THOUGHT THINKING

THE PHILOSOPHY OF GIOVANNI GENTILE

Edited by Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield

Contents

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Introduction

Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield

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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.[1] 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.[2] Gentile was also a translator, editor

[1] This connection has been made before. See Cleto Carbonara, 'Ciò che è vivo e ciò che e 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.

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;[3] 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;[4] 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.[5] 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

[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, Pierro, 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.

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.[6]

To make matters worse, the relevant secondary literature in English is scarce, mostly antiquated and only intermittently

[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 unction 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.

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.[7] 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

[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.

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.[8]

3.

Gentile was born in the small town of Castelvetrano, 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.[9] Gentile was an intellectually precocious

[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.

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.[10]

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

[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

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.[11] 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

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

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.[12] 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).[13]

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

[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.

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.[14]

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

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

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.[15]

[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[1]

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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'.[2] A rich literature has

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[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.

dealt with this problem in significant detail.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

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[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).

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'.[6] His target is any account that sets ideas against a world they are supposed to represent. In

[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.

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.[7] 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.[8] Thus, Plato's transcendent idealism 'leaves matter, and therefore the becoming of nature, outside the idea'.[9] 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'.[10] With the

[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.

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.'[11]

Gentile draws this radical constructivist insight from Vico's *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* of 1710.[12] 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'.[13] 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.[14] The lesson that Gentile derives from Vico is a confirmation of his notion that truth as a fixed and

[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.

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.[15]

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.[16]

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

[15] Ibid., p. 17.

[16] Ibid., pp. 254–5.

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'.[17] 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.[18]

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

[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.

Philosophy in its Relations with European Philosophy).[19] 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.[20]

[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.

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?'[21] 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.[22] 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

[21] Ibid., p. 445.

[22] See ibid., pp. 420, 446–7.

powers of our life develop themselves freely.'[23] 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.[24]

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'.[25] 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.[26] 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

[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.

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.[27] 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 isa transcendental conception. Rosmini does not actually state this, but it is implied in all his reasoning.[28]

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

[27] See Giovanni Gentile, Rosmini e Gioberti, pp. 54–67.

[28] Guido de Ruggiero, Modern Philosophy, pp. 306–7.

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'.[29] 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*.[30] 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

[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.).

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.'[31] 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

[31] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London, Macmillan, 1933), p. 41.

purposes, I focus on his work on Giambattista Vico, a major influence on all the Italian idealists.[32]

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).[33] And while it is clear that Gentile's interpretation of Vico

[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.

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.[34]

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

Unlike most of Vico's commentators, Gentile distinguishes three phases in the development of his theory of knowledge.[35] 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.[36] 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.[37]

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

[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.