throwing him into the clutches of dogmatism and rationalistic speculation from which not even the certainty of Leibniz's *principio di ragione* (principle of sufficient reason) could free him. Descartes' *sum* (which was *existere*) for Spinoza becomes the existence that is enclosed within the *essentia*, the object of higher contemplation. Descartes' actual subject (*cogito*) becomes (as it had already become in Descartes' own ontological argument) a *res (cogitans)*. As *res* it is no longer actuality, but fact; it is not movement, as it was in Plato's philosophy, but the idea of movement; an idea as a resolution of lived experience (*homo cogitate, nos corpus quodam multis modis affici sentimus*; Man thinks... We feel that [our] body is affected in many ways).<sup>[46]</sup> So everything living in life contracts and solidifies in the intelligible realm, in the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. And man, by his speculation, aspires to that quiet death of the *amor Dei intellectualis*, where there is no more suffering because there is no more life.

And thus the object swallows the subject; and method (the *ordo geometricus* of truth, which goes round and round itself) is no longer the method immanent in the historical process, the mind's reality, but is converted (no more or less than the Platonic dialectic, fixed in the *κοινωνία ὄντων γενῶν* (participation of the classes) into the method of the very purest transcendence of absolute acosmism.

## 9. Kant's Method

In the meantime, the theme of subjectivist certainty was developing better in English philosophy—in Bacon, but still further in Descartes (or the English Platonists of the Cambridge school)—and nudged Locke toward that doctrine of experience which paved the way for the immaterialism of Berkeley and the scepticism of Hume, two intuitions that converged in their extreme opposition to Spinoza's acosmism. In one the subject evaporates; in the other, the object evaporates; and it is towards this that empiricism is oriented (the cosmos, dispersing at the core of Spinozan substance). And after that double negation it was natural that the question of method would arise again, more forcefully than before, just as it did in Kantian criticism.

But the Kantian concept of method was not sought in what Kant said about it in the *Logic*, where the old idea is repeated (it is 'a way in which one can know perfectly a certain object, to which knowledge is applied'); because in the criticism the ancient question undergoes a profound metamorphosis, and we are no longer talking about method, but about a critique of pure reason, or epistemology. And after Kant, we no longer write dissertations on and treatments of method; but this is not the reason we disregard the traditional concept of picturing something like an anteroom before embarking on philosophy.

The critique is not instrumental, like Aristotelian logic and the Baconian organon. It is not really clear, however, whether it is an introduction to philosophy, like constructive science, or a part of it, much as the ancient Peripatetics and Stoics asked themselves whether logic was ὄργανον (an instrument) or μέρος (a constitutive part) of philosophy. The critique, in fact, though not presuming to be the organon of knowledge itself, claims instead to address, in a preliminary way, the organon of knowledge itself: to study its legitimate use before it is adopted in other specific instances of cognitive research.

From here arises the famous precondition on which many neo-Kantians were keen to insist. Before then, Hegel used to wittily

compare the critique of reason to the scholar who wants to learn to swim before throwing himself into the water. The absurdity of an epistemology as preface to knowledge has its roots in the old instrumental conception of method, which does not have a proper end in itself, and has value insofar as it is the means to a science that remains beyond it.

The root of the Kantian error in conceiving of this epistemology lies in the separation of knowledge of the object from the object of knowledge. This arises from a dogmatic prejudice that is the cause of all the errors of the critique, which is certainly not entirely critical. For there to be a pure faculty of knowledge (pure reason, pure intellect, or pure sensibility), as Kant claims—instituting his inquiry in the way that he does, by searching for conditions that make possible synthetic *a priori* judgements, authorizing us to extend the breadth of our cognition, and enabling us to arrive at objective knowledge—would be justified, but it would also be absurd. It is justified because it would really shore up this problem of the relation between faculty of knowing and the object; but is absurd, because a problem conceived in this way would be irresolvable.

In reality, Kant both resolves and does not resolve the problem of the critique since, without noticing it, he interprets it in two different ways. On the one hand he reproduces David Hume's empiricist problem, irresolvable except in the sceptical manner of the Scottish philosopher, and which is in fact resolved by Kant with the concept of a thing-in-itself, which is completely unknowable, even though it is fundamental to any effective and objective knowledge. On the other hand, Kant proposes an entirely new problem (which is the great Kantian problem, and has nothing to do with Hume's historical context): the problem that gave the immortal Königsberg philosopher the joy of knowing that his critique had brought about one of the greatest revolutions of the human spirit. So the true Kantian problem is not that of the search for the legitimate passage from spirit to reality, presupposing the spirit to be an extrinsic spectator on reality, in the manner of English empiricism and Greek idealism alike. Rather, the problem is that the whole of the scientific process, for which empiricism retains some basis in the external world, is

reconstructed from within the sphere of the spirit's own activity, which varies from the multiple sensations to self-consciousness, to the Ego, to original apperception. The spirit's activity is synthetic; it is omnipresent and the omnipotent creator of all the connections that make up the system of the external world. This is a problem that Kant begins to resolve with his transcendental idealism, which is really as different from the immaterial idealism of Berkeley as it is from the sceptical idealism of David Hume. It creates a new world, which is phenomenal but at the same time self-sufficient, by forming the true world of science. It is a phenomenon that, thanks to further critique, frees itself from the shadow of the thing-in-itself in order to become absolute as phenomenon, or the absolute reality that appears as itself, and is, therefore, thought.

The Kantian *Critique* therefore dissolves into two very different critiques. One of these is the legacy of the ancient objectivist preoccupations, and the other, the forward momentum of the new idealism. One always clings to the other, tightening its deadly tentacles, without ever managing to suffocate it. The first, in the author's view, is a useful method with which to overhaul science. It functions as an instrument or weapon vanquishing metaphysics, that would have to give way to mathematics (which is an abstract science) and to physics (which is an inverse reflection of the world). In the end, it is a method that has more to do with destruction than construction: mathematics and physics did not await the critique before declaring their faith in truth, while the philosophers remained doubtful and hesitant. The second, by contrast, is neither an instrument used against nor in the service of metaphysics, but is a new metaphysics of the mind or of reality that is consciousness.

For this reason, with regard to the first and worst of these two positions, Kant did not believe that he was able to succeed or that he had succeeded in his attempt to construct an entire doctrine, which, remaining in the antechamber of the science of the real (metaphysics), is limited by its use of the map of science as a means to examine and judge its value.

As has already been revealed in earlier discussions of other preliminary methodological texts, the absurd implications of this



conception are demonstrated principally by the fact that any one of these methods, taken in itself, is the enunciation of a metaphysical system. Even Kant's anti-metaphysical critique is in fact a metaphysic, despite the author's sound intention to steer clear of even minor misuses of reason.

Really it is a metaphysical intuition to position the subject in time, like experience (and therefore as a phenomenon and not noumenon). And it is a metaphysical intuition that leads Kant to see intuition as basically multifarious and chaotic (thanks to the *a priori* form of sensibility) and in need of order and unification. This idea would never have occurred to Kant without his presupposition of realistic conformity, or of the mechanical atomism of science, which he was compelled to justify, or the monadological pluralism of metaphysics, which sustained him in his pre-critical period. On the other hand, it is an idea without which his distinction between substance and form, at the very first level of cognitive construction, would have collapsed. It also enabled Kant to contrast transparent phenomenal reality that is imbued with spiritual form with the substance of the noumenon, which is inaccessible outside our forms of intuition.

## **10. The Method of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel**

Following Kantianism's great step forward, modern philosophy determinedly set out on the path of the most profound constructive, rather than destructive, critique. Kant's critique painted a multi-coloured scene that depicts the variety of mental activity. But the picture that emerges from this originally dark world turns out to be nothing but a creation of mental activity, which is limited to abstracting from the categories in which its being is realized.<sup>[47]</sup> If that is so, then absolute reality is precisely the true *causa sui*; it is not the object towards which the activity of the mind is directed, but it is what it is through its own explanation of itself without ever having to step outside itself. Fichte proposes a new problem, but does not resolve it, because he does not advance it in a sufficiently rigorous way, and in the absence of such practical conviction, his idealism was

confined by impassable boundaries. Schelling's idea of nature as intelligence petrified, or as spirit that is not self-aware, did manage to break through those boundaries, however, through his new projection of the objective aspect so that the spirit is revealed to itself. So Fichte's wholly ideal reality is integrated by Schelling and implemented as a wholly real reality, even though Schelling's reality is assumed and imagined to be an immediate intuition identical to Fichte's.

Hegel laid the foundations for an absolute idealism, presenting nature not as the other side of the spirit, but as a degree in its process. The spirit is seen as the complete realization of the idea (which can do little more than pass over the eternal mediation of the idea itself) which is orientated outside itself in order to see itself in the actuality of consciousness.

Hegel seemed to break free from transcendent origins, resolving reality perfectly into the knowing subject. In fact, he renewed the immanentistic definition of method that Spinoza had proposed, calling it *der sich begreifende Begriff* (the concept that conceives of itself),<sup>[48]</sup> the same idea (the absolute, reality) that, as *alle Wahrheit* (the whole truth), is *sich wissende Wahrheit* (the truth that knows all).<sup>[49]</sup>

For Hegel, in all of his discussions of the topic, method is the totality of knowledge. It is the system itself; that self-contained closed circle, which Aristotle had not wanted to admit. A circle, says Hegel, is a circle of circles, since every link in the chain is alive; each link reflects the next, returning to the start while also beginning a new link. Hegel is fully aware of the identity of method and thought demanded by the profound identity of thought and being, and of the great difference (as great as that between his dialectic and that of Plato) between his concept of method and the common concept.

Yet we cannot claim that Hegel himself altogether discovered the principle of what I call the method of immanence. There are two clear strands of transcendence that endure in his philosophy (his *sich begreifende Begriff* in some respects obstructs his *Sich-Begreifen*). Firstly, it becomes apparent in the distinction of his *Phenomenology* from the *Logic* in the first form of his system, when

the earlier work was published (in 1807) primarily as the 'first part of a system'. And second, it is clear in the definitive three-part configuration of the system: logic, philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* prefigures logic in that it is self-consciousness of truth, or the process of absolute self-consciousness. Hegel introduces a distinction between phenomenological self-consciousness and absolute self-consciousness, between thought and thought, which is analogous to the difference between the two Platonic dialectics, one of which is an empirical advancement of the other. So the dialectical process of phenomenology is not a dialectical process inside truth, but a process of moving toward truth. As such it is not conceived as identical to thought, but floating above it, like the Platonic ideas about the soul inflamed by Eros, and like the relationship between Aristotle's active and passive intellects. For there to be a logic outside phenomenology that gives rise to it, truth would need to transcend thought, which would need to raise itself up to grasp the value of truth.

Neither does it help to unify logic and phenomenology, since logic is the truth of phenomenology and therefore a necessary aim of the free dialectic. The difference cannot be subsumed in this way, and always consists of knowledge that is absolute and knowledge that is not. So the aim of phenomenological thought always contains something that it also lacks; and if this thing is the essential character of truth, it comes to transcend the whole spiritual process which it must attain. Thus it reproduces the ancient and obstructive conception of the empty spirit that stands before truth and must be grasped by philosophical method.

In the configuration of the Hegelian system an echo of Schelling's naturalism remains. Schelling posited nature behind spirit; the spirit cannot become self-aware (realize itself) without thereby recognizing in itself something other than what it is, which is precisely what it becomes aware of. The real becomes reality by the same unconscious process by which a poet becomes inspired; he creates his work before he reflects directly upon it. Like a critic, his reflection

intervenes after the fact. The self-actualizing of the idea is premised on the self-actualizing of natural or unconscious reality. In his *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel reverts to this position, virtually overcome by the absolute idea. Nature and spirit intervene to consolidate the logical idea, insofar as it is an idea, even though it is not conceived as such. Meanwhile nature alone cannot account for this major celebration of the virtue of the idea, after all the idea has broken free of itself, from the immediacy that was the idea, in and of itself. The idea has still not returned to itself and still cannot be grasped either, because it is not conscious. Nature comes first and through it, the process of the spirit finds a path that is already signposted and which it should follow. This is a prerequisite of its laws.

And if this process is a prerequisite of the process of the spirit, then the dialectic of nature is a real and rational system that is already completed prior to the rational and real process of the spirit. It therefore remains outside the process of the spirit and transcends it. And we can say the same of the pure ideal dialectic of logic in relation to the spirit and to nature.

On the other hand, this dialectic of a logic that will be (but is not) the content of consciousness, and will, sooner or later, only be the content (not the act) of consciousness, cannot be conceived as anything but the immobile Platonic dialectic and Spinoza's *ordo geometricus*, since the life of thought remains in its actuality. As a consequence it dissolves into the multiplicity of unconnected moments, which is thought in its activity.<sup>[50]</sup> In any case, when it comes to history (and to the very philosophy that is deployed in history), logic becomes an *a priori* that transcends history. To the philosopher who contributes to history, logic must appear to be an organ of speculative knowledge, the way dialectic appeared to Plato and the analytic to Aristotle.

To overcome transcendence, we need with one hand to unify phenomenology and logic, and with the other the *logos* and the spirit. Thus we can attain the true method of immanence and really go beyond the instrumental method.<sup>[51]</sup>

## 11. Actual Idealism

Phenomenology is distinguished from logic and the *logos* of the spirit by a simple mistake made by the new metaphysical perspective that took hold in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Actual idealism allows us to redress the issue with the utmost rigour. It is distinguished from absolute idealism insofar as Hegel's absolute idea, despite the well-founded purpose of his philosophy, does not truly resolve reality into itself, and does not manage to free itself from the empirical, the contingent and the irrational.

The fundamental error lies in searching for thought (and reality) outside the act of thought, through which thought comes into being: whereas the concept of the *a priori*, a constitutive principle of experience and realization of the pure Ego, made it possible for Kant to conceive of the world anew, as nothing but act, function, pure thinking and subjective actuality. It is the Ego in the act of thinking. Kant began to turn his back on this original impulse when he took to analysing the forms of judgements in order to categorize them. From his analysis of judgements, considered in their own right, he concluded that these categories were products of thought, whose effects were already immobilized by the activity of thought. They could not and did not succeed as anything but ideas, which were also objects of thought, unless they were required to play a spiritual role. In fact, the categories were not really modes of thinking, but thoughts. Unity, plurality and totality of quantity are not modes by which the subject judges, but by which the object is judged; the categories should have been the concrete determinations of the modes by which I think, but they are not. And one can say the same of the categories of quality, relation and modality.<sup>[52]</sup>

What if a conclusion could not be drawn from these categories?

The problem of transcendental logic in Fichte's *Doctrine of Science*, as in Hegel's *Logic*, is the 'I think', which is a kind of skeleton and support for thought in act, unlike Kant's understanding of the categories. But Hegel constructs his logic with a study that, as we have seen elsewhere,<sup>[53]</sup> treats the categories as concepts for us to conceive, not as concepts for us to realize: *cogitata*, not *cogitatio*.

Now that which is thought is thinking itself. It is essentially non-dialectical, without subjectivity and fixed in itself in opposition to the Ego. It is like the Platonic truth to which the soul eternally aspires but cannot possess. So, given this thought (the object of logic), one must necessarily envisage a thought that aspires to realize the first, that is, the object of phenomenology. Having restored the thought of a thought to its self-actualization—that is, the thought in the process of thinking—logical thought is no longer regarded in terms of its abstract content, but in terms of its eternal act, which is so necessary and absolute in the same way that phenomenological thought claims to be necessary and absolute. The privileged position of logic is effectively undermined. All this is an example of phenomenology, in turn, becoming wholly logical. And the *Science of Logic* ceases to be the Gospel of a supernatural law, transcending any philosophy and any other historical process—of the spirit or of nature—and becomes a link in that eternal system of thought, which is complete in its every moment.

Viewed in its actuality, thought does not really split itself into thinking and thought, consciousness and object of consciousness. Thought is self-consciousness; it is consciousness of the self that it becomes by virtue of its self-consciousness. And therefore there is no philosophy that, acquiring consciousness of the logos, presupposes it, rather there is the philosophy that creates its own logos, via the doctrine of the logos. And in each of its doctrines it always creates a new logos; as shown in the variations to which Hegelian logic is subjected in the successive interpretations made by Hegel and his faithful followers, throughout spiritual moments that are always necessarily different, with different problems, and from different points of view.

Logic is none other than the very life of the spirit, which is not a positive fact, as the positivists would have it, but an absolute value, because it is self-creation and liberty. This is what the spirit is faced with: a completed fact, not reality that the spirit brings about by affirming it.

## 12.

The method of immanence, then, consists of the concept of the absolute concreteness of the real in the act of thought and in history. It is an act that transcends itself when it begins to posit something (God, nature, logical laws, moral laws, historical reality as a collection of facts, spiritual or psychic categories other than the actuality of consciousness) that is not the same Ego as the position of the self—what Kant called the *I think*. The method of immanence is both the point of view and the law of actual idealism. As such it has nothing to do with the homonymous method of a philosophy of action that believes itself able to move from the spiritual act by assuming that reality is outside it.

Evidently this method is not a new organon of knowledge, but a principle together with a desire for further knowledge.

### Appendix

1. The παντελής ὄν (absolute being) of the *Sophist* (p. 248 E–249 A–B; Fowler trans. pp. 382–3) has, on the contrary, νοῦν καὶ ζωὴν καὶ ψυχὴν (life and soul and mind), and also κίνησιν (motion); and therefore Plato, in his mature period, clearly felt the need not only to overcome the Heraclitean perspective (which is his settled philosophical motive), but also to move beyond Parmenides’s view, which was always the absolute norm of his mature philosophy, forcing him to understand τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν (being and the universe) without excluding either stillness or movement: but κατὰ τὴν τῶν παίδων εὐχὴν ὅσα ἀκίνητα καὶ κεκινημένα... συναμφότερα (he must quote the children’s prayer: “all things immovable and in motion”... consist of both) (249 D; Fowler trans., pp. 384–7). But, understood in this way, setting himself to understand the unity of opposites that must be the essence of being, he stopped short, and focuses instead on the contradiction between movement and stillness, inherent in being itself; and claims that what he is dealing with is not movement and stillness taken together, but something quite different (οὐκ ἄρα κίνησις καὶ στάσις ἐστι συναμφότερον τὸ ὄν

ἀλλ' ἕτερον δὴ τι τούτων (being is not motion and rest in combination, but something else, different from them) (250 C; Fowler trans., pp. 388–9). He finally concludes that, by its very nature (κατὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν), being is neither at rest nor in motion: or rather, being, which is the focus for all ideas by the κοινωνία τῶν γενῶν (participation of the classes), in itself has no movement, and therefore neither life nor soul. And the theistic interpretation of Plato, dear to the Fathers of the Church, who often try to claim him as one of their own, rails against the most obvious theses from the *Sophist*, in which one would be able to find the most reliable documentation. If, taking the argument further, Plato restores the relationship between being and movement through the mediating concept of ἐἰείυίβá (participation) where being, an overarching general ideal, informs determinate ideas, which one cannot think of other than as modes of being, and which, if they are things, cannot then be other than they are, nor a dimension of being, and therefore they both are and are not at the same time, thus generating non-being; and if then it seems, as Plato explicitly imagines, as has been identified by Parmenides (in his Παρμενίδης αἰδοῖός τε δεινός τε (venerated and awful Parmenides) of the *Theaetetus*, 183 E; see Fowler trans., pp. 154–5) and taking the argument beyond the position of the great master of the Eleatics (μακροτέρως τῆς ἀπορρήσεως), in having demonstrated not simply that non-being is, but also his own idea (τὸ εἶδος), or rather, every idea insofar as it is opposed, in its specific form, to absolute being (as with all particular things) Plato, instead, claims that he is not prepared to admit ὅτι τούνατίον τοῦ ὄντος... ἐστίν (that not-being is the opposite of being), and protests: ἡμεῖς γὰρ περὶ μὲν ἐναντίου τινός αὐτῷ χαίρειν πάλαι λέγομεν, εἴτ' ἔστιν εἴτε μή, λόγον ἔχον ἢ καὶ παντάπασιν ἄλογον (We long ago gave up speaking of any opposite of being, whether it exists or not and is capable or totally incapable of definition) (*Sophist*, 258e–259a; see Fowler trans., pp. 422–3); adding that his non-being is only that which follows from the concept of κοινωνία τῶν γενῶν (participation of the classes), or rather, from his dialectic. If an idea is related to another, it must both be and not be part of that idea. Plato needs the concept of χαλεπὸν ἅμα καὶ καλόν (something both difficult and



beautiful) (259 C; see Fowler trans., pp. 424–5) in order to understand the organic multiplicity of unity (the many ideas linked together in thought), but he cannot justify it in terms of his logic, which obliges him to distance himself from the contrast with being.

And in reality (see above, §6), his dialectic, objective as it is, cannot be other than static; and movement is only the idea of movement (*pictura in tabula*), understood in relation to the idea of being, along with the opposite of movement, stillness. And on the same plane of being, there isn't its opposite, non-being; that is, being is in the idea of relation (νοητόν), and non-being cannot be understood and moreover cannot be posited as an idea, and hence cannot become the subject of a judgement and be given an appropriate predicate. Non-being cannot be viewed alongside being, nor in relation to specific things, which are all positive and therefore intelligible. In order to conceive of non-being in an intelligible world (as a static, negative concept), without which it would be resolved into the pure abstract unity of the Eleatics and the Megarians, which, in the *Sophist*, needs a subsidiary idea, otherness (τὸ ἕτερον), which is no longer the opposite of an idea, but an idea in itself, in relation to which one idea can be distinguished from another.

The true negation of an idea must be actuality, movement, self-generation; but for Plato, it is a fact, a mode of being—a consolidated act, one might say. And therefore Plato never sees, isn't able to see, anything other than being, an ideal, or idea of being (*varia ab eterno e ab eterno unificata*), still and immutable, like the (physical) being of the Eleatics. This is as far as a philosophy that has no conception of the nature of spirit can go.

2. Εἰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἕτερος ἔστι τοῦ ἐπίστασθαι τρόπος, ὕστερον ἐροῦμεν, φημὲν δὲ καὶ δι' ἀποδείξεως εἶδέναι (Our contention now is that we do at any rate obtain knowledge by demonstration) (*Posterior Analytics*, I, 2, §71b17; see Tredennick trans., pp. 30–1). Shortly after that, Aristotle comes back to the question of whether there is non-demonstrative scientific knowledge: Ἐνίοις μὲν οὖν διὰ τὸ δεῖν τὰ πρῶτα ἐπίστασθαι οὐ δοκεῖ ἐπιστήμη εἶναι, τοῖς δ' εἶναι μὲν, πάντων μέντοι ἀπόδειξις εἶναι (The necessity of knowing the

primary truths has led some persons to think that there is no knowledge, and others, admitting the possibility of knowledge, to think that all facts are demonstrable) (*Posterior Analytics*, I, 3, §72b5–7; see Tredennick trans., pp. 36–37). And they thought that everything could be demonstrated internally. Aristotle agrees with neither side: Ἡμεῖς δὲ φαμεν οὔτε πᾶσαν ἐπιστήμην ἀποδεικτικὴν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ τὴν τῶν ἀμέσων ἀναπόδεικτον (We, however, hold that not all knowledge is demonstrative: the knowledge of immediate premisses is not by demonstration) (*Posterior Analytics*, I, 3, §72b19–21; see Tredennick trans., pp. 36–7). Aristotle does not grant the legitimacy of what Rosmini, in *Logica*, book 2 (Turin, Cugini Pomba e Comp., 1853), p. 274, calls a ‘solid circle’, which is something other than a vicious circle: εἰ γὰρ ἀνάγκη μὲν ἐπίστασθαι τὰ πρότερα καὶ ἐξ ὧν ἡ ἀπόδειξις, ἴσταται δὲ ποτε τὰ ἄμεσα, ταῦτ ἀναπόδεικτα ἀνάγκη εἶναι· ταῦτά τ’ οὖν οὕτω γέγομεν, καὶ οὐ μόνον ἐπιστήμην ἀγὰ καὶ ἀρχὴν ἐπιστήμης εἶναι τινὰ φαμεν, ἧι τοὺς ὅρους γνωρίζομεν (if it is necessary to know the prior premisses from which the demonstration proceeds, and if the regress ends with the immediate premisses, the latter must be indemonstrable. Such is our contention on this point. Indeed we hold not only that scientific knowledge is possible, but that there is a definite first principle of knowledge by which we recognize ultimate truths.) (*Posterior Analytics*, I, 3, §72b21–26; see Tredennick trans., pp. 38–9). Evidently the ἀρχὴ ἐπιστήμης (epistemic origin) is distinct from the method of knowing. This [method] consists in precisely the process of ἐπιστήμη (*episteme*; knowledge), which can be developed analytically from the ὅροι (terms). But the ὅροι themselves presuppose some thing else: Ἀδύνατον... ὄντινοῦν ταῦτόν ὑπολαμβάνειν εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι... Διὸ πάντες οἱ ἀποδεικνύντες εἰς ταύτην ἀνάγουσιν ἐσχάτην δόξαν (it is impossible for anyone to suppose that the same thing is and is not... all men who are demonstrating anything refer back to this as an ultimate belief) (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 3, 1005b, 24, 32). [English quotations from *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes*, vol. 17, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1933)].

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

[1](#) Translated from Giovanni Gentile, 'Il metodo dell'immanenza', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, third edition (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 196–232.

[2](#) Plato, *The Republic*, §533c; see trans. Desmond Lee (London, Penguin, 2003), p. 265.

[3](#) Plato *The Sophist*, §253c; see trans. Harold N. Fowler, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, volume 7 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1921), pp. 400–1.

[4](#) *Ibid.*, §§253b–253c, pp. 398–401.

[5](#) Plato, *The Sophist* §253e. [Editors' note: in this passage, the Stranger says to Theatetus, 'But you surely, I suppose, will not grant the art of dialectic to any but the man who pursues philosophy in purity and righteousness'. See Fowler trans., p. 403.]

[6](#) Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London, Penguin, 1996), ii, prop. 42 sch., p. 58.

[7](#) [Editor's note: Gentile here includes a lengthy and complex footnote that straddles several pages. For the reader's convenience we have moved this to Appendix 1, p. 272, at the end of the essay.]

[8](#) Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno, canto XXVII, line 120: 'per la contradizion che nol consente'. C.H. Sisson translates this as 'the contradiction is not allowable'. See *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 162.

[9](#) See Plato, *The Sophist*, §257a; Fowler trans., pp. 414–15.

[10](#) Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, 18, p. 81a 40; see *Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 106–7.

[11](#) There is a famous passage in the *Posterior Analytics*, I, 2, 71b 33: πρότερα δ'έστι καὶ γνωριμώτερα διχσῶ οὐ γὰρ ταύτον πρότερον τῇ φύσει καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς πρότερον, οὐδὲ γνωριμώτερον καὶ ἡμῖν γνωριμώτερον κτε (There are two senses in which things are prior and more knowable. That which is prior in nature is not the same as that which is prior in relation to us, and that which is (naturally) more knowable is not the same as that which is more knowable by us). See Tredennick trans., pp. 30–33. [Editors' note: the final word in the Greek quotation, 'κτε', seems to have been added by Gentile.]

[12](#) [Editor's note: for the reader's convenience we have moved the contents of this lengthy footnote to Appendix note 2, p. 274, at the end of the essay.]

[13](#) Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I, 2, 71b18; Tredennick trans., pp. 30–1.

[14](#) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 3, 1005b 22.

[15](#) Simplicius, in *Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Carolus Kalbfleisch (Berlin, De Gruyter, 1907), p. 20<sup>11-12</sup>: ἡ δὲ λογικὴ πραγματεία πᾶσα τὸ ὀργανικὸν ἐστὶ μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας ὥσπερ οἱ κανόνες, ὥσπερ αἱ στάθμι τῶν τεκτόνων τε καὶ οἰκοδόμων. And Alexander of Aphrodisias wrote: εὐλόγως ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχαίων οἱ μέχρι τῆς χρείας προήγαγον τὴν λογικὴν πραγματείαν, ὄργανον αὐτὴν ἀλλὰ μὴ μέρος λέγεσθαι. See John Philoponus, *In Aristotelis Analytica priora commentaria*, ed. Maximilian Wallies (Berlin, De Gruyter, 1905), p. 3<sup>3-3</sup>.

[16](#) Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, I, 13, 16; Hermann Usener (ed.), *Epicurea* (Leipzig, Teubner, 1887), p. 177.

[17](#) See the work of the scholiast cited in Karl von Prantl: John Philoponus, *In Aristotelis Analytica priora commentaria*, p. 7<sup>31</sup> ff.

[18](#) See Giovanni Gentile, 'Il circolo della filosofia e della storia della filosofia', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 138–49.

[19](#) See Philoponus, *In Aristotelis Analytica priora commentaria*, p. 626.

[20](#) Chrysippus of Soli, fragment from Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugantiis*, in Hans von Arnim (ed.) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. 3, Chrysippi Fragmenta Moralia cum Generali Stoicorum Doctrina Composita (Leipzig, Teubner, 1903), p. 42.

[21](#) See also my discussion of Spinoza in section 8, below.

[22](#) Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, tractate 3, §§4–5; see trans. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page (London, Faber and Faber, 1930), pp. 38–39.

[23](#) Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, 9, §3; see MacKenna and Page trans., pp. 252–253.

[24](#) Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 3, §3; see MacKenna and Page trans., p. 384.

[25](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *I problemi della Scolastica e il pensiero italiano*, second revised edition (Bari, Laterza, 1923), pp. 36–39; and *Giordano Bruno e il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (Florence, Vallecchi, 1920), pp. 241 ff.

[26](#) For Telesio's and Campanella's methodical canon of *natura iuxta propria principia*, see my comments in Gentile, *I problemi della Scolastica*, p. 154.

[27](#) [Editors' note: This comes from the first aphorism 'on the interpretation of nature and the empire of man.' See Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 8 (London, Woodfall, 1826), p. 7.]

[28](#) [Editors' note: Gentile quotes Descartes in the original French. This English version is taken from 'Discourse on the Method', in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, eds. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 111–51, p. 122 in this edition, p. 22 in standard pagination.]

[29](#) Louis Liard, *Descartes* (Paris, Alcan, 1903), pp. 20 ff.

[30](#) For more on this principle, see Gentile, ‘L’atto del pensare come atto puro’, in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, §17, pp. 183–95, pp. 193–4. [Editors’ note: for an English translation, see Gentile, ‘The Act of Thinking as Pure Act’, *From Kant to Croce: Philosophy in Italy, 1800–1950*, eds., trans. Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012), pp. 683–94, p. 691.]

[31](#) [Editors’ note: Spinoza, ‘On the Correction of the Understanding’, in *Ethics and On the Correction of the Understanding*, trans. T.S. Gregory (London, Everyman, 1986), pp. 225–63, VI, §30, p. 235.]

[32](#) *Ibid.*, I, §10, p. 229.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, VI, §34, p. 237.

[34](#) See Gentile, *Le origini della filosofia contemporanea in Italia*, vol. 1, I Platonici (Messina, Principato, 1917).

[35](#) Spinoza, ‘On the Correction of the Understanding’, VI, §34, p. 237.

[36](#) *Ibid.*, VI, §35, p. 237.

[37](#) *Ibid.* [Editors’ note: Gentile omits part of the text without signalling that he has done so. We have put an ellipsis in place of ‘...*quod ad certitudinem veritatis nullo alio signo sit opus, quam veram habere ideam; nam, uti ostendimus, non opus est, ut sciam, quod sciam me scire. Ex quibus rursum patet...*’]

[38](#) This recalls definition IV in part II of Spinoza’s *Ethics*: ‘*Per ideam adaequatam intelligo ideam, quae, quatenus in se sine relatione ad objectum consideratur, omnes verae ideae proprietates, sive demonimationes intrinsecas habet*’ (By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea). See Curley trans., p. 32.

[39](#) Spinoza, ‘On the Correction of the Understanding’, VI, §35, p. 237.

[40](#) *Ibid.*, VII, §38, p. 238.

[41](#) *Ibid.*, VII, §44, p. 240.

[42](#) [Editors’ note: we have added this ellipsis. Gentile here omits the word ‘postea’ (after this) without indicating that he has done so.]

[43](#) And he continues: ‘*Nam neque se ipsos sentiunt. Si aliquid affirmant, vel dubitant, nesciunt se dubitare aut affirmare ; dicunt se nihil scire, et hoc ipsum, quod nihil sciunt, dicunt se ignorare ; neque hoc absolute dicunt ; nam metuunt fateri, se existere, quamdiu nihil sciunt, adeo ut tandem debeant obmutescere, ne forte aliquid supponant, quod veritatem redoleat. Denique cum ipsis non est loquendum de scientiis ; nam quod ad vitae et societatis usum attinet, necessitas eos coegit, ut supponerent se esse, et ut suum utile quaererent, et iureiurando multa affirmarent et negarent. Nam, si aliquid ipsis probetur, nesciunt, an probet aut deficiat argumentatio. Si negant, concedunt aut opponunt, nesciunt se negare,*

*concedere aut opponere ; adeoque habendi sunt tanquam automata, quae mente omnino carent* (...for they are not conscious of themselves. If they affirm or doubt anything, they know not that they affirm or doubt it: they say that they know nothing, and say that they are ignorant of the fact that they know nothing; nor do they say this with certainty, for they fear to confess that they exist as long as they know nothing, to such an extent that they ought to remain silent, lest perchance they might oppose something which has the savour of truth. Again, we cannot speak to them of the sciences; for as for that which relates to life and the habits of society, necessity compels them to suppose themselves to exist, and to seek what is useful to themselves, and to affirm and deny many things by oath. For if anything is proved to them, they do not know whether the argumentation is proved or is wanting in some particular. If they deny, oppose, or grant, they do not know that they deny, grant, or oppose; and therefore they must be regarded as machines which lack any mind at all). Spinoza 'On the Correction of the Understanding', VII, §47–48, pp. 240–241.

[44](#) Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, prop. 10 schol, pp. 37–38 in Curley trans.

[45](#) See Lodewijk Meyer's preface to Spinoza's comments on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, in Spinoza, *Opera*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, Winters, 1925). See also Spinoza's *Epistolæ*, 2, in vol. 4, II, and the conversation between Tschirnhaus and Leibniz in Stein, *Leibniz und Spinoza: ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Leibnizischen Philosophie* (Berlin, Reimer, 1890), p. 283.

[46](#) Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, ass. 2 and 4; Curley trans., p. 32.

[47](#) See G.W.F. Hegel's remarks on the unknowability of the thing in itself in his *Encyclopedia*, §44.

[48](#) G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, III.

[49](#) *Ibid.*, III.

[50](#) See Gentile, *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, pp. 3–35; see also 'The Reform of the Hegelian Dialectic', trans. A. MacC Armstrong, *Idealistic Studies*, 11: 3 (1981), pp. 225–48.

[51](#) I do not also say 'nature' because nature is the middle term between the *logos* and the spirit, regarded as two opposed points that are mediated. When these terms are unified, the problem of nature disappears.

[52](#) See Gentile, *I problemi della Scolastica*, pp. 87–91.

[53](#) See Gentile, *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, part 1, pp. 3–96.

# Pure Experience and Historical Reality

Giovanni Gentile<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 277–309*

**Abstract:** In this, Gentile's inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Pisa in 1914, he describes his approach to and conception of history. The opening sections of the lecture display a more personal and relaxed, at times effusive side to Gentile's writing as he praises his former teachers, offering readers some insight into his influences and his view of his own philosophical project. In the later sections, he turns to the technical question of how we, as concrete subjects living, thinking and acting in the eternal present, can make sense of the past, which is, by definition, outside the compass of our actual, present thinking. Despite the difficulty of the problem Gentile addresses—a difficulty increased, one suspects, by his habit of expressing questions and answers in his own specialist vocabulary—the lecture form enables him to relax his usual abstruse style, showing us something of himself as a teacher as well as a philosopher.

1.<sup>[2]</sup>

Gentlemen,

At the kind behest of the illustrious Members of the Faculty of philosophy and letters, I return to this glorious University some twenty years after I left. These twenty years were the whole of my youth, which, at school and in my studies, I spent keeping alive the torch that I was able to light here, fuelled by the doctrine, faith and love of great teachers. In these twenty years my thought and soul never left this sacred place of my spiritual rebirth—my second home. I have loved it with unwavering filial gratitude. I have dreamt of and longed for it with a wistfulness that has never abated: this sweet

homeland between the *Sapienza* and the *Scuola Normale Superiore*. Despite its modest appearance, this school has been for the last half-century the most meritorious institute of Italian high culture, hallowed by those of us who have had the good fortune to live out our student days here.

I return, like someone returning to his native land after many years of absence, with the desire to see again old faces and places I used to know. These stayed with me in fond memories, in the hope that I would one day turn back time and savour once more the joy of a time in the precious tradition of the elders, under whose kindly supervision young people would grow up. One returns full of hope, but—alas!—finds bitter disappointment. We are no longer the youngsters we once were. Everything seems to have changed, but, above all, we have lost one of the dear elders, in whose embrace we hoped to rediscover the old comfort and refuge from adversity; Alessandro d'Ancona<sup>[3]</sup> recently passed away. While we had still not given up hope that with his strong constitution, he could have pulled through and might have returned to his scholarly studies that shine with his inquisitive zeal. We had still not given up hope that he might return to gather together and renew his old writings, our first paragons; that that devoted scholar, who had already announced and prepared new writings, might have been able to compose more. He kept alive the image of the spirit in which the past is present. Ancona was a revered teacher with an acute sense of the particulars and of the positive through which he was able to instil (even in those of us who tended towards speculation) a strong need for effectual and concrete reality, which constituted a primary, not secondary, place in our philosophical education.

Just the other day, quite unexpectedly, one of the most outstanding teachers I ever had passed away: our very own [Amedeo] Crivellucci.<sup>[4]</sup> He seemed to be at the height of his powers, and ready for a new and more fruitful expansion of his activities. His sagacity introduced the young to historical research; for many of us, it is to him that we are indebted for our love of exploring historical archives, criticizing documents and conducting scrupulous scientific investigations of memories of the past. He was the teacher who, for



more than twenty years, despite difficulties and personal sacrifices known to only a few, never faltered in his perseverance and his will, which were laid bare to scholars on the noble training ground of his *Studi storici*, where we first took up arms. We will always carry with us, impressed upon our hearts, the image of his kindness and austerity, which was full of power and sweetness.

Earlier this year, even before Crivellucci and D'Ancona, we lost Donato Jaia.<sup>[5]</sup> For me he was a huge part of Pisa and of this school; he aroused in my mind the beginnings of speculative life. He kindled my interest with his great affection and inspired me to venture along my current path. He procured the food that sustained and nourished me; he conveyed to me the love that excited his own soul; he was truly my second spiritual father, who kept his watchful eye on my progress, even from afar. I was always aware of his gaze, both comforting and admonishing me.

It is with trepidation that the son comes back to cross the threshold of his father's house after he has been away a long while: the house is empty. It is empty, but, having overcome the feelings aroused by all the objects missing from within these four walls that look just the same, he sees that the spirit has endured, and flourishes once more. It is as if he can once again see the details that he held dear, as if he can still sense that gaze, which reminds him of this time or that, at one point or another around the house. The past always lives on in our hearts; we honour it and feel nostalgic towards it. And we rebuild it so that, bit by bit, it reclaims the value it always had and could never lose, because it lives on for eternity in the spirit where it is perpetually renewed.

And Donato Jaia, whose paternal image I have encountered directly today, accompanies me to the chair which once belonged to him. He does not live on for me, nor for you, honourable colleagues, who bore witness to his love for this school, right until the end; he does not live on for you, nor for the scholars of the next generation who heard his voice fading away on the eve of his death: he lives within all of us who knew and loved him. I am not taking his place; I am continuing his legacy. I will continue forever mindful of the higher teachings, not just of science but of consciousness, that were always

expertly dispensed from this chair. He was really an apostle; he taught such faith in truth, his words were so imbued with sincerity and passion, and he always aimed high, and in his well-meaning heart was scornful and dismissive of anything around him that was lowlier. To most people he appeared old-fashioned because of his contempt for the world and the way a few elect scholars revered his approach to a problem. After all, contemporary culture was generally alienated from the profound intelligence of this elite. In the course of his studies he was certainly not willing to stand by anything that had no value. He knew what opinion others had of him; but he was not perturbed by it, neither for himself nor for the science that remained close to his heart and was his deepest interest. This was one of the clearest manifestations of his plain-speaking philosophical temperament. He was, like all true philosophers, content with the silence and solitude of those shining summits of knowledge: and in this he was right. Because, for he who is in its presence, truth is an absolute value, which cannot be derived from any other kind of value. He knew that sooner or later his truth would spark a total transformation in science and in life, and because of this certainty he reaped the copious fruits of his efforts. This certainty was enough to allay his impatience for the fate and triumph of his philosophy. In Italy and abroad, Jaia's philosophy was found not to represent a somewhat antiquated form of the progress of study. Rather, because it was folded and closed in on itself, it was largely disconnected from the prevailing discussions of the time and so came to represent the ultimate goal to which speculative thought aspired: the living centre of the most recent philosophy.

## 2.

Donato Jaia was rightly considered a Hegelian. But there is no need to say that these extrinsic designations do more than indicate the lines upon which a thinker's doctrine develops. They cannot in any way determine its content and broader implication. After all, what Hegelian is more orthodox than our own Augusto Vera? And his doctrine is profoundly different from Hegel's in both its fundamental

theories and general tenor.<sup>[6]</sup> It is so different, in fact, that it is impossible even to replicate a thought. Jaia was a Hegelian of the same critical orientation as Bertrando Spaventa, who energetically set about revising Hegel's original doctrine, or rather, attacking it from within.

Even in the works of its most loyal followers, the Hegelian doctrine was beset by formidable difficulties that stemmed from the residues of earlier metaphysics, which had been neither expunged nor as yet absorbed into the new intuition. From the outset, this intuition was rigorously immanentistic, but was dogged and impeded in its logical process by elements of the old dualism, from which the philosopher of Stuttgart [i.e. Hegel] never managed to disentangle himself. Nor did he manage to integrate it with his own system. Given its historical motives and ideals, his idealism, therefore, had to be the most radical negation of Platonic idealism. It ended up being an abstract realism, which in some fundamental ways resembled the ancient version.

We could describe the fundamental historical character of Platonic idealism, which persisted throughout Aristotelian, neo-Platonist, Scholastic and Cartesian intellectualistic metaphysics, right through to Kant, in the following way: the idea, the Absolute, is not spirit, but the object and presupposition of spirit. It is an object that cannot be identified with the spirit without annulling itself as spirit in the process. In so doing it collapses into a simple presupposition of an ulterior spiritual position, in relation to which it becomes a knowable reality. An idea conceived in this way is already, by its very definition, a realized reality: a reality that is what it is, or what we might call 'natural'. The most coherent conception of such a reality is Spinozism. Derived from Platonic philosophy, Spinozism has offered the most courageous negation of all the spiritual values, that is, the most logical suppression of any liberty and any finality. Some philosophers call it 'nature'; others call it 'spirit', as it was known for many centuries. In essence, however, there is nothing spiritual about this reality given that it is the presupposition of the spirit. Its life would, therefore, be inconceivable without that which conditions and

precedes it. This idealism led to its own negation through David Hume's scepticism.

For modern idealism, by contrast, which began with Kant, the idea, the Absolute, is the spirit in its pure and originating activity. But the first philosopher to become aware of the profound speculative upheaval implicit in the Kantian principle was in fact Hegel, who was also the first philosopher to deny the existence of any reality that is not thought. And I call him the first because, although Berkeley identified representation with the existence of that which is perceived, his conception has nothing to do with negation. Kantian or Hegelian 'thought'—which is the act of the thinking activity—would also understand Berkeleian representation as something presupposed by thought. It is with Hegel, therefore, that we see the beginning of the new idealism—an idealism that can no longer be called naturalism, but something akin to spiritualism.

Hegel did not follow his revolution through to the end. His idea is internally divided: on the one hand it presents itself as an activity that thinks, and on the other, as a reality understood as both object and presupposition of thought. In both cases the forms in which the ancient Platonic idea arose throughout the history of philosophy are still present. On the one hand we have the pure, ideal form of the logos in itself: the reason of the world. And on the other, the natural or positive form of the logos, which is created and not self-aware: pure nature. Hence the Hegelian idea cannot be spirit without first being a logical and natural idea. These two forms of reality transcend the act of thought. They overhaul the ancient position that sees reality as just what it is and the spirit as having to adjust to that reality, because it is not thought that is real, but the reality that stretches out in front of thought.

Hegel's logic is not thought, but the norm of thought. Thus it has to become natural, before giving way to thought as knowledge of itself. At the same time, his logic no longer needed to be a static system of ideas, but the idea's own development from one moment and level to the next. This is where Hegelianism is at its most difficult: firstly, the idea must be conceived as both thought and as the object of thought; but most importantly, we must recall that *crux*

*philosophorum* of the Hegelian dialectic and all its fundamental categories: being, non-being and becoming.

To his credit, [Bertrando] Spaventa not only identified this difficulty in the Hegelian system; but he also recognized that it cannot be overcome unless the dialectic is conceived as the actual movement of thought, rather than being treated as a movement of the idea that is the thought's object. And thus the whole edifice of the system is shaken, with Spaventa identifying logic and spirit, and no longer leaving room for nature (which was Hegel's middle term).

The most important step taken by Hegelianism was to conceive of the new idealism as absolute spiritualism. It was a problem that Spaventa himself linked with subsequent philosophy. For the new idealism, as the philosophy of immanence, offers the most powerful forward thrust toward its intended target. Naturalistic positivism, neo-Kantianism, any kind of phenomenalism, empiro-criticism, the immanentism of Schuppe and his school, French spiritualism leading to contingentism, to the *philosophie nouvelle* and even to the philosophy of action: all these were certainly respectable ideal movements of the nineteenth century. Each of them is important in its own way and has its own value to uphold, illuminating some aspect or other of the modern philosophical problem. But they all make the same mistake; none of them adopts the point of view of immanentistic philosophy, or experience, if you prefer, which Spaventa had attained in Italy. All of them, without exception, presuppose that knowing (the spirit in its actuality) is something other than reality. As a result, the key to overcoming that Platonic dualism eludes them all, and yet it is the root of all transcendence and all its difficulty.

### 3.

Donato Jaia held steadfast to this principle. He worked his whole life on a conception of the world as an act of understanding. It was not that he conceived of knowing as the pinnacle of reality, but the immanent essence of it. His whole life was an investigation with the aim of breaking down the concept of nature into the very activity of

the spirit. He wanted to demonstrate how the concept of nature—its own basis and condition—would arise through process. The investigation always remained an investigation: he never found a solution. But Jaia should be credited with drawing attention to the problem, with having clearly shown that this is the real problem and that, as with all well-posed problems, the solution would be found by examining the problem robustly, with utter commitment. Whence the faith that excites the heart, as one struggles to communicate one's thinking: a faith that is aroused when one feels as if one has, as it were, touched the truth. Apart from Jaia, no philosopher (not even the most fervent mystic) has ever felt the spirit to have so profoundly grasped the truth, upon which the sceptic casts doubt. Until Jaia, there was no one like him who thought that knowledge of reality was the very consciousness of self arrived at through that same reality. Or that knowledge of reality is realized by acquiring the consciousness of one's own being. In this intuition, yes, there is the unity of thought and the absolute; but it is a unity that does not presuppose the duality from which the mystic proceeds. It does not, therefore, need to negate one of the terms, thought. It is rather the celebration of thought as the true nature of the absolute.

This concept is the most exquisite fruit of modern philosophy from the Renaissance to the present day. I am proud to have received at this school, from the voice of the unforgettable master, the living sense of this concept. And I am proud to have been invited here to explain it to the best of my ability. I am delighted to have the good fortune to be able, from this chair, to pay a debt of filial devotion by addressing this concept throughout my life's work.

#### 4.

The concept I have outlined, of knowing as being, has been put forward many times in the history of philosophy. The first to do so was Protagoras, although one could point towards a series of Plato's most convincing arguments made in the *Theaetetus* that counter the doctrine set out in *Protagoras*. But each case had a special significance. When we consider our precursors, if we do not show

particular disdain for the great sophist of Abdera [i.e. Protagoras]—even if we believe we can no less justly include Plato too—we must be wary of drawing comparisons that are actually confused due to crude equivocations. There is no precise equivalent to our concept of knowing in any one of the historical positions of the past. Polemical motives that rail against our doctrine are brandished, therefore, by the naive, or, to put it better, by people unschooled in the history of philosophy. Though these polemical motives might once, to an extent, have been significant, they were so only in relation to comparable doctrines.

Our conception of knowledge is experience itself. But experience has never been conceived, as it should have been, as pure experience, not even by the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in modern times. The concept of experience was always founded on the presupposition, or at least the suspicion, of an opposition between the knowing of reality and the principle of knowledge. Even those who consider the differentiation between subject and object to be both an after-effect and extraneous to the essence of pure experience see it that way. The phenomenalist himself, denies the legitimacy of the concept of a thing in itself. Though he holds the phenomenon to be a subjective manifestation of this concept, he continues to characterize this subjectivity as extrinsic to the nature of the known object. All of this implies that the phenomenon is realized through transcendence of something unknowable when it comes to the act of knowing. So the concept of experience is still Kant's: the concept of the relationship between Ego and non-ego is necessarily subjective, although it absorbs the presence and action of something outside of the subject. It is plain that this is a very obscure concept. In fact, for both Kantianism and the philosophies that did not go beyond Kant's point of view, it is the cause of inextricable difficulty throughout the theory of knowledge and in all metaphysics. This gnoseological problem is, after all, the pivot on which all questions about the nature of the real hinge. It is by definition impossible for there to be any kind of relationship between the ego and the non-ego, because they are conceived as absolute opposites (like the multiplicity by which Kant separates sensibility, and sensibility itself).

So this ego, which is totally opposed to the non-ego, is the ego that is the 'I' and nothing else, having nothing in common with its opposite. It therefore has the immanent nature of an ego in an infinite sphere: it is an infinite ego that will never come to meet its opposite.

The relation of sense to the sensible enters into the common concept of experience through the back door, as it were. Having posited the real outside the sentient subject, one is constrained to temper this reciprocal exclusion with an expedient that therefore invalidates it. But invalidating it—without, of course, bringing it to the attention of whoever has invalidated it, and without allowing him to abandon his starting point—is believed to be wholly irrefutable in the unyielding opposition between reality and sense. And the expedient is that middle term: sensible qualities. These qualities are based in the external, extra-subjective realm, and so respond to the interior nature of the subject. It is a middle term that strengthens and concentrates the obscurity of the concept of the relation between Ego and non-ego. Except that it does not openly recognize absolute subjectivity, severing instead any presumed link with the imaginary real, considered external to the sphere of the sentient ego.

Immanuel Kant (to mention a well-known example), when endeavouring somehow to determine the distinguishing features of extra-subjective reality, to which sense would be passively subjected, tied himself up in the strangest contradictions. For him, the principal character that registers in the earliest instances of sensible experience is that disordered multiplicity. According to the Transcendental Aesthetic, that disordered multiplicity would then be unified and arranged according to the pure forms of intuition, time and space, thereby providing material for the synthetic activity of the intellectual categories. And thus Kant does not notice that he has already presented the most uniform material of experience as a function of the intellect before exposing it to the proper functions of sense to expand upon it. After all, for him, multiplicity will be one of the categories of quantity. He wants to classify this unformed material of sensible experience, these givens, as he calls them, in order to assign an extra-subjective foundation to the various



conceptions that sense imposes on it, sometimes in the form of space, and at other times in the form of time. And he distinguishes between givens of external sense, as the material of space; and givens of internal sense, as the material of time. He thereby goes back to a spatial distinction at a time when spatiality has yet to be born. And we could expand the list of contradictions considerably. Nor should we be surprised that he might have incurred such a critical and wary response, because he brings to a halt two thousand years of rigorous speculation about the concept of this opposition, variously understood, but never denied, between reality known and the spirit that knows it. Though Kant initiates what he calls the Copernican revolution of philosophy, placing the subject at the centre of knowledge, he fails to shed the ingrained preconception that says that the solid foundation of experience must consist in a world outside that self-same subject.

Many thinkers of the last century hoped to throw light on the illegitimacy, or rather the absurdity, of thus attributing the content of experience to a realm that is itself beyond experience. Experience does not transcend itself, either from the standpoint of the object, which is the content of knowledge, or from that of the subject, which is its source. When we believe that we transcend the object and see movement, for example, as equivalent to a sensible quality, which we psychologically call colour, in reality we only transcend one form of knowledge by reaching another. And we substitute one object, which is a subjective sphere of experience, with another, equally subjective sphere of that same experience. So it is not possible to detach the subject of a given knowledge relation without tying it to a new relation, in which the subject is resurrected, in a new form, in the unbreakable unity of its knowledge relation with the object. It is through this knowledge relation that the very nature of the subject is realized. So the psychologist, who analyses perception and isolates the ego from the content of what is perceived, does nothing but substitute one content of knowledge for another; but the perceiving Ego escapes its own isolating analysis, remaining immanent (and real only so far as it is immanent) in the very act of its analysis.

This does not lead, as we might fear, to the object and subject being unknowable. Rather it leads to their absolute knowability, or, even better, their actual cognition. This fear is born out of the inability to fix this concept of experience, which is not transcended; and any critique of this concept ends in a vicious circle. This is because one would need already to have proven the legitimacy, or just the possibility, of the ancient and vulgar dualistic conception of the object, in order to be able to deduce from it the unknowability of each of these two terms, which cannot be closed off from each other by their true specific nature. In truth, only someone who starts out thinking of the object in this way, as extra-subjective, outside and independent of its relation to the subject, can aspire to a faithfully objective knowledge of it, beyond the condition of its place in relation to the subject. And vice-versa for the subject. But, when one has recognized the absolute immanence of the two terms in the knowledge relation, postulating the knowability and unknowability of either one outside the relationship becomes especially absurd; and it is clear that, by contrast, the actuality of the subject, on the one hand, and the actuality of the object on the other, implies their reciprocal presence in an act that is absolute cognition. So we might ask ourselves whether or not we know that object, but it will never be anything other than what we know as object; and that subject, for whom intelligibility involves meaning, will be made manifest in the act of knowing. So to speak of the unknowable is, in any case, to speak of something deprived of meaning. To speak of a mystery, be it before us or deep down inside us, is to prostrate oneself before a thing of one's own creation. The mysterious is only that which we veil in mystery; it has been observed that the matter of the fearfully unknowable object (so well known and so intrinsically Kantian) that the agnostics spoke about in the last century, is nothing other than the residue of our cognition when the cognition itself is removed. That is to say, it is the residue of our cognition when, as Kant would put it, we implement the category of negation in all its rigour.<sup>[7]</sup>

To convince oneself of the indisputable truth of one such concept of experience, one rather needs to free oneself from a certain way of thinking, that is, from a certain logic, that has nothing to do with experience—as everyone has always acknowledged—and that cannot stand as a valid a priori law, over and above experience. What I mean by this is that we must abandon the false presupposition of a reality that is conceivable according to the principles of identity and non-contradiction, in the sense in which these principles take their places in scientific thought from Aristotle onward. This is not a question of formal logic, but of the highest metaphysics. When Plato and Aristotle wanted to fix the universals, which is the aim of scientific cognition, they in fact needed to abstract from the living of life. Or, in other words, they needed to learn by what has been said of nature, that the world of pure forms is shaped by generation and corruption or continual becoming. They become entangled in all the dualisms of form and matter, act and power, universal and particular, which, though denounced with extraordinary shrewdness by Aristotle, nevertheless proved to be his shirt of Nessus (the poisoned garment that killed Heracles). These dualisms remained unsurpassed as much in his metaphysics as in all later philosophy. It was not until recent times that we no longer felt the need to conceive of the true universal, the object of thought, as something wholly different from that which Greek philosophy had believed it to be, as Socrates had shown. For us, the universal is not a fixed point in opposition to thought: something that exists for itself, and which, as thought discovers the universal, is like a beast in its lair. Once we arrive at the universal, being what it is, and unable to be anything else, it is compelled to communicate to thought its own quiet absolute. In order to remain true, thought adapts accordingly. But that is not the case. The modern critique of cognition has shown that this true being, to which, after Parmenides, Plato's high speculative fantasy aspired, does not exist and is not thinkable, because it would be the death of thought. After all, thought is life and movement; it only ever stops when it expires altogether. It is not only the moral sciences that are subject to continual vicissitudes of doctrines. The natural sciences, too, are in continual flux. [Galileo]

Galilei, for example, attributed an iron subordination to iron laws of a mythical Nature. Here Nature reveals itself to us as superior to human minds and, in its eternal essence, with no concern for human determinations. Knowledge of these laws is presupposed but never definitive; it is an edifice that is wholly ours, at which we labour, continuously labour, forever constructing and reconstructing it from the beginning. And in these very same mathematical formulations in the simplest and least-discussed propositions, even within the ambit of certain postulations, spiritual constructions appeared. These can have neither value nor meaning unless they are constantly rebuilt and revisited by the spirit that undertakes the rebuilding. The spirit can only be determined to the extent that it is self-determining.

The necessity of the determinations, in which each concept is concrete, is not an antecedent but rather a consequence of the act from which the concept arises. Necessity has to do with either the identity of the concept with itself, or an identity that does not transcend the determining act of the concept. And equally it concerns the universality of the object that constitutes the concept, but only inasmuch as the universality of the act that the concept constitutes is the object. There is no act of thought that can be realized except as a universal act: or, to put it another way, we cannot think anything without at the same time thinking that one is thinking the truth; since in order to cast doubt, one must be sure that one cannot do other than cast doubt, and that therefore it is not I, as a particular individual, but logic itself that, in this case, is compelled to cast doubt. To speak of thought is to speak of thought necessarily and universally. The illusion—it is, after all, nothing but an illusion—of the contrary, arises when thought is regarded not in the act (as that which judges a given thought as a fact, and a particular fact), nor as real, concrete thought, but as that same abstract and merely ideal thought, which is, in turn, the content of a real thought. Similarly a dream is a dream to the extent that it is dreamt by someone who dreams but is not himself dreamt!

If one looks at the dream in the dreaming of it, thought in the thinking of it, which is evidently the only way one can catch sight of it, is necessary and universal in its own actual self-determination.

This does not mean that there is something that is absolutely true for everyone and definable once and for all, as was once thought; but rather that each of us must conquer the truth, like anything else the human soul might aspire to, through our own labours and personal abilities. We always hold the truth in our grasp because we always think; and we never hold it in our grasp because we always think. Woe unto us if we no longer had to think! How wretched are those who are tired of thinking! What a sad lot we would have in an Elysian Arcadia, in which there was no tiredness, no struggle, no yearning after, nor seeking the truth!

Truth, the object of knowledge, the universal that is essentially the thought itself in its realization, experience: all of these are one absolute and therefore pure experience, which is self-validating. Existential becoming excludes, equally, both the position of a determined object and that of a determined subject as presuppositions of experience. This reveals the absurdity and vanity of any question about the nature of the subject and object, conceived abstractly, as if each existed in and for itself.

## 6.

Our 'experience' is very different from that of the empiricist, whose experience starts out with the irrational and ends up with the irrational. His experience is the product of a reality outside of logic, outside of so-called data; it is what it is, and has no reason to be any other way. The datum is a brute mechanical fact, which cannot generate anything other than mechanism. And the only way one of our most esteemed recent philosophers could believe he had extracted the logic of thought through the experience of facts is if he had not thought enough about the essential character of cogency. But the experience of the empiricist and, in general, that which is always regarded as the font of all *a posteriori* knowledge, is not the pure experience that I am talking about. In truth, it is not even experience because conceiving of *a posteriori* cognition is dependent on the way in which we conceive of *a priori* cognition, which we compare it with. Here again is that dualistic position to

which I have already referred, where we have a cognitive power on the one hand and a knowable reality on the other. We should be careful of this approach, which sees us negating experience in the very act of trying to affirm it, because, before our affirmation of experience can intervene, we have perceived a knowable reality. When it comes to fundamental cognition, which we might call the most difficult and essential cognition, we take it as *a priori* while at the same time claiming it to be, by nature, entirely *a posteriori*.

Our experience is logic. It is the only logic that we can conceive without transcending the rational act. But it is also a living, logical act, which creates its laws through the act of realizing them. It does not create laws prior to the facts of thought; but thinking excludes them precisely because of the existence of true and proper facts of thought. Really, we need to make a clear distinction between fact and act of thought. If I say that Immanuel Kant defined the judgement as an *a priori* synthesis, I express a fact; but this conception, which I presented as fact, is not a fact. The claim that Kant's doctrine is a fact means that, in my mind, its being does not exclude its non-being. Kant, one might think, might very well not have formulated this doctrine. After all, his critics believed he really shouldn't have. And because he did not need to do so, he could have just not formulated it. But as I express this fact, my thinking about it is not a fact, because, if I think this, I cannot help but think it, and I cannot think differently. My thought is necessary, universal, true. But be warned, it is in the act of being thought that it is true. It is, therefore, not a fact, but an act.

So it is not only that my thought is an act; but, on reflection, it also turns out that Kant's thought is not a fact unless we deem it not to be a thought, but rather the negation of thought, since a thought that is a thought is a deliberate thought: that is, a thought discerned by logic, assigned a value and thereby made ours. In writing the history of philosophy, for example, we cannot start out with propositions of this kind: 'Such-and-such has said this, and we are not trying to find out why.' The concrete significance of a thought, in all its cogency, resides, precisely, in the reason for a thought. I was about to call its significance its physiognomy. This significance is, so to speak, its

distinguishing feature. And until we know materially, as it were, what one is talking about, without deciphering the meaning of those words, we cannot really know what one is saying. And when we decipher that meaning, when we truly decipher it—as all critics and historians must do with regard to the authors they study—then other people's thoughts become our thought. This thought is no longer a fact because it has its own internal reasoning, its own value and it cannot be different from the way it is. So thought always appears to be logical thought. But its cogency is connected to, or rather, is identified, with its actuality; we cannot discern it without entering the thought that we want to understand and make it ours, absolutely ours. By the act of making it ours, as I put it, it becomes impossible to distinguish between us and them; between me, as the deep reader of Kant, and Kant, as the author of the work I am reading. And then what inevitably happens is that an intense reading absorbs us and makes us forget. At that moment, the thought of other people, as they say, actually becomes our own.

Our experience, then, is not contingent fact, but logical necessity. It is not *a posteriori*, but beware, nor is it *a priori*. It is not *a posteriori* because it is necessary: its rhythms appear imbued with intrinsic logical necessity, which is liberty. It is therefore not a determination to which we are subjected, but a determination by which we honour the inner nature of thought. And it is not *a priori* because it is experience: that is, because its absolute liberty requires that its act not be preceded by any predetermination of any sort. In its concept, therefore, the old opposition of *a priori* and *a posteriori* is annulled, as it were. And experience can be defined as the true synthesis or unity of these two terms.

## 7.

Sense and intellect, another of the old oppositions inherited from Platonism, are also annulled in this experience, in its purest form. This is not sensible experience, since the concepts of sense and of the sensible only hold together in the presupposition. It is eclipsed by the doctrine of pure experience—of a reality that, whichever way we

look at it, is external to the subject, and from which the process of experience would begin. Now, with the demise of that presupposition, any other determination of the so-called sensible experience dissolves. If we consider the sensation of colour, we do not posit it as the psychic consequence of external movements. (Though this is a useful explanation for the purposes of certain empirical schemes that have their value in the exact limits of empirical science, but are without philosophical meaning, you can just about make out how empirical schemes attempt to coordinate a view of the internal relation between the physical and the psychic.) Rather we posit the sensation of colour as what it actually is: the immanent act of experience whose only *raison d'être* is itself. In other words, it is a free creation, not of an ego that exists prior to the act itself, but of an ego in the process of realization. This is confirmation that we cannot define this sensation as in any way external, or as being in relation to the external. To what would it be external? Space, in which things are externally juxtaposed to each other? Isn't everything within us a form of experience? Nor can we claim that sensation is an immediate form of experience; because if it is an element of an ulterior experience, respectively mediated, then immanent experience, which can only ever be a single experience, will be the latter. And compared to it, the former will effectively be an experience. And if instead the first is grasped in its actuality (in the moment that we perceive a colour and nothing else) then we cannot call it immediate compared to an ulterior experience that does not exist. At the same time we can say that it mediates the anterior experience as it absorbs it.

But we cannot consider it a particular experience either, unlike representation that stems, according to common empirical psychology, from the content of sensation in contrast to general or abstract representations and in contrast to concepts that are said to be derived from experience. This is because any moment of experience, in the act of experiencing, is at once particular and universal, and perfectly determined in its individuality. The distinction between particular representations and universal concepts is, again, tied to the old logic, whose shortcomings we have already indicated.



From our point of view, the comparison between particular experience and universal concept, which for us is equally an experience, makes no sense, because one excludes the other. They both exhaust the totality of psychic life in its actuality and posit themselves as infinite affirmations of the spirit. The characteristics of experience cannot belong to it unless they arise from within it.

In fact, each experience is universal because of its unmultipliable unity. It is universal because of its infinity, and its celebration of the subject that, in the act of celebrating, is the only possible subject. However, it is also particular, because it is what it is through its own process, and cannot be transcended. But it is very different from the individuality that modern philosophy laid bare, which moved towards an end to the ancient dispute over the principle of individuation. But there was no way out of this dispute, since the individual is unity of form and matter, according to the Aristotelian definition, and is to be found in the abstract world of the object of thought. The individual, by contrast, that can truly be an absolute unity, is nothing but the interior act of consciousness, of self-consciousness. The spirit surrounds itself with that interior act, enclosing itself inside its world: a rustling of leaves, a cold shiver, a philosophical system, a lofty fantasy that clings onto hell and the Empyrean, a unity forever sealed by self-consciousness.

## 8.

In the logic of pure experience, the act by which the individual constructs self-consciousness does not unravel or exhaust itself. There are no established individual identities, just as there is nothing virtuous or fixed. Just try securing in thought something we assume to be already determined; that very act will be a new creation which will resuscitate the process. This means that self-consciousness, in its individuality, is formed in the infinite, and that this individuality cannot therefore be divided into multiple discrete individuals, but in a continuous process of individuation. The same can be said of *The Divine Comedy*, for example, which is not, strictly speaking, a work of a certain individual imagination, undertaken in the narrow confines

of the life of a man who died in 1321; that would be an abstraction. The real *Divine Comedy* is that which we read, which we interpret, and on which we cast judgement. There is no interpretation or judgement by which we encounter the divine poem and by which it reveals its true self. And nor will there ever be a De Sanctis who can give a definitive interpretation or judgement. Furthermore, if we wanted to regard an interpretation as definitive, we could not reaffirm it without, in turn, interpreting the definitive interpretation. Thus our work extends the process by which we establish that spiritual creation that we call the *Comedy*, is carried out across a series of centuries; it is tangled up in the whole progress of the spirit and flows into the general current of thought, or of culture.

But be warned. This infinite process of experience appears to take place in time, in the succession of the ages, of the years, of individual moments; but it is neither temporal, nor spatial. The dead seasons about which the poet [Giacomo Leopardi] speaks in his fantastic conception of the infinite are left out of history. What is dead is outside the spirit, which is immortality itself. When we exult in our reading of *The Divine Comedy* we are not exulting in what was written seven centuries ago, but in how we rewrite it in our reading of it: and yet it is sincerely thought that engaging with *The Divine Comedy* is a sign of greatness. And so all of history has rightly been called contemporary, where the past is not relived, but lives on in the present, with its interests, its passions, its aspirations and its mentality. In the final analysis, history is a representation, or, even better, a product of the historian's mind. The past that enters into history is the past that survives in the present: it is the present. The spirit knows nothing of the actual or the real, it only knows the present, which is nothing but its actuality. And this present should not be confused with the present that is distinguished and composed of all the abstract parts of experience, it is situated at the intermediate point between past and future. It is itself one of the moments of time, whereas the true present is extra-temporal, eternal, and bears the whole of time, with its false infinity or eternity, as its content. That is why the process of experience, in its actuality, is an eternal process.

## 9.

This process is at once theoretical and practical, since even this opposition collapses once experience is understood as pure experience. In fact theory can only be opposed to practice if the object of theory precedes experience, in which case the object of practice becomes the product, the result of spiritual activity. One minute man seems to regard the course of the world as inert (in which case it is strange to see how he thinks he might manage to remove himself from it), and the next minute he thinks he can actively intervene in its progression, in order to direct it toward his ends. But if experience is left out of these realistic presuppositions, and is understood as self-consciousness of the real, which is realized precisely by acquiring this awareness, experience is then no longer just the contemplation of reality, but contemplation together with creation. This creation takes hold of our entire being, and consumes us in a beneficent blaze, contributing to the world's highest ends. It consumes and renews our very being in a continual transformation, in which, deep within us, the same self-creative process of reality surprises us.

## 10.

All discriminations arise from within this pure experience. We usually try to trace its roots outside that experience, which has the added benefit of making it impossible to have the same experience in which those discriminations took place. But there are some crude distinctions that, undoubtedly, restrict common philosophy. So, if experience is a discriminating act par excellence, it does not admit distinctions of nature, which would break up the absolute unity of the individuality of self-consciousness. The art of the spirit is, as it were, unique to the extent that its works are infinitely varied. Art cannot be separated from the work of art; but it assumes infinite forms in its development, and these, if we consider them abstractly one by one, outside the unique genetic process to which they belong, makes the works of art appear detached. In pure experience, the activities of

perception of the real and the inventive imagination are one and the same. If we take that presumed reality to which perception would hold fast out of the equation, and if we resolved perception into a self-perception, it is clear that self-perception, or consciousness of self, is both that which is known as real perception, and that which is known as simple imagination. And here we see the spectre of solipsism, which has always threatened any rigorous idealism. And here we hear the alarm-bells signalling the danger that reality is fading away into a merely ideal phantasmagoria. Here, too, we hear the protest of the historian who wants to make a neat distinction between the realm of historical facts and that of fantasy and speculation.

At this point I am replying to the historian, and since I am speaking about the scholars of history and of philology, which is also history, a single reply suffices. There has been no philosophy more respectful to history than ours; and one of actualism's fundamental and most important theses is that true philosophy is history. And if positivism is the doctrine that considers the positivity and determination of historical fact to be the essential form of the absolute, no positivism was ever as positive as this idealism of pure experience. But, in order to handle the concept of history without equivocation, we must first critically elaborate it.

Meanwhile, it is worth warning you that there are currently two meanings of the word 'history': firstly, history is the complex of historical facts; secondly, it is their representation. And we need to make just one representation given that the historical fact that the historian represents is not separated from the act by which he represents it, or rather, in which it is realized. Because if the historian of ancient Rome believes that in his mind he can transport himself there across the two-thousand year divide, right into the middle of the conflict between the plebeians and the patricians, or onto the bloodied battlefields of Julius Caesar's army, really what he is doing is transporting history, or to put it rather better, he is drawing it entirely from within himself. He only sees that which his own spirit is able to generate and embody. Thus Alessandro Manzoni, who presents the imaginary Don Abbondio before the historical Cardinal

Federigo [Borromeo], does not allow his imaginary creation to intrude (as he mistakenly suggests in the *Discorso sul romanzo storico*, Discourse on the Historical Novel) on a world that already exists. Instead he draws from his own imagination and establishes the historical and invented figures in a unique creation, a world dreamed up entirely by him, much like you might define any poetic world. This dream is certainly more coherent and solid than the dream of a sleeper; but it is nonetheless a dream, enjoying the freedom that allows the spirit to forget itself in its own object, removing any link between itself and the world around it.

But there is a profound difference between the historian and the poet or novelist. The historical figure that the historian finds in the novel is so idealized, so true, as Aristotle would say, that the historian no longer recognizes the man represented in the historical documents. The difference between history and art is analogous to that between the experiences of being awake and dreaming. This difference has always struck us, and although psychologists have tried long and hard to define it, their attempts were in vain, because psychology, like the natural sciences, rests on a point of view that is extrinsic to the nature of the facts that it attempts to explain. To the question of why dream-experience does not have value vis-à-vis wakeful experience, that is, of why I must believe my eyes when I am awake but not when I am dreaming, the answer is obvious and final if one looks at the psychic fact in its concrete actuality, in accordance with the doctrine of actual idealism. And the answer is that, when we are awake, we judge and therefore devalue the dream, detaching ourselves from that judgement is what makes a dream a dream. Thus the artist can be judged by the philosopher, but not the philosopher by the artist. He who knows more judges he who knows less, because more contains both less and more; the inverse cannot be said, for the opposite reason. And so an experience is judged by a greater experience, which exceeds it, and therefore cannot recognize its value except as a constitutive part of itself. So if in the dream we cannot gather up into a whole the experience of wakefulness that came before and our dreams and wakefulness that came before that, then, when we awake we

reconnect that same dream to the history of our soul, to all that we know. Thus the dream itself takes its place among the various facts in which the content of the spirit, in its present act, is woven together, what is otherwise known as past experience. Were we not to wake up, the dream would not be a dream, but reality. This rupture of the organized totality of thought's compact system throws the simple imaginary—that world that so enthralled us in sleep, with the firm grip of the most adored and abhorred reality—into a psychic penumbra.

As with the dream, through new experiences we devalue earlier experiences that do not fit with the unique process of the individuality of self-consciousness. Experience is its own measure, it cannot be judged by anything else. But thought's devaluation of itself is never an absolute devaluation, for that would be the affirmation of an entirely unthinkable thought, of a mystery that is not even a mystery. That is impossible. To devalue a thought is not to find that it is unfounded, but that it is deficient, not to destroy it, but to complete it. The dream is a historical reality as dream, consolidated by the awareness of wakefulness, which is a dream. And if we put ourselves in the shoes of whoever has made a mistake, we find some reason and truth in every error; and it becomes a truth if it is accompanied by the awareness of the limits of this point of view, that is, with an awareness of what is missing from it. This devaluation—as a whole and also as recurring as part of a whole—is the experience always going beyond itself, developing. It is the same experience that is just its development.

Reality is experience in its immanent awareness. We could also call it the object of experience (if we can at last avoid any dualistic misunderstanding). And this object is history: the only thinkable reality and the only science that is aware of itself.

What else is there outside of this? Nothing, because there is nothing outside reality. Furthermore in that same history there are distinctions between historical and imaginary facts: there are real events, as well as myths, figments of the imagination, dreams. From time to time, a fact belongs to one or other category, according to the different title with which it starts to take part in experience: after all, a

title is itself a judgement, that is, a function and moment of experience. Consider this: when I read *Orlando Furioso*, I am captivated by the vague imaginings of the poet, and I forget myself and everything else. At that moment I find myself drawn into a coherent world, which does not seem like a fabric of inventions, but as a weave of historical facts. All of a sudden, the spell is broken and I wake up; my previous interpretation would be turned upside down by a whole host of preconceived judgements formed by my culture or experience in which Ariosto's whole world would be relegated to his imagination. There are moments, in the genesis of experience that I do not reconnect to the whole of experience itself; or rather, I do reconnect them, but I do so negatively, characterizing them almost as if they were the superstructure of experience. And, of course, all this takes place in the heart of experience. Because when it comes to Ludovico Ariosto, history matters: he really existed, and so did his imagination, which was fuelled by the chivalric literature that had gone before and which flourished in his masterpiece. All this is, therefore, a matter of historical fact.

In theory, fictions and accepted facts, true things and false things are on the same plane, with no way to discern between them. The distinction becomes more definitive in the real act of experience and arises from the rhythm of its development. Since experience does not constitute an absolute identity, as has been said, nor is it the sudden and unexpected emergence of determinate representations; rather it is, as our own Jaia said, the self-determination of an indeterminate. That indeterminate is nothing compared with the determinate that results from the process of experience. This is what makes it a true and proper creation, all of whose demonstrable antecedents—its authority and conditions—are made clear to the critique through pre-existent elements of a soluble analysis. And in fact it has been noted, both in the critique of art and psychology, that historical and scientific investigations are not able to uncover any spiritual facts whatsoever from all of these antecedents. Experience is therefore a creation, one that does not even presuppose a creator; it has therefore been called *autoctisi*. The creator is exactly the same as the creation by which the creative act materializes. For every

genius, truth, already arrived at intuitively and by good sense, is *ex se natus* (born out of itself). Perhaps a genius does not share the same disposition as every other man, and his spirit makes a greater impression?

This concept of *autoctisi* is at once the circuitous and the most obvious, the most obscure and the clearest that we can offer. Thus the blind will never know the meaning of a colour; but for someone who can see it, it is enough that, on seeing colour, he look within himself. The same distinctiveness or irreplaceability also belongs to the process we call self-creation, because we only create the thought that we think. In fact, if a blind person can speak about colours, then no one can speak about thought, given how blind to thought our universal nature is. So, whatever I think, I do not only think what I think. That is to say, I do not only think of what is known as the content or object of my thought; but I also think of myself thinking of this object. We do not have consciousness of anything without at the same time having consciousness of ourselves, to which the object of consciousness clings. Let us begin with feeling that is believed to be the most basic psychic function. We find that feeling really means not just feeling something, but feeling ourselves feeling something. This something is the concrete determination in which the Ego is realized. Otherwise, outside of its realization, the Ego would remain an abstraction (as we can clearly say by analysing the act itself). Since the thinking Ego actuates itself by determining itself: and thought is not presupposed unless it is itself determined. Consciousness is, as it were, the actuality of self-consciousness. It is the consciousness, in fact, that we all have of ourselves, of our own powers, of our own value, and can only be the consciousness of work already achieved. It is the consciousness of everything that has been determined and that actually manifests our personalities.

## 11.

The spiritual development that constitutes experience is this progressive self-determination of the Ego. Through this progression, each moment is a new form of affirmation of the Ego and also a



negation, a real annulment of the Ego in the form by which it was previously determined: it is the movement from the non-existence to the existence of a determinate Ego. And, since a non-determined ego is nothing, you could also describe it as a movement from the non-existence to the existence of the Ego. Our life is the continual death of the old ego and a continual birth of the new, in which, although the old endures, it is renewed and transfigured.

This perpetual rebirth makes manifest the vigour of the spirit that continually aspires to go beyond the past in order to recover it in the completeness of all experience. And attenuating the spirit entails a weakening of the force of both this renewal and cohesion, which is the same force that drives self-awareness. The world, its systems, and the concrete system of our personalities are gradually formed through the course of experience. The awareness of this system is history; a flaw in it is a historical lacuna. And the dream, the imagination, every fictional creation, these are always the result of a suspension of the creative energy of the spirit before the system of the world. Suspending and enclosing themselves in abstract subjectivity, they draw away from the reality that is nothing but the objective concrete actuality of the Ego. This is why the wakeful accuse the sleeper—who dreams—of a lack of awareness. It is much like the accusation charged at the poet—who roams in a world populated only by the creations of his imagination—by the critic, philosopher and historian.

But that same abstract subjectivity would not be possible without some content in which it is made objective. Having lost contact with the organic totality of experience, the subject seizes on just a part of it, on a few elements of experience, and constructs a whole other experience on fragmentary and abstract foundations. This other experience is also abstract, and will also be valuable, though only as a function of the particular personality that carries it out. Consequently sometimes during a dream we are not aware that we are dreaming; and in the artist's outpouring of genius he converses with his characters and treats them with the same passion that he would a living person.

The duty of philosophy, as the Indian sages put it, is to awaken men and make them conscious of this world as the work of the spirit that stirs within them, and to make them conscious of their own being in the world's creative energy. But today, philosophy knows that the reality of the spirit is the very reality of the world that, in its consciousness of itself, is history. And so we turn to history as the fulfilment and ideal of the reality of the spirit, if it is illuminated by thought, which draws a rational cosmos out of murky chaos.

We have now driven the old gods out of their inaccessible Olympus, we have escaped the cold shadows of a mysterious nature, we have set our firm and serene gaze upon absolute reality in the eternal life of experience, which belongs to us, and which we have almost created with our own hands. Now philosophy has bestowed upon man—not that transient individual who is also an abstraction that yields to common thought, but the spirit that brings us all together, and is a manifestation of all of us—the very highest dignity and responsibility of a god that sits in judgement. It cannot ever be satisfied, since by its very nature it labours eternally to realize itself.

Inspiring each other, therefore, towards this religious sense of a common mission, we will work together, dear students. We will work together, believing that we can shed light around us, with the modesty of knowing that, deep down, we will never have done enough.

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

[1](#) Translated from Giovanni Gentile, 'L'esperienza pura e la realtà storica', in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, third edition (Florence, Le Lettere, 2003), pp. 233–62. The essay was first published, under the same title, as a free-standing booklet (Florence, Libreria della Voce, 1915).

[2](#) [Editors' note: we have added section numbers to this essay. Gentile does not use numbers in this case; instead he marks the sections divisions between sections with full line breaks.]

[3](#) [Editors' note: Alessandro D'Ancona was born on 20 February 1835, in Pisa, and died on 9 November 1914, in Florence. He was a professor of Italian literature at the University of Pisa.]

[4](#) [Editors' note: Amedeo Crivellucci was born on 20 April 1850 and died, in Rome, on 11 November 1914.]

[5](#) [Editors' note: Donato Jaia (or Jaja): born in Bari on 16 June 1839; died in Pisa, 14 March 1914.]

[6](#) See my *Origini della filosofia contemporanea in Italia*, vol. III, part I (Messina, Principato, 1922), pp. 271–387.

[7](#) For more on the insistence on the unknowability of the subject in the actual idealist system, see my note in the *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, I (1920), pp. 354–6.

# The Moral Problem

Giovanni Gentile<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 311–342*

**Abstract:** In this lecture, taken from the *Discorsi di religione* (Lectures on Religion), Gentile tries to make sense of morality in the absence of a transcendent reality. This lecture is in some respects uncharacteristic of Gentile's work. While the tenets of actual idealism give rise to the question, the answer is elaborated without recourse to the technical apparatus of actual idealism. As a result, the lecture plainly shows us Gentile not, as he was sometimes thought to be, as the expounder of a rigid and rarefied doctrine, but as a sensitive and careful interpreter of the philosophical problems thrown up in the course of life as actually lived.

## 1.

Modern philosophy, as pure idealism, is essentially an ethic. This is because it reduces every reality to that of the spirit, posited not as something in itself, but as self-creative act—that is, a reality that only exists insofar as it is realized. That is precisely the nature of reality from the perspective of moral value: a reality that we only know by making moral judgments.

This is why we can say that ancient philosophy, unaware of the nature of the philosopher's own spiritual reality, never addressed the specific problem of ethics. Although Platonic, Aristotelian, Ciceronian, Epicurean, Cynical and Stoic philosophies do address Eastern (Indian) and Greek morality, ancient thought did not understand moral reality; and as a result, both oriental pessimism and optimistic Greek naturalism were entirely oriented toward eudemonism. Hence life was conceived as an economic problem, presented by nature and solved by reason, by the most rational

means, or rather, by those most naturally suited to achieving the ends bestowed on man by nature. Buddhism solves the problem, with rigorous logical coherence, by recommending the elimination of the will. The will is considered the root of the individuality to which the problem of life and the moral life effectively belongs. The same negative ideal of renunciation reappears in a series of philosophies: Cynicism, in the Greek philosophy of decadence, restates the ideal through its negation of that personality to whose reality the moral conception of life refers; the Sophists wanted to remove moral life and custom from historical law—which is typical of a world posited by the human will—and make it a natural law; Socrates believed that to know goodness, you just had to be good; Plato hypostatizes this object of intellectual intuition as an idea, so that in his Republic he does not know how to point out any end higher than justice; while Aristotle makes justice the fundamental virtue and the core of his ethics, it is a form of justice that recognizes and respects us, but does not create us or anything else. These philosophies are always oriented toward the sense of the universal conception typical of the Greek spirit. Accordingly all thinkable reality presupposes the activity of the spirit, although clearly the spirit's actions should also be conceived as autonomous and unconditioned catalysts. In this way spirit's actions can seem like creators of a world, which, in turn, can be judged as good or evil. And all of these ethical ideals to which Greek thought aspires are not, in fact, ideals: at most, they are a means of arriving at the ideal, or the objective, which is the achievement of happiness. For man, this just entails being one's own master, or being master of the form that relates to one's own being, which is therefore naturally destined towards happiness. Happiness is not a desired end, but a natural end. It is the development of our being which naturally tends towards this end, in the heart of the universal becoming of nature. So at most, we could be immoral, affirming our personality and living a life that you could say is of our own creation; but we could never be moral, since morality would always involve observing the laws of nature, denying our will and that part of nature's being that is really our own.

Take, for example, Plato, the most profound interpreter of the Greek spirit. The Good is an idea; it is the idea of ideas, since every idea, in its intrinsic finality, is also good. If we are to be good, we must love the Good (that is: ideas as a whole). And, Plato, in his efforts to understand the life of the spirit as he aspires to the ideal and the realization of thought, looks to the highest concept, which is Love, the divine Eros, son of Poros and Penia (plenty and penury). And Diotima [in Plato's Symposium] teaches that love is the 'desire for the perpetual possession of the good'.<sup>[2]</sup> It begins with procreation, which is the desire for immortality, or the spawning of an immortal idea, which is the complete and perfect being of the mortal individual. But could this desire for the idea, planted by nature in the heart of man, be his will?

What do you suppose, Socrates, to be the cause of this love and this desire? Look at the behaviour of all animals, both beasts and birds. Whenever the desire to procreate seizes them, they fall a prey to a violent love-sickness. Their first desire is to achieve union with one another, their second to provide for their young; for these they are ready to fight however great the odds, and to die if need be, suffering starvation themselves and making any other sacrifice in order to secure the survival of their progeny. With men you might suppose such behaviour to be the result of rational calculation, but what cause is to be ascribed for the occurrence of such love among the beasts?<sup>[3]</sup>

The idea stirs restlessly. It is sparked as much by love as by the most inorganic matter or man or Socrates. And this love draws all things necessarily, fatally and inescapably toward the Good. So love, this supreme and immanent force of the spirit, is as much the life of the spirit as it is the life of nature: it is instinctual, a natural law that is not free and does not pass judgement on itself.

So this philosophy lacks the intuition of moral life.

In the doctrine of life, the moral point of view arises when love is spoken of not as a natural fact but as an action. In Christianity, this is set out as a duty: 'Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ... and thy neighbour as thyself.'<sup>[4]</sup> And thus the love of oneself, which is natural, is distinguished from the love of one's neighbour, which is not natural, but must be inside us. It further distinguishes between love of all finite things—with which we naturally identify in life through our relations with nature, itself nothing but the system of finite things, and with which we, as correspondingly finite things, are naturally linked and connected—from the love of God, which must be placed above natural love of natural things. So now we are talking about a love that is not a love by which nature is articulated and strengthened inside our soul without our input, without our concerted effort, without us initiating it or requiring our consciousness of it. Rather, we are talking about a love that we can no longer conceive of as anything but our creation, our action—love that is no longer a fact, but an act.

And if, in previous philosophies, love is the source of all natural things, then similarly this other love (charity) is the creative energy of our entire inner life. It begins with all these so-called feelings that our conscience, viewed from the ordinary intellectualistic perspective, accumulates in the form of simple natural facts. These natural facts derive from the deep reality with which we must contend. They therefore emerge as a force that runs contrary to, and must be tamed in the interests of, liberty. In the new intuition of an essentially moral life, sentiments are a reality established by love as an act in which our free personality is made manifest. They can, therefore, all be evaluated, and are all dependent on the rule of the spiritual law. According to the ordinary man, the heart cannot be dictated to. He still thinks that courage, for example, cannot be learned. This kind of language is what makes that man ordinary, like Don Abbondio<sup>[5]</sup> who remains indifferent to the high moral inspiration of Cardinal Federigo.<sup>[6]</sup> We are no longer talking about seeing what is there in our soul; because, if we were, we would have first to assume that this soul already exists and is worth taking seriously. And if our soul already existed as just another of the many objects we use to construct the

whole of what we call 'nature', it would be a part of nature. But if we realize our internal life through our love, then it is also through love that we bring to bear our living individuality, our soul. We form our will in the complex unity of all the many elements from which we can abstractly distinguish it. It is no longer a matter of seeing what is there in our soul, but what ought to be there; or rather, of seeing what our soul should be. Our souls should not be of the kind that love themselves, as finite beings among other finite beings, so that in turn we naturally love both ourselves and finite things. Rather, they should be the type of souls that are in the process of being constructed, learning to love our neighbours, and no longer drawing a distinction between ourselves, our neighbours and God above all things.

### 3.

To conceive of moral reality is to conceive of this reality not in terms of what already is (object of the intellect), but what it *ought to be* (object of the will). But such a concept would strictly speaking be impossible if we were to separate what is from what should be, or if, as in original Christian idealism, there were fundamentally no hint of unity between what we are—a soul that, as the Gospel so forcefully puts it, we must lose—and what we should be—a soul that we must find. That unity is the subject, the human spirit as transcendental activity; it cannot be itself unless it is unified both in itself and with others. That is, the subject cannot exist unless it is evolving in a process of self-creation. It is impossible to keep one foot in intellectualism and the other in a reality that, as our reality, is the domain of our liberty, and therefore of our moral life. With the dogma of incarnation, on the one hand, Christianity tries hard effectively to free man from nature and endow him with the vigour of spiritual liberty. With the dogma of grace, on the other hand, Christianity goes back to contrasting the man of nature with the man of spirit. It goes back to presupposing a Good that, like Plato's, is diametrically opposed to the human will, from which the process of morality would



still have to arise. As a moral doctrine of life, the old Christianity founders on the dogma of grace.

Christianity develops through the history of modern thought; you could say that its whole development consists in gradually freeing itself from the perception of the transcendence of the Good in order either to become aware of its actual spirituality, or in order to grasp the act by which the spirit realizes itself.<sup>[7]</sup> That is to say: it consists entirely in the progressive overcoming of the opposition between the will and the intellect, or between what is (nature) and what ought to be (spiritual reality). From the beginning, Christianity took aim at the same target as idealism does today, totally separating the concept of a pre-existing nature and the life of spirit. This life is understood as a process in which the spirit is present only inasmuch as it is dialectically becoming. Contained within its being is its non-being and the spirit prevails with a brightness that illuminates the darkness, precisely because darkness is being overcome. As such, nature becomes that being which is the non-being of the spirit. We only speak of that non-being insofar as the spirit negates it in the process of asserting itself. So being is not opposed to what ought to be, but is contained within it. And the real—the old real, that is—is not opposed to the ideal. Rather, the real is contained within the ideal, and the ideal realizes itself as the negation of the real that it comprises. So the world is idealized, spiritualized and completely illuminated in order to become a free, spiritual and moral world. The moral world in [the doctrine of the pure] act is neither some golden age nor paradise without evil. It is a contrast between good and evil, a struggle to achieve the joy of the spirit, a joy that can only be tasted through effort, as a result of hard-fought achievement. It is a world that is real only insofar as it is realized, a world that is moral *in fieri*: a moral act.

#### 4.

So far as it is act, rather than fact, moral reality can be defined as liberty. This entails, first, mediation; and, second, universality. The spirit is free inasmuch as it is a process, in which its being is situated

neither at the beginning, nor the end, but in the unity of the beginning and end. My will is free only insofar as I do not detach myself from my will as a consequence of my activity and my will does not detach itself from me. By detaching one from the other, we become—to use Kantian language—two phenomena: and, like all phenomena, each is intelligible solely according to the principle of causality. I, personally, cannot be what I am not; and *operari sequitur esse* (function follows being); so I cannot manifest myself except in certain given actions, each of which will be what it is able to be, given its conditions. Rather, I am only ‘I’ insofar as I act and want: I am what I do; beyond that act I do not exist; I become a simple presupposition. I find myself to be real when acting, that is, when the act is reaching its conclusion. Not, however, that we should consider the completion of this action in its tangible external crystallization. We should rather consider it in terms of its interior usefulness or spirituality. But if I only exist as a result of my own actions, it no longer makes sense to look for the conditions that pre-existed my actions and that might somehow determine my actions.

This process or mediation is the circle in which spiritual reality is realized as reflexive activity that does not act on or create anything but itself. It expresses itself, fundamentally and immanently, by speaking of self: Ego. This is not the representation of a reality that you might imagine existing prior to the representation; it is a realization, the self-realization of the realizing self.

But what of mediation and universality? Mediation realizes the universality of the subject that arises through the act; and without universality the subject would return to itself without having differentiated itself from its immediate being. In fact, it would not even be able to return, because it would not have sufficiently distanced itself from itself. The function of spirit is to actuate the Ego; it is self-affirmation. But it would not be an affirmation if it did not go beyond the ego that has to be the object of the affirmation. Rather, it would have to arrive at an affirmation in which the affirmation itself absorbs the presumed immediate object of knowledge through the act of idealizing the initial (abstract) object and installing the new concrete object. The idealization is thus a universalization, that is,

mediated universality (which is not there initially but presents itself). The thought is always this: the so-called reduction of the particular due to universal categorization. And the act of self-consciousness is the thought that lies at its core and becomes its immanent form. This is its desire or moral act: it affirms itself only by the very act of affirming itself, thereby negating its own abstract or presumed particular subjectivity in order to become a concrete universal subjectivity. Only thus do we earn our freedom.

In fact, we believe ourselves to be naturally free, but all of spiritual experience demonstrates that we must seize our liberty. Indeed, every time we affirm our liberty we implicitly acknowledge that once we were not free. On the one hand, the history of humanity runs from slavery to liberty; and men have always fought, are fighting and will forever fight for liberty. The story of each individual man, regarded as the empirical succession of moments in his particular life, is the progressive release from bonds that the individual comes to consider constraining, and from which he periodically feels the need to break free. Within the intimate dialectic of our personality, what surprises us is how we seek to satisfy the need that hangs over us, that is, the need to make our freedom a reality. It is the realization of a concrete liberty that resolves the determined problem of our concrete personality. On the other hand, our own experience tells us that man's progressive emancipation in history—and the triumph by which, day by day, man manages to carve out his freedom in the natural and social environment in which he strives to live, and the profound liberty that we celebrate deep within our soul—is nothing but subjection to a law that draws us progressively ever higher. It strips us of the egoism that makes the individual appear to be by nature sealed beneath a skin of sensation or within some thought that is particular, relative, ephemeral and arbitrary. In fact, this is an egocentric conception of life, but it raises us to the realm of universal things, values and ideals, to a reality that is not limited by time and space, and is not circumscribed by accidental conditions. In short, it raises us to a reality that is not particular. A slave became aware of liberty and his own need for it, and was therefore spurred in his struggle for liberation by the same obedience that subjected him to

the will of his master. It compelled him to act upon a will that was not his innate will, but a will that he considered a law. It is no longer an individual will, but a universal will relative to the basic society in which the slave finds himself bound to the personality of the oppressor. And the slave had to conceive of that law as universal, that is, as greater than his own self in its natural existence. It was in the name of that same law that, over time, he could call for equality of rights for himself and all the other members of society. Man continues along the path of freedom via school, social coexistence and social institutions; via his ideas, his beliefs and his customs. And no one will ever know how to command if he has never learnt to obey: that is, to recognize the ideality of law as absolute, which he will need to use as a norm and title of true authority. Others cannot take authority seriously if they begin to doubt it or if they stop respecting whoever claims to be exercising it.

But the dawning of self-consciousness, even in the individual's ideal solitude, becomes clear as it brings men together, and drives them to live a common life, in the positive concreteness of spiritual universality. Before that, life's character (which, as I said, experience attests) reveals itself by realizing a universal reality: by uttering a word, again only mentally, that would have no meaning and would not correspond to a real moment of interior life if it did not arise like a flash of universal light. The universal light is swathed in transcendental value because of the narrow limits of the particular subject. It soars before the particular subject like a great being with an absolute sense of its own self-worth.

So liberty is the mediation between self and living universality. It is not presupposed but made real in the generation of itself.

## 5.

If you look carefully, you will see that the two terms we have used to resolve the liberty of the moral act are mutually complementary, and thus come together in an indivisible unity. Mediation is mediation of universality, if (as I have already pointed out) we understand 'universality' to be not some universal thing that is a presupposition

of the act to which it is connected, but something immediate. So true universality, or universality that has this value for the spirit, is that which is obtained thanks to the mediation of the spiritual act. You only have to reflect upon this intrinsic relationship between the concept of the universal and the concept of mediation to understand their reciprocal, complementary nature. It is this that makes up the liberty of moral life.

A universal can only be considered immediate by abstraction, thereby presupposing the spiritual act that refers to it; and thus all the deviations of scientific thought and practice arise because they limit themselves to a conception of the universal as abstractly presupposed and immediate. Here we see the ethical aspect of the question that directly concerns us. The universal is the law, like the law of the will. We conceive of the law in abstract terms when we do not consider it to be either an actual act of will or the real solution to our problem that arises from the very heart of this problem. We conceive of it abstractly when, instead, we consider it to be a solution that pre-exists our problem, either chronologically or just ideally, in which case the law has no value as a consequence of our will but, if anything, the will has value as a consequence of the law; the will abides by the law to the extent that we think it able to contribute to the value of the law. But even if, by mediating itself, the will has the means to conform to the law, we will still need to think that the will is able to make judgements on the law itself. To obey the matter of the law—which is neither perceived to be a law nor valued as such—would evidently bring us back to that most natural state of Platonic love. It would reduce the act of will to the spiritual world in which it is morality because it is liberty. But we value law when we acknowledge its value via a judgement (by which we mean a practical judgement), which we cannot impose upon the law itself except insofar as we compare it with a law that serves as a model, category, predicate, ideal, or whatever we want to call it. In any case, its value to the judging subject is like a universal back to which the law in question should be led.

Taking up an ideal that is not ours, immanent in the positive act of our character, is possible only thanks to the connection between that

ideal and some ideal that is ours. If we neglect to make this connection, and do not allow the spiritual life of our ideal to intervene—this after all is the only thing that makes it possible for us to value the law to which we submit—then we would materially obey the law but we would also be killing the moral spirit via the letter of the law, or better, of abstract legalism.

Any universal is living and concrete. It is truly universal (and not universal by universalizing in contrast to the true universal) only if it does not pre-exist the act that it universalizes. Rather, it is truly universal only if it is the product, or rather the very life or realization, of the act itself: and so it is not immediate, as we might presuppose, but consists in its own mediation.

## 6.

Morality consists entirely of this universality, in the determination of universality's dialectic. And therefore all moral doctrines appeal to the ideal as the negation of natural egoism, the sacrifice of particular individuality, in order that everyone starts out with an awareness of the differences between himself and others; between himself and nature; and between himself and everything that he does not know except as the object of his experience. The ancient doctrine established the awareness of the spirituality of the real, in which moral life is celebrated by saying: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. The modern doctrine uses the theory of moral autonomy to formulate the philosophical principle of the moral world's intelligibility, shutting down the concept of supreme ethical law in a formal definition: 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law'.<sup>[8]</sup> The two expressions are mutually equivalent insofar as they both hint that moral activity's only distinguishing feature is not the will's conformity to the law, but the will presenting itself as law. We love our neighbour as we love ourselves when we love ourselves as we love our neighbour. Hence we no longer direct our love toward ourselves as opposed to our neighbour, and our neighbour as opposed to us. Rather we direct it toward that 'We' by which we embrace both ourselves and everyone

else indistinguishably. That is: we direct our love to ourselves in our universality, as a pure spirit, as a spirit free of the natural limitations of all those objects of our experience that are not part of us, but are the subjects of our own experience, through which these objects appear to us, and are therefore thinkable.

Rediscovering yourself in your neighbour means revoking that self which is described by the boundaries of your flesh, separate from your neighbour. It means making a new self by the power of love. This new self can no longer rest on flesh and blood—that is materiality which implies difference, multiplicity and mutual exclusion. No: it must rest on the spirit in its universality, that spirit through which we encounter and identify with ourselves, even when we are just talking or singing: this is the secret of your moral life.

So if you want to find out whether your action is moral, look to the maxim that your action follows. That is: do not look to an abstract maxim that you might offer as the object of mere speculative contemplation, or similarly by which you come to judge an action. Rather, look to the maxim that you in fact follow in what you do; that is, to the maxim that is immanent in the action of whose intrinsic validity you are clearly already convinced given that you already follow it. This last maxim is not your abstract ideal, but the inner law of your true will. So moral action involves a maxim that appears to you not as the law of your phenomenal subject, but of your pure Ego, of that Ego which is the principle of concrete and absolute universality when it affirms and reveals itself. Like all phenomena—which are interchangeable and which occupy space and time, belonging to the multiplicity—the phenomenal subject is particular. But the pure or transcendental subject is unity, and because it is unity, it is universality. But what, then, is the content of the law? If we were to answer this question, like all the hasty critics of Kantian ethical formalism would claim to do, we would end up fracturing the unity of mediation and universality. (This formalism, by the way, needs to be understood rather more rigidly than the author of the *Critique of Practical Reason* could himself.) If its content is determined, the law would be a law presupposed by the act of will. It

would be an immediate and abstract law, and as such fatal to both liberty and, by extension, moral life itself.

The most naïve and imperfect moral doctrines (such as utilitarianism), as well as those that are immoralistic and paradoxical (like individualism), cannot be regarded as moral doctrines without conceiving of the act of will as a realization of the universal. Utilitarianism exhorts man to put collective interests before his own. From its abstract and economic perspective, utilitarianism sees the value of the particular as identical to the value of the collective, insofar as it does not endow its own law with the simple character of the hypothetical imperative (which belongs to an economic law). Rather, it endows it with the character that one demands of a moral doctrine, that is, of a categorical imperative. Thus it treats the community, whose general interests it looks out for, as a universal subject, which is more important than the individual. And from that point of view, utilitarianism does not contradict Kant, but confirms his doctrine. In the same way, Nietzsche's individuality can sometimes attribute deontological value to the individuality that has to affirm itself through a life that is idealistically considered and longed for, insofar as the dominant individual positions himself above the servile multitudes. In the act of building himself up like this he reveals and embodies a greater sense of humanity than the humanity of which he is an instrument. His value in defending and laying claim to the suffocating oppression of the masses comes not from him as a particular individual, but in him as greater force of the spirit, as supreme form of that spirituality to which slaves unconsciously aspire. Thus a father, who establishes a rigorous and perhaps even tyrannical paternal regime over the capricious and unconscious whims of his young sons, might believe sincerely that he is fulfilling a sacred moral duty. To the father, his dominant will appears rational; his children could, therefore, similarly assert their will if they knew how to reason like him.



We all have different duties, but every single one of them is still our duty. Beyond all the single duties between which we draw distinctions, each one of which can sometimes perplex us, there is one, without which there would be no way to conceive of any determined and particular duty: the duty always to do our duty. That is the duty of which we are not ordinarily aware, just as we are not ordinarily aware of our selves, despite being aware of everything that we see and think. Without this duty that is fundamental to all our other duties, we would be able to apprehend the other duties as, at most, simple notions: strange, flavourless notions, without either positive significance or the capacity to arouse our interest. But we could never turn such mere notions into real obligations drawn from our will. We would register them as voices not directed at us. If God had said to every man, 'Honour thy father and thy mother', I could read this in a catechism, or else I could come to know it some other way, without feeling obliged to observe the precept, since my coming to know it means above all being located (as the intellectualists would have it) outside of the world to which the knowledge refers. So if God speaks to men, in becoming aware of it, I remain outside and above the world in which this awe-inspiring conversation takes place. What is it that allows me to participate in this world? What is it that allows me to feel a precept within me, a precept that is directed not only at other men, and at men who are the objects of my thoughts in general, but also, even more importantly, directed at me? It is the moral attitude of the spirit, which feels drawn towards an ideal, which will be determined in various ways by the development of the spiritual life. As such, the moral attitude itself is the development of something that is already in us, and does not come to us from the outside.

But sometimes no moral ideal can be effectively instilled, either as precept or as example, unless it arises spontaneously from man's own heart, as the experience of teaching has always clearly demonstrated. It is not only true of sermons, which are ineffective. Similarly, even the most illuminating examples found in moral theories will leave the spectator indifferent, because he will always be a simple spectator. He does not yet personally—in his heart or by

his own will—identify with the tormented struggle he witnesses in his hero: the spectator neither worries about the hero nor joins him in his struggle. The spectator does not say to himself: *de re mea agitur* (this concerns me). The most morally compelling example is given by those close to us, our loved ones whom we regard as mirrors to our own selves. So, when they are on the brink of action, we too call forth our energies, which in turn inspire our soul as well. In this case it is not only the example of our loved ones, but also their words, that will know how to find, or rather, will naturally find their way to our hearts. There they will echo silently like the voice that expresses our deepest intuitions.

Duty, then, is duty for us, an obligation insofar as it is *our duty*: it is what arises from the spiritual act, as the ideal of our being. And because our being is not something that *is*, but something that *becomes*—thereby distinguishing itself from nature—it is a free and moral reality. Similarly our ideal is not something that *is*, but something that takes shape and develops. It is not something that just *is*. And this means that if you begin to define duty, with the aim of fixing its essence and isolating it from the development by which it takes shape, you have already suppressed it, because you make it material and thereby destroy the spiritual essence in which its moral character resides. We cannot just define duty; it needs to be continuously defined and redefined. And he who looks for its final definition, and turns to the philosopher to define it conclusively for him, seems to want to pin duty down once and for all. It is a duty that never gives us peace, a duty with which we are never content, and which torments us relentlessly, never allowing us to look back, but always forward, forward, down a path that never ends. He who looks for its final definition seems to want to obliterate duty, once and for all, and so bring the matter to a close!

No, this is only possible when it is possible. When it comes to debts, we can make contributions to them and eventually pay them off, thus freeing ourselves from the burden. But the same cannot be said of duties, because beyond duties there is Duty. Duty's forms are transient. And Duty, as ideality, as universal, as the law of our spirit,

cannot set like the sun, since our own spirit (as strange as it sounds) would have to set with it.

## 8.

The good is the universality of the will. But this good, as must be clear from what we have seen, is not eudemonistic good. This is where we are so far: happiness, as man's natural goal, comes back to a picture of nature. If we consider man living as an empirical being, moved by the instinct of love that, according to Plato and all the Greek naturalists, moves everything, he too belongs in that picture. And one can only speak of that happiness from a standpoint that does not allow us even a glimpse of moral reality. What is more, this is a reality from which we cannot remove ourselves except by abstracting from it, since repudiating moral reality just means repudiating *one* moral reality (as an objective and definite moral reality). Repudiating one moral reality means affirming another, which in turn will just be repudiated again. Now that we are so thoroughly absorbed in our moral world, we cannot see the good, to which man aspires, eudemonistically. Therefore the good cannot be the prize of virtue. It cannot be the end to which virtuous action, the will itself, aspires. Our very own Pomponazzi said: *Praemium virtutis ipsamet virtus* (virtue is its own reward); so, in their different ways, did the Stoics, Spinoza, and even Dante, who says to the sinner:

Capaneus, if your pride is not lessened,  
Your punishment will be that much the worse.<sup>[9]</sup>

But we cannot get beyond eudemonism by purely and simply denying it, as Kant did. By denying it, we are forced to use one hand to return what we took with the other: we postulate a transcendent kingdom of ends, in which we can carry out the justice that, in the world of moral experience, the existence of evil hinders. This is false, naturalistic eudemonism, which we should replace with the true, spiritualistic eudemonism. As such, if it is true that the Greek ideal of happiness is not actually an ideal but is reality itself—which, insofar

as it is presupposed, is more real than we think—then it is no less true that happiness is an essential form of the ideal.

What, according to the Greeks, is the happy condition of being? For idealists like Plato and Aristotle, happiness is the ideal condition of being (idea, form, being that is pure being, or perfect being, undiluted by its opposite). And this condition is not the end toward which one inclines, simply because it precedes life, existence and our inclination towards happiness. For Democritus and the Sophists, for the Cynics and the Cyrenaics, for the Stoics and the Epicureans (materialists), this condition is simply the natural being that pre-exists the will, and to which the will must fall back. Happiness pre-exists our inclination toward happiness, conditioning and giving rise to it. So the myth of the golden age is that goodness begins in nature.

The spiritual conception of life begins when we recognize that if goodness were present from the beginning, we could never do good; and that if goodness were not enacted, it would no longer be goodness. Therefore it is not a presupposition, but a product of life and of history. It represents progress, not deterioration; it is not the impoverishment and straining of reality, but its enrichment and reinvigoration. The happiness towards which the will gravitates is not the condition of the will but the very reality that the will itself realizes. It is happiness because it is the fullness of being—perfection, as the ancients also believed. But happiness is not something other than will; it is moral, and as such it coexists with the same virtue or act of free will.

But what of the just yet miserable man, the victim of an evil that he is not able to overcome despite the force of his own virtue? He is internally divided, caught between moral intuition and naturalistic intuition of the world. One minute he sees himself as master of his own destiny and *suae faber fortunae* (creator of his own fate); and the next, as subject to the fatal forces of a fortune that is oblivious to the reason of the spirit. But it is obvious that if he perseveres with the latter, he could never wake from the dream in which he lets himself be dragged along by the current of the world (which is really just the wave of his own imaginings). He could never take a moral position in the world, and as a consequence could never compare his fate and

virtue. On the other hand, it is obvious that if he were closed to the intuition of his spiritual powers—by which he makes himself citizen of the kingdom of ends and through which he breathes the pure air of moral life—he would have no way of knowing, that is, appreciating or desiring, joys that exist outside of the moral world. But is it possible to pass from one way of seeing to the other? It would be possible if we could effectively conceive of a dualistic reality, as philosophy has repeatedly tried to do, and as Christian idealism tried to do early on. It would be possible if we were to conceive of reality as, on the one hand, the object of the intellect, presupposed by the spirit; and on the other, as the object of the will, which presupposes the spirit. But such dualistic conceptions are impossible. Forever lamenting the rift between merit and fortune, and comparing good and evil as if they were two equally real and potent things or forces, is pure fantasy. It is just having one foot in each camp.

## 9.

But it is also true that there is no good without evil. However, evil in relation to spiritual or moral good cannot be a natural evil. Natural evil is the opposite of natural good. If, when you have natural good, you cannot also conceive of moral good, then, in a similar way, natural evil mutually excludes the possibility of moral evil. An inherently or naturally wicked man cannot be wicked because of the wickedness that is inherent in mankind, of which we accuse him by association. In fact, the idea of an evil nature makes no sense unless we also personify and, therefore, mythically represent nature as the spirit itself.

But what is natural or physical evil? Among other things, it is illness: the disorganization of an organism. The organism that is not an organism: the being that does not exist. Thus moral evil is the non-being of that being that does not strictly speaking exist (like nature), but rather becomes: or rather, it is not immediate being, but mediate being. Goodness is universal; but it functions by being mediated by the spiritual being; and evil is only the non-being of that universal, or its mediated guise. Evil is therefore that immediate

being which is nature as seen by the spirit. The nature that the spirit rediscovers deep inside itself is like the point from which the process of mediation begins, a process that effectively constitutes it: nature is the particular that the spirit universalizes; it is the reality that the spirit idealizes. And its value as a law of action only reveals itself if it is idealized and thus transfigured.

There is evil, then, to the extent that it is negated, just as the particular exists to the extent that it is universalized, and the real to the extent that it is idealized. The good, therefore, is the firm and living body; and evil its shadow. To put it another way, evil is like the abstract matter (i.e. the inorganic substance) which is organized within the circle of the life that makes up the living body. But the good is the living body.

Evil's inclusion in and dissolution into goodness is what we call the ideality of evil because it is not real as evil, but only as good. Whatever of evil is real lies in goodness: as it comes into being, good replaces evil; in his mind man cannot help but be aware of having overcome evil as he realizes goodness.

Paradoxically, this doctrine of the ideality of evil does not clash with the human conscience that solemnly affirms (and needs to affirm) the existence of evil. This doctrine is simply an invitation to reflect upon that conscience. It is an invitation to reflect that the evil, whose existence it rightly affirms, is precisely the evil that we must single out as an evil. Not only must we know that evil, we must condemn it. Furthermore, via the spiritual actuality of condemning it, we also invalidate it. The doctrine of the ideality of evil does not deny the existence of the evil that the human conscience condemns and strives to destroy. It denies the existence of the evil that one recognizes as evil without destroying it. It is as if our understanding of a fact of nature were the realization of something that the spirit could do nothing whatsoever about, and which would thereby render our own understanding indifferent as well. The moral point of view is somewhat different, and has it that we cannot consider reality as anything other than what it is by virtue of our spiritual attitude. So conceived, to know evil is to condemn it. That is to say, it is not the abstractly theoretical or intellectualistic affirmation of a separate

entity, but the practical affirmation and realization of good will as it passes judgement, a righteous awareness of good.

We cannot understand either good or evil from a so-called 'theoretical', or more properly 'intellectualistic', point of view. We understand them by their value, by the extent to which we value them, good as good and evil as evil. Either way, we value them by the extent to which we realize a will, adopt a moral stance and take action. And what we do, either as we come to understand goodness or as we come to understand evil, is goodness itself.

## 10.

It is impossible to both know and do evil; the contradiction does not allow it, since in practice, according to the moral perspective, knowing is doing. And whoever does evil does not know it. He might know it in principle as evil; but in effect he knows it as good. It is his good (the good that has to be his own, in order that it be a good that he himself can carry out). And if, while he is realizing some spiritual reality, he exhausts both his spiritual reality and reality in its entirety—which, at least according to the moral point of view, is nothing but the reality of the spirit anyway—then his goodness would be absolute. However, it becomes evil, and as such should be condemned and therefore annihilated by the conscience's judgement and pronouncement of the condemnation, when the malefactor's wrongdoing does not exhaust the totality of his spiritual life. And so we can talk about good and evil in this life as if it were an infinite ladder that rises up from the earth to the sky and from nature to spirit: it is a story of endless progress. Every step we take up the ladder is good, and every time we stop on a rung, when slowness or apathy of the spirit yields to nature, it is evil: 'What negligence, what dawdling is there here?'<sup>[10]</sup> In the life of the spirit, any pause is sinful.

On the other hand, the unreality and ideality of evil is also, in its way, a reality of supreme and essential moral interest. There is no evil in nature, and the spirit is good. But this good that the spirit realizes through its own action, insofar as it is mediation, cannot be conceived as anything but the unity of the mediated and the

immediate, as the unity of the universal and the particular, or of the object and subject. We have said that mediation is identity. It is more than the difference between our points of arrival and departure; it is reflection, a circle. We can separate ourselves from our immediate being only by coming back to it through the act of self-consciousness. We make ourselves universal. But at the heart of universality, which is the negation of our individuality, we must rediscover our individuality. Yes, we lose our soul, only to rediscover it. Within the character of my family, of the state to which I belong, of humanity, of the spirit whose immanent reality I come to grasp in my will, in my search for a more solid understanding, my personality is not suppressed but instead elevated, enlarged and invigorated.

Evil, therefore, resides within the good; inside it, at its core. We notionally consign evil to the past. And in the history of mankind, or in the development of our personal character, we like to think of the past as over and done with, but this past is like the internal substance of the present. Otherwise it would end up being emptied out, not of its content, but of the very being that makes it an act or a living, self-realizing form. The truly good man is not an innocent man who has never come face to face with evil. He is not someone who once knew evil but is now absolutely free of it; a man who has forgotten it and cleansed himself of evil, who no longer feels the urges that once lead him astray, the urges that once hindered him from taking the path along which he barely walked but was dragged, by the very force of its gradient. Rather, the truly good man forges his own path, and in so doing celebrates his own liberty, his own values, his own power. He defeats the enemies that cross his path and make him feel the weight of his journey. Only when every difficulty is overcome does the spirit rest, sleeping or reenergizing itself. Only then is the work of the reality of goodness interrupted.

## 11.

This concept of goodness that struggles on its way into its own world is both a religious and irreligious concept. Religion is a matter of how the spirit approaches its object, conceived as a pure object,



detached from its essential relation to the subject. Religion is therefore conceived as something infinite, which is not relative to the subject and does not allow it to affirm itself. The religious conception of goodness is a Good like that conceived by Plato. It cannot be conceived without ruling out the possibility of giving any credit or value to the subjective actions of the man who claims to be carrying out a good deed. This conception is essentially intellectualistic; and as such it is essentially antithetical to the moral vision of the world.

The most profoundly religious element of religion is not so much the affirmation of the abstract object (from which it certainly draws its origins) but the negation of the subject. This is the most important element if we consider that the affirmation of the abstract object cannot be a spiritual act if the subject does not return to itself from the object. And to return to itself from the object, understood in its abstractness, is to return to itself without rediscovering itself there. Buddhism is atheistic, but strictly speaking it is still a religion because it does not deny God in order to affirm rather than negate the subject, which is the necessary and characteristic conclusion of religion.

Moreover, having fractured the relation between object and subject, the affirmation of the object coincides with its negation. The object cannot be known without the subject that knows it. And if by affirming something we also somehow know it, then the unknown is not affirmed except as that which we deny. In this respect, Buddhism is the logical development of Brahmanism, just as non-belief is the child of superstition. When the subject loses confidence in his own powers, he naturally ends up also losing faith in the object, which only stands before him by virtue of the subject, or, at least, by virtue of the subject as well. And the only place the object can be situated is on the altar that man himself has built.

So the affirmation of the object and the negation of the subject mean the negation of reality qua spiritual reality and the negation of the good as the product of liberty. In short, it is the negation of liberty. As we have shown, Christianity has the great historical merit of having reclaimed liberty from the intellectualism of ancient philosophy, which was wholly oriented toward natural reality. But

Christianity is not only a religion, but a philosophy as well, and it is therefore a moral doctrine. Its greatness rests not on its straightforwardly religious element, but on the philosophical and moral truth that it proclaimed, and with which it managed to transform human civilization.

The Greeks had already seen the necessity of setting the gods free in order to understand human life. Civilization is born and progresses through a life of thought and rational action; it founds cities and opens history books. The Greeks conceived the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods in their heaven, in order to impart the privilege of celestial beings to man. What makes these celestial beings celestial is that they were endowed with what man conceived as ideal (truth, goodness, immortality etc.). They were endowed with qualities upon which man's thought was fixated, as the reality to which his thoughts and hopes aspired, and which he, therefore, needed. Prometheus lies chained on the Caucasus because he transgressed the will of Zeus, or rather, the law that defines Zeus as Zeus by contrasting him with mortals. Will or no will, Zeus as a being must be *toto caelo* different from mortals. Prometheus is the impiety immanent in the law of life, so far as it is human life, and not simply natural. This life is not a constant; rather, man's 'unquiet genius'<sup>[11]</sup> modifies, transforms and permeates that life, making it spiritual. And in contrast both to abstract, rigid, merciless Jewish monotheism and to Greek naturalism, this impiety is the progressive and dynamic element of Christianity. The religious content of Christianity would come apart if it did not twin nature with the spirit. This would dampen its spiritual impulse, negating liberty and isolating the divine (which is even conceived as a Trinity) from the entire sphere of nature. In turn, nature effectively operates as a breeding ground, from which Christian grace must choose its select few. But the type of idealism which hinges wholly on the Christian doctrine's principle of renewal, in its absolutely immanent and spiritual intuition, can no longer temper the Promethean meaning of moral life. It must say that morality and religion are antithetical terms, each of which is the negation of the other: *mors tua, vita mea* (your death, my life).

## 12.

From this perspective, moral life is irreligious life, but from another, it encompasses religiousness, and goes beyond the antithesis of liberty and transcendence, which we have revealed. It will be easy to convince ourselves of this if we consider the mythic character that religious thinking tends to assume, and if we distinguish between myth and the truth which myth reveals.

The nature of religion leads it to represent its truth in mythical form. But what is myth? Myth was once thought to be the sensible representation of the idea; it is the thinking of the spirit in nature. The Platonic solution to the problem of the immortality of the soul is mythical. It is the solution around which thought, or rather the human heart, anxiously turns. It conceives of the soul-as-spirit as mortal, although in its unity the soul-as-spirit gathers together temporal, spatial or natural multiplicity and is, therefore, immortal by definition. And it conceives of the natural soul as immortal, as the soul that in the world of nature our imagination assigns to every human body. But this is a multiple soul: it is spatial, temporal and finite. By definition, it is itself mortal.

Or rather, by presenting the soul as an object in its notional rejection of relativity, religion does not thereby cease to regard it as spirit. In fact, that object is nothing but the spirit in its very subjectivity, but when placed before religion it appears as pure object. And so this object, on reflection, is reason and the will, or personality. But when it is conceived as pure objectivity, it only becomes a person by entirely excluding or transcending our own selves. It ends up being conceived as immediate reality, which therefore precedes our spiritual reality and is therefore nature. The object, as pure object, is personified; but personified in the guise of a natural or material personality. As a consequence of its materialization, it resides in heaven, understood as a place isolated from our experience, and can from time to time take on any kind of material form compatible with its spirituality, as transcendent spirituality.

And though the abstract position of the object induces religion to mythologize, its mythologizing actually stifles that seed of truth that it needs in order to survive, the seed from which it must endlessly draw nourishment. So it is true that the object, as opposed to the subject, is object and not subject. It is true that if the subject did not represent itself as object, but instead as this object that is not a subject, it would not be a subject. But it is also true that this object, which is the negation of the subject, is the very subject that realizes itself by drawing contrasts with itself. That is, you cannot see the spirit in nature, where myth directs us, without rediscovering yourself and going beyond the myth that led to that rediscovery. If we hold onto the myth, the merely naturalistic representation, then in the religious conscience, we remain before God, and God before us in the same relationship by which an atom is connected, materialistically, with another atom. This is a wholly negative relation, or it is the negation of any relationship: it is non-relative (even when an atom is connected with another it does not contain anything at all). And in atomism, in fact, the atoms are reciprocally transcendent of that transcendence which religious mythology reserves exclusively for God in relation to man, but not vice versa.

But it is clear that such transcendence would spell the death of religion. If God were outside human consciousness he would not exist for man. It is much like how one atom is outside another, or, to put it another way, how, without a predetermined harmony, a Leibnizian monad would be outside another. Mythology born of religion erodes and destroys religion. As such, any recovery of religious sentiment is a revolt against the materialistic representation of the divine, in an effort to internalize and intensify the spirit.

So yes, we can affirm the opposition between object and subject, but only if we do not at the same time usher in that radical and original multiplicity that we introduce into nature. We are spectators of nature, but we cannot introduce this opposition into ourselves without then becoming spectators of our own performance, and therefore sinking from spirit to nature, repressing and impeding the impulse of spiritual life within ourselves. This impulse is present as much in the religious life as it is in moral life. And if we are careful

not to submit to the materiality of myth, we see religion and morality interpenetrating and coming together in convoy in the vigorous rhythm of the life of the spirit.

### 13.

Moral and religious life interpenetrate as mediation and universality. They interpenetrate in liberty, which is moral reality, for if man is not in himself moral, but makes himself moral by acknowledging the law through his deeds—the law as the universal and the object of his action—rather than through words, then he can become moral only by sacrificing himself. The religious moment of moral life is this: this sacrifice of the self, this sacrifice understood as one's true life, a life that is truly human, the only life that is truly worthy and the only one that we can live, so far as we see it in all its glory, in the light of its absolute and overwhelming value. And we absolutely have to pass through the religious moment in order to carry out a moral act.

Any claim for an independent morality, with neither obligation nor sanction, is either a misunderstanding or complete nonsense. One cannot speak of morality without discussing the dependence of the subject, and therefore obligation; an obligation would not be an obligation if it did not also incur a sanction, through which the obligation manifests itself. Rather, the spirit is independent in the sense that it includes everything; but the spirit has its roots in, and draws nourishment from, the subject. And through the subject, the spirit comes to know its being intimately and finds the source of its liberty. And as subject, it cannot but contrast itself with the object, that is, negate itself as a finite and particular being in the infinity or universality of the object.

For religion, the object is everything, and religion loses itself to the object. But the object is not everything: it is, as we have said, the boundary over which the subject must pass in order to return to itself. 'Pass' here means that the object is not immediately identified with the subject. In fact, the object cannot immediately be the subject, but rather its opposite, its negation. This is because the subject could not return to itself, and as such could not affirm itself, if

it did not first negate itself. As we have seen, this is the rhythm of moral life. So in fact this rhythm is made possible by the negation of the subject in its immediacy; we are always that subject so long as we contemplate ourselves and take pride in or deplore our being. As such, our 'being' is immediate subjectivity that is negated so that the subject mediates itself as subject, in its liberty and self-consciousness as man. Man is man because he negates and refuses to be what he already is, looking instead toward the ideal that he must realize. And if he were to confuse this ideal with what he already is, he would become perfectly complacent in his current state; he would drift off and sleep like a log. His endless spiritual vigil entails him stepping out of himself; and, as St. Paul himself said, 'dissolving himself' and assimilating the ideal, which is the object. It entails being both ourselves and something other than ourselves. This other is absolutely other: a chain by whose strength we gird our loins. Without it we would bend to the slightest breeze like a fragile sapling, which lives, but does not know it is alive, and has no life plan.

This religiosity is immanent not only in moral life—in the fullness of a life in which man realizes a world that, because it has absolute universality, has the greatest possible solidity—but is no less immanent in the artistic life. The latter encloses man in the abstract and particular world of his dreams, and there it promises him the greatest freedom from any exterior or objective limit or check. In art, too, the subject makes a world from his abstract interior world; for him, that world *is* the world, like Beatrice's smile, or the mouth, the noble mouth<sup>[12]</sup> that Ugolino wipes clean on the hair of his victim.<sup>[13]</sup> The universe is reduced to this moment; a universe that unwinds from within without receiving or admitting anything from the outside. It is an infinite reality, on which the poet fixates; forgetting himself, he is reeled in and carried along either by the logic of the object that is the source of his inspiration, or by God, who excites and permeates the poet without allowing him space to breathe or be free.

The thinker does the same; as does the spirit, which reaches out to God alone. But it does not come to rest on God, because in order to do so it would have to make God himself materialize and make the

spirit materialize through God. So we could say that the immortal life of religion is an immortal death, not like the death to which Lucretius wearily succumbs, but like a death in which we cannot come to rest, because dying like this is living. And the death of religion is the life of the spirit that endures religion by going beyond it, and by going beyond it, the life of the spirit realizes the good and performs its eternal task over and above all religions.

From this point of view, religion is not the negation of the moral will, but actually, its apprentice. Religion is the school for the moral will, a school from which the spirit never graduates because it will never feel that its work is done.

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

[1](#) Translated from Giovanni Gentile, 'Il problema morale', in *Discorsi di religione*, fourth revised and expanded edition (Florence, Sansoni, 1957), pp. 76-107.

[2](#) Plato, *Symposium* 205e–207b; trans. Walter Hamilton (London, Penguin, 1951), p. 86.

[3](#) *Ibid.*, 207b, pp. 87–8.

[4](#) Luke 10:27 (King James version).

[5](#) [Editors' note: Don Abbondio is a character from Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, noted for being cowardly, lazy and reticent.]

[6](#) See my *Sommario di pedagogia*, vol. 1, part 1, ch. 15, §7.

[7](#) See Giovanni Gentile, *Discorsi di religione* (Florence, Sansoni, 1957), pp. 6–8

[8](#) Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans., ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31; 4:421 in standard pagination.

[9](#) Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno, canto XIV, lines 63–4; trans. C.H. Sisson (1998), *The Divine Comedy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 103–4.

[10](#) Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio, canto II, line 121; trans. C.H. Sisson, *The Divine Comedy*, p. 207.

[11](#) Giacomo Leopardi, 'Inno ai patriarchi, o de' principii del genere umano', in *The Poems of Leopardi*, ed. Geoffrey L. Bickersteth (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), line 15, p. 188.

[12](#) [Editors' note: the repetition in 'la bocca, la fiera bocca' (the mouth, the noble mouth) does not appear in the first edition (1920) of this essay. Gentile added this poetic flourish in the later, expanded version of the *Discorsi di religione*.]

[13](#) [Editors' note: This is an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, canto 33, lines 1–3, in which the narrator meets Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, who is condemned to gnaw on the head of Archbishop Ruggieri, his betrayer: 'He [Ugolino] raised his mouth from his ferocious meal,/That sinner, wiping it upon the hair/Of that head, the back of which he had spoiled.' See *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C.H. Sisson, p. 186.]



# Basic Concepts of Actualism

Giovanni Gentile<sup>[1]</sup>

*Collingwood and British Idealism Studies, 20:1–2 (2014), pp. 343–359*

**Abstract:** In this essay, Gentile offers an accessible overview of the tenets of his philosophy. Originally published in German in 1929 and later revised for inclusion in Gentile's *Introduzione alla filosofia* (Introduction to Philosophy), the essay also contains replies to some of the main objections levelled at the doctrine, such as that it was solipsistic, incompatible with Christianity and unable to make sense of sensory or empirical experience. Thus we see how Gentile used the years separating this essay and 'The Method of Immanence' to refine and strengthen his doctrine without ever compromising its central principles.

## 1. The Origin of Actualist Philosophy

Actualist philosophy is connected historically to German philosophy via Kant and Hegel, both directly and indirectly through its followers, expositors and critics of German thought in Italy during the last century. But it is also connected to the Italian philosophy of the Renaissance (Telesio, Bruno, Campanella); the great Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico; and those involved in resuscitating speculative Italian thought during the age of the national Risorgimento: Gallupi, Rosmini and Gioberti.

The last years of the nineteenth century saw the appearance of the first works outlining actualist philosophy.<sup>[2]</sup> In the first decades of this century it was developed in parallel with Benedetto Croce's 'philosophy of spirit.' I regularly contributed to the review *La Critica*, which Croce founded in 1903, and which for many years led a long, victorious campaign against the positivist, naturalist and rationalist tendencies of thought and culture in Italy. The fact that the

'philosophy of spirit' matured around a decade earlier, drawing universal attention to itself from the outset, meant that by the end, two philosophies had emerged, both far more refined than they had been at the start. But the differences between them naturally became clearer as the principles of the philosophies were used to explain their consequences. And today, again owing to certain contingencies that I won't go into here, the differences far outweigh the similarities and themes that the philosophies certainly have in common.

## **2. The Principle of Actualist Philosophy**

Actualist philosophy is so called because of the method that it propounds. This can be defined as the 'method of absolute immanence', and is profoundly different from the immanence talked about in other ancient, modern or even contemporary philosophies. All of those lack the concept of the irreducible subjectivity of reality, which renders the principle or measure of reality itself, immanent. Compared to the abstract idealism of Plato, Aristotle is an immanentist. In Aristotelian philosophy this idea becomes the form of nature itself: form is inseparably connected with matter, in the synthesis of the concrete individual and the idea—its principle or measure—cannot be separated from it except by abstraction. But for actualist philosophy, the natural individual is itself transcendent. This is so because, in practice, the individual is not conceivable outside the relationship in which the object of experience is indissolubly linked to the subject of experience. The two are linked through the act of thought by which experience is mediated and realized. Up until the arrival of Kantian criticism, realism was founded on this kind of transcendence. All philosophies, even though they reduce everything to experience, conceive of experience as objective and not as the act of the thinking Ego, insofar as it thinks, realizing its own reality. The ego is a reality outside of which it cannot think independently.

Actual idealism holds fast to the following anchor. The only solid reality that I must affirm—and to which any reality I might think must be tied—is this: only through the act of being thought can that which

thinks and is realized become a reality. Hence the immanence of all that which is thinkable in the act of thinking; or, *tout court*, in the act; since, given what we have said so far, nothing can be called 'actual' except the act of thought. Anything that one can think of as different from this act is concretely realized to the extent that it is immanent in the act itself.

### **3. The Act as Concrete *Logos***

The act referred to in this philosophy cannot therefore be confused with the act (Ἐνέργεια) referred to by Aristotle and Scholastic philosophy. The Aristotelian act is also a pure but transcendent thought, one that is presupposed by our thought. In actualist philosophy, the act coincides precisely with our thought; it regards the transcendent Aristotelian act as simply an abstraction, not an act: it is *logos*, but abstract *logos*, which is made concrete only in the concrete *logos*, which is the thought that one is currently thinking.

According to actualism, the Aristotelian act, the Platonic idea and any metaphysical or empirical reality that reasonably presupposes thought, belong to the abstract *logos*, which makes sense only in the actuality of the concrete *logos*. Even if this represents and is rightly represented as independent of its subject—as something in and for itself, as extraneous to both the conditions of thought and to thought itself—it is still a matter of an abstract *logos* whose outcomes are still the result of the originating activity of the ego, which in thought is realized as the concrete *logos*. Realism is, therefore, always right, but only so long as it does not claim to exhaust all the conditions of thinking. In fact there will always be things to add to the conditions of thought, in order to go beyond transcendence and reach the terra firma of effective reality. It is this that will form the fundamental condition of anything thinkable, thinking itself.

### **4. The Infinity of the Ego**

The thinking process must no longer be conceived materialistically as something realized in time and space, in order to shore up the

infinite burden and responsibility of any thinkable reality. This thinkable reality is thinkable only in so far as it is immanent in the spiritual world that is realized by thinking itself. Everything is within me insofar as I have time and space within me as the measure of all that is represented in experience. Far from being contained in space and time, I contain them. It is commonplace to hold on to the mistaken idea that I am contained within nature, the system by which everything is ordered in space and time. Far from it, in fact, I, myself, am composed of nature. Inside me it ceases to be the type of nature that is spatial or temporal, a mechanical nature, instead it is rendered spiritual, realized in the concrete life of thought.

### **5. The Liberty of the Ego**

The Ego is free because of its infinity, in which everything is immanent; and, being free, it can want, know and choose among the mutually opposed contradictions that polarize the world of the spirit, which has value because it contrasts with its opposite. Liberty is not related to nature in its abstractness, but neither is it related to any form of abstract *logos*, logical truth, truth of fact, or to the law that presses on the will with the restrictive demands of a natural force. In short, it has nothing to do with a system of thought that would have the subject compared with the thought object, thereby defining it and foreclosing it in certain terms, fixing it and depriving it of the life that is proper to actual spiritual reality. If a man is considered to be a part of nature, and is portrayed as such—as a being that occupies a certain space for a certain time, that is born and will die, and that is limited in every sense, enclosed in his own society by elements that act on him and are not under his control—he is not free. But as long as he moves within this order of ideas, highlighting his own limits, and reducing and exhausting his options, he begins to suspect that proper liberty is nothing but an illusion. He becomes powerless to take control of or even to familiarize himself with the world. Then, at the height of his desperation, he will be compelled to rediscover in the deepest parts of himself the liberty that he had hitherto ignored, reaffirming it and finding that without it, he could not possibly think to

the extent that he thinks. *Hoc unum scio, me nihil scire* (to know only one thing is to know nothing). But, so long as it is limited, this knowledge enables us to know the truth. And that truth is truth to the extent that it is distinguished from what is false, and should be conceived and apperceived in terms of this distinction, which is based on opposition. That would not be possible without liberty, which is the infinity of whoever conceives and apperceives, whoever judges what is true, pronouncing their judgement with such supreme authority that it cannot be appealed against. Clearly no one closed within fixed limits could hold such authority.

## 6. Profound Humanity

Thus inside every empirical human being is a profound humanity that lies deep within him, as well as within any being that can be distinguished from himself. It is because of this humanity that he is therefore conscious of himself. This humanity thinks, speaks and yearns, and by thinking it thinks itself and all the rest into being. And bit by bit it forms a world which is increasingly enriched by actions [*determinazioni*], and strives more and more to conceive of that world as part of a harmonious whole, like an organism whose parts correspond and are bound by an internal unity. But the subject himself is always present in this world, and if he represents it and manages to contract it to fit his needs, desires and even his very nature, he has before him not only the world but also his own self, in a reciprocal relationship. He brings the two together as an untiring and diligent creator and custodian, actor and spectator.

It is not that this humanity underpins the individual in its singularity. Instead does it not bring individuals together in thought, or more specifically, in feeling and thinking, in writing poetry and performing actions? Does this humanity not gather individuals through culture which is the life of the spirit, binding multiple generations and races within a single man; within a man who knows nothing of obstacles except to overcome them, nor of mysteries except to solve them, nor of wrongs except to right them, nor of slavery except to free himself from it, nor of misery except to relieve it, nor pain except to soothe

it? This profound sense of humanity is something that we are not aware of at first, either in ourselves or in others, but it is also that which makes it possible to seek out, speak to and extend a hand to others. This is why, when a truth becomes clear in the mind, and we are seized by a feeling that excites and inspires us, our tongue, in the words of the Italian poet, moves as though of its own accord.<sup>[3]</sup> We are powerless to do anything but speak and let our soul swell, speak and sing, even if no one really hears us. It is as if there were an invisible crowd—of the living, dead, yet-to-be-born—surrounding us, listening to us. It is like an anonymous crowd of judges who, though faceless, think and feel as we do; who, properly speaking, are within us, or rather, more properly still, *are* us. They listen to us because we hear ourselves speaking.

## 7. The Actuality of the Ego

As it speaks and reveals itself—going beyond itself—this humanity is concretized and distorted, and ceases to be what it is in and of itself. It is therefore neither a *Deus absconditus* (hidden or unknowable God) nor a secret and inaccessible Ego. This humanity exists only to the extent that it is realized, and it reveals itself through its realization. And therefore actual thought is everything; and outside actual thought the Ego itself is an abstraction, relegated to the great paraphernalia of metaphysical excogitations, which are purely rational and non-existent entities. The Ego is neither soul-substance nor a thing (the most noble of things). It is everything because it is not anything. If it has to be something, it is a determined spirit, a spirit that realizes itself in its own world as a poem, an action, a word, a system of thought. But this world is real to the extent that as the poem is being composed, the action is taking place, the word is uttered and the thought arises and becomes part of a system. The poem was not there in the world, and nor will it be there. It only exists, either, through the action of being composed, or through the action of being read, when it is recomposed. When put down, it falls into nothingness. Its reality is a present that never fades into the past, and does not fear the future. It is eternal, belonging to that

absolute immanence of the spiritual act in which there are no successive moments of time that are not presented together simultaneously.

## 8. The Method of Actualism: The Dialectic

All of this means that the actuality of the spirit, which is eternal (having neither past nor future) is not conceivable by means of the logic and identity characteristic of the old metaphysic of substance. Rather it is conceivable only by means of the dialectic, that is to say, of course, the dialectic according to modern philosophy. The idea of this dialectic is founded on the concept not of being as the object of thought, but of the subjectivity of thought. It is not, strictly speaking, a concept, *Begriff*, but a self-concept, *Selbstbegriff*. If thought as act is the principle of actualism, then its method is dialectical. This is neither the Platonic nor the Hegelian dialectic, but a new and more properly dialectical form which revises Hegel's method. It contrasts with both Plato's dialectic—which was based on static ideas already thought (or at least [thought] as the object of thought)—and Hegel's, who in the *Science of Logic*, considered the dialectic to be the movement of ideas being thought about, or categories by which thought thinks its object.

So we have a dialectic of completed thoughts and another of thinking. It was Fichte who began to set out the problems of the dialectic of thinking, but Hegel who first tackled it, fully aware of the need for a new logic to pit against Aristotelian analytic, and therefore Platonic logic and ancient philosophy in its entirety. Hegel proposed the problem without ever resolving it, because, having begun with the first categories (being, non-being, becoming), he let the absolute subjectivity of thinking elude him, and treated his logic as the movement of ideas that one thinks and must therefore define. This is a ridiculous trajectory because it presupposes that just by thinking ideas we therefore define them, containing them within a closed circuit, rendering them static. This is the reason that all Platonic ideas are interconnected. They compel subjective thought; when thinking of one idea, one thinks of all the others too. And, like

gymnasts running around a gymnasium, thought moves restlessly from one idea to the next, while the ideas themselves remain static.

Ideas stand still, but they are abstract logoi, which need to be led back to real, actual thought. Actual thought exists insofar as it does not exist; it is always in motion, never static. It is certainly defined and reflected in the defined object, but it can only ever be satisfactorily realized through its incessant requirement for redefinition in ever more fitting ways. Thought is dialectical because of its sense of becoming which is not a unity of thought made up of being and non-being—in which the opposing concepts of being and non-being are somehow related. Rather, it is the realization of the wholeness of thought's own being with its real non-being. We can define the concept of this unity; but our definition is neither a mental representation nor a logical duplicate of a reality that transcends the logical act. It is one and the same thing, embroiled in the very act.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **9. The Religious Character of the Dialectical Conception**

The dialectic of thought holds the answer to the thousand sceptical doubts and anxious questions that arise from the experiences and polarities of life: the polarity between man and nature, life and death, reality and the ideal, happiness and sadness, science and mystery, good and evil, and so on. Herein lie all these ancient problems that tormented both the religious conscience and the moral life of all men; concerns about theodicy lay at the crux of philosophy. The actualist conception is spiritual and profoundly religious, even though its religiosity will prove unsatisfactory to those who are used either to conceiving of the divine as something transcendent or to confusing the act of thought with the simple fact of experience. Now, a coherent religious conception of the world must be optimistic without negating pain and evil and error; it must be idealistic without suppressing reality and all its defects; it must be spiritual without turning a blind eye to nature and the cast iron laws of its mechanism. But despite their best idealist and spiritual efforts, all philosophy and all religion—if limited by the logic of identity which holds that opposites are mutually exclusive, wherein being is not non-being,



and vice-versa—is destined to fail. It lapses into an absurd dualism and ends up closed in on itself in an abstract and, therefore, unsatisfying and absurd monism.

The antinomies of moral life and the religious conscience, of the world and man, are insoluble using the logic of identity. There is no faith in human liberty or human reason, or in the power of the ideal or in God's grace. The latter can save man and sustain him throughout his life, in thought, which is the process of inquiry, doubt, and perpetual interrogation to which life is a response. Are we or are we not immortal? Is there a truth for us? Is there really a place for virtue in the world? Is there a God who governs everything? And is this life worth the effort it takes to live it? These questions arise again and again from the depths of the human heart. That is why men think and why they need philosophy. It comforts them and enables them to live with some kind of answer. Any living being grasps on to an answer if he can. But a logical, firm, reasonable answer is not possible unless thought draws away from objects which are sometimes construed as binding the world in iron chains in a kind of system. Thought must, rather, turn in on itself for it is here that all reality has its roots and here from which its life is drawn. It is not that being is already there, but that it comes into being, rather than being from the outset and in itself; where knowing something is to comprehend it, and each time one comprehends it, even if one knows it already, one learns it all over again. Its value lies not in what has been done and already exists, but what has yet to be done and which one is therefore in the process of doing. Joy is not something that one has already enjoyed, but something that spills into its opposite, and which does not descend into the monotony of boredom, stagnating and inducing death, but is renewed and revanquished with new effort and further suffering. In other words, the spirit burns eternally, and as it burns, its sparks and blaze destroy anything dead and inert. Here to speak of being is to speak of non-being; knowledge is ignorance, good is evil, joy is suffering, achievement is effort, peace is war, and spirit is nature conceptualized.

## 10. The Body and the Unity of Nature

Before we schematize nature in relation to space and time and analyse it in all its forms through experience and intellectual interpretation, nature—real, primordial nature, the eternal mother to which Bruno referred—is that profound nature that we encounter in our body and by means of our body. It does not consist of a set of abstractions that split apart as we think of them, thereby diminishing, pulverizing and rendering thought impenetrable as the abstract logos would have it. Rather, nature consists of the unmultipliable unity that is the inexhaustible and infinite source of any composite reality that unfolds in space and time.

It is, first and foremost, the body that we all perceive in our self-consciousness, as the primary and irreducible object of our own consciousness. It is the body through which we sense and come to embrace in our consciousness both the attributes of external things and every detail that we must identify in the whole physical universe. We feel all of this because of its relation to our body, which is the immediate and direct object of our senses. However it is only in its entirety that it can enter into this relation since, in the physical world, nothing can be thought that does not connect with the rest of that same physical world. So clearly our head would fall to the ground if it were not supported by the torso, and that by the legs; but it is also clear that if we were to remove a single grain of sand from the ocean floor, not only would the adjacent grains, which it had supported, come tumbling down, but in truth the universe would be ruined. We live on our planet but our planet is also part of a system, without which we would not have the light and warmth that allow us to live on this earth. Everything that is sustained by the universe is the centre of an infinite circumference, including our body, through which we effectively sense the universe. The body is a living element of a living organism, which is present, and which affects and is made manifest through each of its elements. When the body is considered to be the only part of physical reality contained within our skin, it becomes an abstraction. It is analogous to the way in which we can look at our hand, staring at it so intently that we abstract it

completely from the arm to which it is necessarily attached, and without which it would lack not only strength but also material unity.

## **11. The Spirituality of Nature**

It follows that to speak of 'body' is to speak of the entire corporeal universe, in which one is born and dies, and in which all individual, particular living things rise and fall. But what is this body? Where and how do we gain sense of it and come to know it? As I have said, it comes about when we first start to feel, when we do not yet feel anything in particular, but we feel because we have a sense of ourselves. We are that sense of ourselves, which is the very same thing that subsequently develops into an ever-greater awareness of ourselves (self-consciousness). Here, in the very first seed of our spiritual life, there is already a sentient principle and something that is sensed (it is in fact the body that is sensed). There is a synthesis of these two terms, each of which exists for the other. Together they realize the act of sensing; without this synthesis it would not be possible to seek the sentient principle as though it were actually felt.

## **12. Experience as the Measure of the Real**

Thought regards immediate experience as the measure of reality's own existence, rather than as an abstraction constructed by thought. This is due to both the originary immanence [*originaria immanenza*] of the body's essence, at the basic core of the spirit, and also to the originating and fundamental spirituality and ideality of the body and of nature more generally.

The measure of thought cannot be outside it, in a fantastic external reality to which it is connected via sensible experience. The measure of thought is within thought itself. But thought, as subject or self-consciousness, is above all its own sense of self; it is the soul of a body, which is to say, of the body of nature itself. And anything that is not tied to this principle of thought, and is therefore not realized via this principle, is like a building constructed without the necessary foundations, and as such bound to collapse.

Thought is always a circle whose outline cannot move away from its starting point without returning to it, closing in on itself. Where the end does not match with the beginning, my thought is not my thought. I get lost. And there is no value in that. It is not truth. The Ego that thinks and realizes itself in thought occurs when the point of the circle of thought closes and is fused. Thus, the very thought that the Ego produces (the concept) is the concrete and effective existence of the Ego itself (self-concept). The personality of each man therefore lies in his actions.

### **13. The Actuality of History as Consciousness of Self**

When regarded not from the outside and in the abstract, both nature and history flow entirely into the actuality of *pensiero pensante*. History, too, is a self-concept. History is not man's awareness of the operations of the spirit separated from that which he actuates in his historical consciousness. History is neither man's awareness of his actions nor his awareness of the past. After all, man's actions no longer exist and the past is mere ideality in order that thought can discern the present that does exist. In fact the present is the only real thing. It is all that matters and is eternal, in contrast with a past that does not exist and does not matter and is therefore not present. As a result it is expelled from the eternal world (and for the spirit the eternal world is everything). Like any thought, history is self-consciousness. And for that reason it has been said that all history is contemporary history, since it reflects, through the representation of past events and passions, the problems, interests and mentality of the historian and his lifetime.

The so-called remnants and documents of the past are elements of culture, and thus the intellectual life of the present. They are brought to life through the interest of those who seek them out, critiquing and interpreting them. These remnants are made to speak to us and be relevant through the work of historiographers. This is an actual thought that is only intelligible if it acquires an ever more discerning and cautious consciousness of itself. The dead would be entirely dead and truly erased from the realm of reality, which is a divine

reality, were it not for the living, who, by speaking of the dead, commemorate them in their hearts, and breathe life into their own spirits.

#### **14. Criticism of Solipsism: The Limit of the Ego and the Negation of that Limit**

Is this solipsism? No. The solipsist's Ego is a particular and negative Ego; it senses its own isolation and the impossibility of escaping it. So the solipsist is an egoist, denying the good just as he denies the truth. But his Ego is negative because it is identical to itself; and that makes it a thing, not a spirit. Its negativity is the negativity of the atom, which is always just that, and is unable to change in any way whatsoever. It can completely exclude other atoms from itself and, in return, be reciprocally excluded from them precisely because it does not have the power to negate itself and change. But the dialectic of the Ego, as actualism conceives it, is the principle of the infinite progressive universalization of the Ego itself, which is infinite in that sense and excludes nothing from itself. Any limit can be overcome by this deep-rooted energy, which is the very essence of *pensiero pensante*. That energy negates and overcomes the limit because the limit is what the Ego imposes on itself in the course of its self-determination. In order to begin with its sense of self, the Ego divides itself into two elements, as both subject and object of feeling. As a subject, then, it comes up against and is thereby limited by itself as an object. The Ego manifests its infinite energy as it endlessly posits and negates its own limit.

This negation is not annihilation. In order to negate the limit in the way I mean here, the limit must be preserved, but in such a way that it is internalized in the consciousness of the infinity of the subject. To love thy neighbour, Christian-style, entails negating others as an external limit of our personality. It does not follow, however, that it thereby eliminates other people's personalities, rather, it conceives of our own character in a more complex way, as though we could understand and feel the personalities of others. This is the meaning

of the immanent conversion of the abstract *logos* into the concrete *logos*, which is discussed in the actualist *Logica*.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 15. Actualism and Christianity

To finish: is this philosophy, which is so radically immanentistic, an atheistic philosophy? Today this is the accusation most insistently directed against it by Catholic and traditionalist thinkers who never manage to come to terms with the distinction contained within the unity of the spiritual act. They are the true atheists in philosophy, for if they were really to conceive of that absurd separation between the divine being and humanity, any relationship between the two would become completely impossible. And I firmly believe that the attitude that these thinkers adopt is atheistic because it is anti-Christian. In fact, I am convinced that Christianity, with its central dogma of the Man-God, has the following speculative significance: at the root of the necessary distinction between God and man there must be a unity, and this unity can only be spiritual. This is human spirit to the extent that it is divine spirit, and divine spirit to the extent that it is also human spirit. He who fears and hesitates to accept in his heart man's infinite responsibility and struggles even more to recognize and sense God in himself, is not a Christian, and—if there can be no Christianity without a revelation, wherein man arrives at a clearer awareness of his own spiritual nature—he is not a man, either. Or at least he is a man unaware of his own humanity.

How can he feel free and therefore able to identify and fulfil a duty, or understand a truth and thereby enter the kingdom of the spirit, if, in the depths of his own being, he does not have a sense of the convergence and driving force of history, the universe, the infinite and everything? Given the limited powers with which he is endowed at any given moment of his existence, would he be able to face the problem of life and death, and the devastating power accorded by the laws of nature which seem so cruel? Yet if he must live a spiritual life, he needs to prevail over these laws. In the worlds of both art and morality, he must, through action and thought, take part in the life of immortal things that are divine and eternal. And he takes part in

them freely and of his own accord, since the spontaneous capacity of the spirit can have no help from the outside, save that which is willed and appraised and therefore freely sought out and found to be of value. Hence nothing that comes to us from the outside benefits the health of the soul, the vigour of the intelligence and the power of the will.

So the actualist does not deny God, but joins with the mystics and the most religious spirits that have ever been in the world in repeating: *Est Deus in nobis* (God is within us).

*Translated by Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield*

[1](#) Translated from Giovanni Gentile, 'Concetti fondamentali dell'attualismo', in *Introduzione alla filosofia*, first edition (Milan, Treves, 1933), pp. 20–37. The essay was first published in German in April 1931, then in Italian in *Nuova Antologia*, 1 August 1931.

[2](#) I am referring chiefly to my historical monograph *Rosmini e Gioberti*, written in 1897 and published in Pisa in 1898. See also my *Saggi critici*, second series (Florence, Vallecchi, 1927), pp. 11–36. [Editors' note: a full reference for the first volume is Giovanni Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti* (Pisa, Tipografia successori fratelli Nistri, 1898)].

[3](#) [Editors' note: Gentile here alludes to Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, chapter XIX, stanza 2: 'Allora dico che la mia lingua parlò quasi come per se stessa mossa, e disse: Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore.' (Then I say that my tongue spoke as if it moved by itself, and said: 'Ladies who have knowledge of love'.) See English trans. A.S. Kline (2001), available online at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/TheNewLifeII.htm>.]

[4](#) See two of my essays in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, second edition (Messina, Principato, 1923), pp. 1–74 and pp. 209–40.

[5](#) [Editors' note: Gentile here alludes to the two volumes of his *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere* (Bari, Laterza, 1917/1923).]

## Notes on Contributors

**Daniela Coli** is a researcher at the department of Letters and Philosophy at the Università degli Studi di Firenze. She is the author of *Giovanni Gentile: la filosofia come educazione nazionale* (2004), editor of *Giovanni Gentile: filosofo e pedagogo* (2007) and has published widely in Italian journals of philosophy, political theory and intellectual history.

**James Connelly** is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Hull. He is the author of *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (2003), *R.G. Collingwood: A Research Companion* (with P. Johnson and S. Leach) (2014), and many other articles on Collingwood. He also has an interest in environmental politics and philosophy: his co-authored *Politics and the Environment: From Theory to Practice* is now in its third edition (2012).

**Bruce Haddock** is Professor of Modern European Social and Political Thought at Cardiff University. His principal publications include *A History of Political Thought: From Antiquity to the Present* (2008), *A History of Political Thought: 1789 to the Present* (2005), *Vico's Political Thought* (1986) and *An Introduction to Historical Thought* (1980). He is also joint editor of Vincenzo Cuoco's *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799* (2014), *Evil in Contemporary Political Theory* (2011), *Principles and Political Order: The Challenge of Diversity* (2006), *Multiculturalism, Identity and Rights* (2003), and *The Politics of Italian Identity* (2000).

**Lizzie Lloyd** is an art writer and doctoral researcher at the University of Bristol, working on Subjectivity and Writing Art Histories. She has also translated work on Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf.

**Antonio Giovanni Pesce** is a researcher at the department of Humanistic Sciences at the Università di Catania. His main research interests are in moral philosophy and metaphysics. He has worked on Vico, Pascal and Croce, and was awarded his doctorate in 2011



with a thesis on Giovanni Gentile. He is the author of *L'interiorità intersoggettiva dell'attualismo: il personalismo di Giovanni Gentile* (2012).

**Rik Peters** is Associate Professor in the department of History at the University of Groningen. He is the author of *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (2013) and many articles on both the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy. His main interest is in the relationship between (historical) thought and practice, which is also the theme of his Master's course, 'Learning Histories and Organizations', and of his contributions to the research project 'Contested Constitutions', funded by NWO (Dutch Organization for Scientific Research).

**Andrew Vincent**, FRHistS, FLSW is Professor Emeritus of Political Philosophy at Sheffield University; Professorial Fellow of the Collingwood and British Idealism Centre at Cardiff University; and author or co-author of over ten books including *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices* (2012) (co-edited with Michael Freeden), *British Idealism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2011) (co-authored with David Boucher) and *The Politics of Human Rights* (2010).

**James Wakefield** is an Honorary Research Fellow of Cardiff University, where he completed his PhD in 2013. He is the author of *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism: A Study of Actual Idealist Moral Theory* (2015) and has interests in contemporary meta-ethics and the philosophy of education.

**Also available**

# Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism

A STUDY OF ACTUAL IDEALIST MORAL THEORY

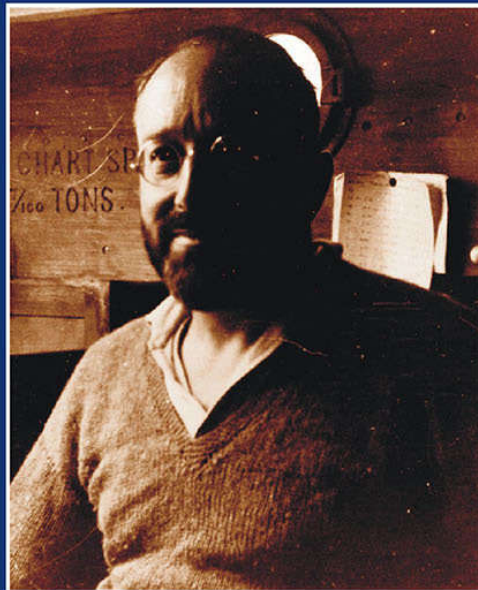


JAMES WAKEFIELD

# History as Thought and Action

*The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile,  
de Ruggiero and Collingwood*

Rik Peters

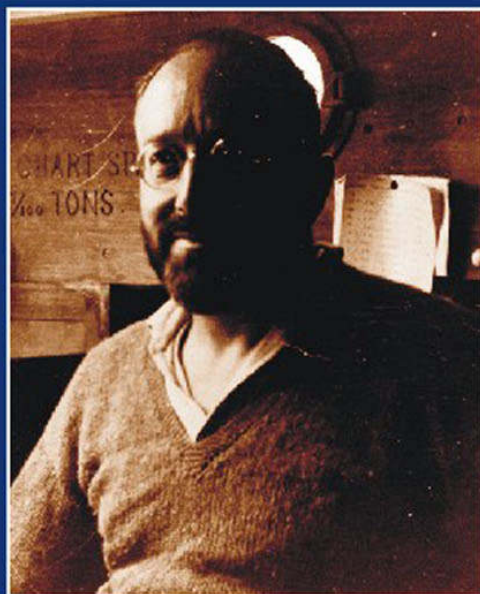


British Idealist Studies  
Series 2 (Collingwood), Volume 6

# Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation

*Art, Metaphysics and Dialectic*

Richard Murphy



British Idealist Studies  
Series 2 (Collingwood), Volume 4

[Front matter](#)

[Title page](#)

[Publisher information](#)

[Body matter](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Gentile as Historian of Philosophy: The Method of Immanence in](#)

[Practice](#)

[The Integral Philosophical Experience of Actualism](#)

[Giovanni Gentile as Moral Philosopher](#)

[Gentile, Education and Mind](#)

[Gentile and Modernity](#)

[The Actuality of Gentile's Philosophy of History](#)

[Collingwood, Gentile and Italian Neo-Idealism in Britain](#)

[The Method of Immanence](#)

[Pure Experience and Historical Reality](#)

[The Moral Problem](#)

[Basic Concepts of Actualism](#)

[Back matter](#)

[Notes on Contributors](#)

[Also available](#)