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**ACTUALISM AND ITS AUTHOR**  
**PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE OF GENTILE STUDIES**

*1. The resurgence of Gentile studies in Italy and elsewhere*

It has been some twenty years since Gabriele Turi called time on the old ‘Gentile problem’ - the problem, that is, of how to engage with Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher for so long ‘frozen’ in position, at least in the popular imagination, as ‘the philosopher of Fascism’. Turi made the case for ‘a return to a strictly philosophical Gentile’, without the ‘reductive’ assumptions and interpretive restrictions that had led previous generations of readers to think of him as a Fascist first and a philosopher only second.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, Gentile’s reputation has gradually but unmistakably thawed. Scholarly debate on his work is today in a healthier state than at any time since his death. The old Gentile problem has not been solved, but the air has now cleared sufficiently for commentators to have a serious debate about his ideas without having to take sides in the controversies over the rights and wrongs of the Mussolini regime. Gentile’s political career remains the focus of considerable academic interest, of course, but it now represents just one part of a larger debate about actualism and its author. For all that he remains, in Sergio Romano’s words, ‘an awkward philosopher’, he is widely recognised, alongside Benedetto Croce, as one of the premier Italian thinkers of the twentieth century, having made substantial contributions not only to political theory but also to aesthetics, ethics, theories of the self, pedagogical theory and, on a broader front, to Italian culture.<sup>2</sup>

Gentile’s late restoration to the upper ranks of twentieth-century philosophers presents us, his twenty-first-century interpreters, with a new problem. What does actualism still have to offer? Or, supposing we can view

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<sup>1</sup> G. Turi, *Giovanni Gentile: Oblivion, Remembrance, and Criticism*, trans. Lydia P. Cochrane, “Journal of Modern History”, 70 (4) 1998, pp. 913–33; pp. 915–16.

<sup>2</sup> I take the phrase ‘awkward philosopher’ from the title of Sergio Romano’s paper, *Un filosofo scomodo per tutti*, in *Stato etico e manganello. Giovanni Gentile a sessant’anni dalla morte*, ed. Roberto Chiarini, Marsilio, Venice, 2004.

Gentile outside his peculiarly troubled historical context, what does he still have to say to us? My aim in what follows is to offer a survey of some of the major themes that have emerged in the recent literature on Gentile and the enduring value of his work. In doing so I will offer some reasons why his partial rehabilitation in Italy has not been met by a corresponding revival of interest among English-speaking philosophers. Finally, I will argue that for actualism to be subjected to the acid of analytic philosophy would constitute a valuable addition to the existing literature on Gentile and to Anglo-American philosophy more broadly.

## 2. *The 'Gentile problem' in the English-speaking world*

Gentile's ideas have rarely been well received in the English-speaking world. While he had sympathetic readers in the 1920s and 1930s, interest in idealist thought was waning in Britain and America by the time he reached the peak of his fame in Italy. Soon after he became firmly established as the Fascists' go-to philosopher, Gentile's reputation was largely eclipsed by that of the Party. Even when he personally had little influence on policy, he and his ideas were cast in worse light each time the government changed its policies to align itself, little by little, with its belligerent ally in Germany.

Even after the Second World War was over and Gentile was dead, the fact of his long, unapologetic adherence to the Fascist regime was enough to keep many philosophers from engaging seriously with his ideas. Since Fascism was assumed to be an ideology 'empty of ideas and honest motives... brutal, opportunistic and unintelligent',<sup>3</sup> intellectuals adhering to it could not possibly be anything but 'liars, frauds and mountebanks'.<sup>4</sup> Gentile was widely supposed to have surrendered his intellectual credibility when he came out in support of Mussolini; not only were his works published *after* that point to be viewed with suspicion, but so too were those *already* published, standing as exhibits of a career led disastrously astray by the promises of a misconceived Hegelianism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> G. Allardyce, *What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept*, "The American Historical Review", 84 (2), 1979, pp. 367–388; p. 368.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Gregor uses this phrase to characterise latter-day interpreters' view of Fascist intellectuals. See Gregor's 'Introduction' to G. Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Society, with Selections from Other Works*, Transaction, New Brunswick, New York, 2002, p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Among the scholars to dismiss Gentile's philosophy as a selective reinterpretation of Hegel's are H. Marcuse, in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1955; and G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Thought*,

Those few post-War English-speaking commentators who did take Gentile's ideas seriously tended to present them explicitly in relation to debates over the intellectual substance of Fascism, often in order to counter the prevailing opinion that the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* was crudely anti-intellectual. The works of A. James Gregor have been exemplary in this respect.<sup>6</sup> Those who tried to engage with Gentile as a philosopher, as H. S. Harris did when he wrote his 'essay in salvage', *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, did little to attract the attention of their peers in philosophy departments, despite the undoubted value of their works for intellectual and political historians.<sup>7</sup> Gentile ended up in the unenviable position of a philosopher frequently *recognised* as a major figure in the history of ideas, his theories better known from others' exegeses than from being read in the original, and then almost never by philosophers prepared to do anything with them.

The revival of Gentile studies in Italy during the 1990s had a minor parallel in the Anglophone world. This was due in part to the works of specialists in British idealism determined to measure the influence of the Italian idealists on R. G. Collingwood;<sup>8</sup> and to those interested in the

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third edition, George G. Harrap, London, 1961. As late as 1997, Harry Redner set out with the express aim 'to spare others, especially the young, all the painful effort [he] expended trying to profound sense of the temptingly fascinating works of [Gentile]', in the reading of which he 'wasted many of what should have been [his] best years'. See H. Redner, *Malign Masters: Gentile, Heidegger, Lukács, Wittgenstein*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1997, p. xi.

<sup>6</sup> As well as his translation of Gentile's *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, cited above, A. J. Gregor's major works on Gentile include *The Ideology of Fascism*, The Free Press, Toronto, 1969; *Giovanni Gentile: Philosopher of Fascism*, Transaction, London, 2002; and *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> For example, H. S. Harris, still the most widely acclaimed of the (very few) English-speaking commentators on Gentile, wrote in the 1990s that 'for more than thirty years I... lived with the conviction that my own book on Gentile [viz. *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1960] "fell dead-born from the press".' The book was thoroughly researched and judiciously presented, but Harris's peers struggled to see the value in an examination of so thoroughly discredited a social philosopher as Gentile. See Harris, *L'etica del sapere*, "Clio" 27 (4), 1998, p. 615; and reviews of *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* by D. Germino, "The Journal of Politics", 23 (3), 1961, pp. 584–587; and R. Gross, "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", 336, pp. 222–223.

<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Collingwood's thought and Gentile's is complicated, not least because the liberal Collingwood tried to downplay his debt to Gentile after the nature of Fascism became apparent. For more on this, see J. Connelly, *Thou Art the Man: Croce, Gentile or de Ruggiero?* in *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary*

philosophy of history, themselves often attentive readers of Collingwood, Croce and de Ruggiero.<sup>9</sup> But since the philosophy of history is typically practised in university history departments rather than philosophy departments, by historians rather than philosophers, actualism remained, and to a large extent still remains, closely bound to the historical Gentile and the controversies of his times. Few analytic philosophers read Gentile, or if they do, they let their opinions of him go unpublished. Today in the Anglophone world he is read largely for his connections to other philosophers, as an ally and later rival of Croce, an influence on Collingwood, and a dubious descendant of Hegel.

### *3. Gentile's political life and afterlife in Italy*

It should come as no surprise that the effects of the big thaw which Turi anticipated have been most marked in Italy. There the story of the revival of Gentile studies is rather more complex.

In his lifetime, Gentile had a substantial impact on Italian public life, first and most concretely through his educational reforms in the early 1920s, later through his articulation of a specific vision of the Italian state, which partly informed the official Party doctrine, and finally through his contributions to such institutions as the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. In his published works he developed the idea of an Italian intellectual tradition distinct from its French or German counterparts. In the twenty months he spent as Mussolini's education minister, he exercised an extraordinary degree of freedom in reforming the Italian education system. It has been widely remarked that his autonomy in this role was due, in large part, to the fact that the Fascists had not yet worked out a policy programme, so they had no

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*Perspectives on R. G. Collingwood*, ed. D. Boucher, J. Connelly and T. Modood, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1995, pp. 92–114; J. Wakefield, *Talking their Way Out of Relativism: Collingwood and Gentile on the Nature of Inquiry*, "Collingwood and British Idealism Studies", 19 (2), 2013, pp. 139–168; and J. Connelly, *Collingwood, Gentile and Italian Neo-Idealism in Britain*, in *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, ed. B. Haddock and J. Wakefield, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2015, pp. 205–234.

<sup>9</sup> Among the philosophy of history specialists interested in Gentile are Claudio Fogu, David D. Roberts and Rik Peters, all of whom have recognised the value and originality of Gentile's ideas within their own sub-discipline. See e.g. C. Fogu, *Actualism and the Fascist Historic Imaginary*, "History and Theory", 42 (2), 2003, pp. 196–221; and *Fascism and Philosophy: the Case of Actualism*, "South Central Review", 23 (1), 2006, pp. 4–22; D. D. Roberts, *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007; and R. Peters, *History as Thought and Action: the Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2013.

grounds on which to oppose him. Whatever accidents of circumstance gave him such free rein, Gentile's brief ministerial career, before he was 'kicked upstairs' to a ceremonial position in the Ministry of Culture, made him a rare example of a *bona fide* philosopher king, with both political power and a clear idea of what he wanted to do with it.<sup>10</sup>

All of this made Gentile's posthumous reputation more precarious in his native country than elsewhere. He could not be treated as he was in Britain: largely ignored, occasionally ridiculed and from time to time trotted out as an example of one led astray by the sinister appeal of Fascist ideology. To Italian readers he represented something rather more substantial, having left a real mark on culture and, more tangibly still, on those who had read and absorbed his ideas before the War and sought to realise his principles of thought and action in new ways now that the old regime was gone. Italian commentators have long asked themselves whether the time has come for a fair and thorough reappraisal of Gentile's work, distinguished by an appropriate air of 'serenity' in which scholars can take 'the right interpretive attitude, free from prejudice'.<sup>11</sup> The question of whether the right moment has yet arrived to make that assessment – a question which each author typically claims, at the moment of publishing his or her latest book, to be at last able to answer in the affirmative – has become, in a strange way, one of the most recurrent themes of the long post-War conversation about Gentile's legacy. But in general, the deep controversy surrounding his name has led his interpreters to be extraordinarily *careful* when dealing with him. Much has been written about his place in the history of ideas, his relationships with other canonical thinkers (especially Croce), and his intellectual development.

A central motif of the literature since the late 1990s has been the idea of Gentile as a 'philosopher of the nation' (*filosofo della Nazione*). He is pictured as a thinker of enduring relevance for Italy, having laid out a powerful theoretical case for the need for institutions to play an active role in defining all the elements of identity, including culture, language and history.

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<sup>10</sup> I take the phrase 'kicked upstairs' from H. Redner, *Malign Masters*, p. 6. More detailed accounts of Gentile's ministerial career can be found in M. Di Lalla's *Vita di Giovanni Gentile*, Sansoni, Florence, 1975; and G. Turi, *Giovanni Gentile. Una biografia*, Giunti, Milan, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> I take the word 'serenity' from A. Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile. Per una interpretazione filosofica della storia contemporanea*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990, p. 16. The other phrase comes from P. Pellegrino's introduction to A. Signorini, *Giovanni Gentile e la filosofia*, Le Lettere, Florence, 2007, p. xiv.

His greatest contribution, on this view, was ‘to give national form to a universal culture’.<sup>12</sup> This theory is not to be regarded as a relic of Fascist ideology. Quite the contrary, the theory is to be considered largely independent of the Party programme in which it featured.<sup>13</sup> Gentile is considered the inheritor of an intellectual tradition traceable to nineteenth-century authors like Mazzini, D’Azeglio, Gioberti and Spaventa, who all, in their different ways, contributed to the vision of Italy as a spiritual construct which cannot be relied upon to come about spontaneously, but which must be endlessly made and remade, deliberately and actively instilled, in the public consciousness.

Daniela Coli’s work may be taken as exemplary in this field. She has identified Gentile as a key figure in the foundation of ‘a national cultural tradition’, which crucially ‘survived the fall of Fascism’.<sup>14</sup> She argues that he recognised the decadence and fragility of certain historical currents in Italian culture and was preoccupied with ‘the figure of the scholar who had no sense of civic life and who... 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’. Gentile, by contrast, was a fierce advocate of Italian cultural sovereignty and the political institutions that helped sustain it; he was engaged in the life of the nation through and through. He believed that his educational reforms would bring about nothing less than a transformation of the national consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The idea of Italy, or of any nation, is *realised* to the extent that actual, thinking people identify with it and regard its interests as their own. Only thus can political or cultural norms have any moral authority. Italian identity is not a given, but something constructed, something fragile and impermanent. Its construction must be effected self-consciously if its result is to be more than *pensiero pensato*, an abstraction without value.

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<sup>12</sup> I take this phrase from the title of a short paper by Vincenzo Zaccheo: *Dare forma nazionale ad una cultura universale*, in *Giovanni Gentile, il filosofo della Nazione*, Pantheon, Rome, 2006, pp. 25–28.

<sup>13</sup> They may be considered ‘largely independent’ thanks to the appearance of many of the ideas in works like Gentile’s *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, published in 1916.

<sup>14</sup> D. Coli, *Giovanni Gentile. La filosofia come educazione nazionale*, Mulino, Bologna, 2004, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> D. Coli, *Gentile and Modernity*, in *Thought Thinking*, pp. 137–166; pp. 165–166.

Alessandro Amato has provided a more painstakingly theoretical, rather than historical, foundation for this way of reading Gentile's work. The philosopher was not, argues Amato, a willing dupe or uncritical acolyte of Mussolini, as some critics have supposed, but an independent, conscientious and strikingly original thinker, who supplied a voice of reason and conscience from within the Party, just as his opponents, like Benedetto Croce, did from without.<sup>16</sup> Present in all Gentile's works is the idea that constant reflection and self-criticism is necessary if any kind of institution, be it a principle or a political party, is to have real moral substance. Another recurrent theme is the need to realise thought in action: virtue consists not only of thinking about right and wrong, but also of working to correct the wrongs one identifies. On these grounds, Amato plausibly contends that Gentile, *qua* philosopher, had an ambivalent relationship to the Party of which he was a member. Actualism was in a sense the philosophy, or at least a philosophy, of Fascism, but also, with its insistent stress on the need for self-criticism and authenticity, of anti-Fascism. So conceived, as a contingently partisan doctrine, actualism may well have something to say to us, irrespective of our political allegiances in the present day.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the commentators just cited is to have rehabilitated Gentile's philosophy, especially his political philosophy, without fudging the hard problems that arise from his biography and the institutions in and under which he worked. The historical figure remains always in view, but does not obscure what is worth remembering from his work. There remains an open question of how convincingly the historical Gentile realised his ideals in practice, and even of whether actualism provides a sufficient foundation for any substantive principles – we might think, for example, of his quietist response to the Racial Laws (*Leggi razziali*) of 1938.<sup>17</sup> Yet his ideas are intelligible even outside the context in which he

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<sup>16</sup> A. Amato, *L'etica oltre lo stato. Filosofia e politica in Giovanni Gentile*, Mimesis, Milan, 2011, *passim*, but especially p. 15; see also G. Capozzi, *Giovanni Gentile. Il filosofo oltre l'uomo*, Satura, Naples, 2004, p. 129–130.

<sup>17</sup> These are questions with which historians continue to engage. For examples from the recent literature, see Alessandra Tarquini, *Il Gentile dei fascisti. Gentiliani e antigentiliani nel regime fascista*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009; Luciano Mecacci, *La Ghirlanda fiorentina e la morte di Giovanni Gentile*, Adelphi, Milan, 2014; Alessandra Cavaterra, *La rivoluzione culturale di Giovanni Gentile: la nascita della Enciclopedia italiana*, Cantagalli, Siena, 2014; and Rosella Faraone, *Giovanni Gentile, 'The Philosopher of Fascism': Cultural Leadership in Fascist and Anti-Semitic Italy*, Lewistown, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2017.

worked. Whether or not he succeeded in squaring his actions with his ideas, his philosophy can be judged on its own terms. Fascism gave him a platform, a vehicle, for his ideas, and it was within the complex of Fascist ideology that he expressed them. Nonetheless, he recognised that institutions are perpetually *in fieri*, changing according to the contingent needs, interests and purposes that actual thinking imposes on them. Since many of the political institutions to which he referred no longer exist, or have substantially changed in the seventy years since his death, part of his theory may be set aside as an historical artefact, a piece of *pensiero pensato*, applicable to his historical context but not to ours. The rest, revived in the very different context of Italy today, has acquired a new significance, perhaps different from any that Gentile himself could ever have imagined. We can accept his adherence to the Party as a fact about him without having to view the whole of his philosophy, nor even of his political philosophy, in that light. The *philosopher*, to borrow Gino Capozzi's apt metaphor, has a life beyond that of the *man*, the historical figure.<sup>18</sup>

What is striking about this way of reading Gentile is that it demands very little of actualism. Gentile can be redeemed as a 'great man', a major figure in Italian cultural history and as an advocate for national self-consciousness *whether or not* his detailed theories hold water. Even Amato's subtle and generous interpretation of Gentile's moral and political thought can be read for its conclusions without concern for the finely detailed reasoning that leads him to them. The main outcome of that interpretation is that Gentile was not just an uncritical ideologist who pushed his arguments where his employers needed them to go, but a serious and independent thinker who just happened to develop his ideas within the political apparatus available to him at the time. He, the historical Gentile, has thus become iconic of a certain cast of mind, a way of thinking about the relationship between individual and national identity, rather than any single political creed.

Gentile's partial rehabilitation as a 'philosopher of the nation' and a champion of Italian culture has shown that he has an enduring relevance independent of the contingencies of his own historical and political context. Yet it has also had the unhelpful side-effects of leading commentators to treat his whole system of ideas with too much reverence, as though it were a unified, irreducible object, and further of making the philosopher, rather than

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. G. Capozzi, *Giovanni Gentile*, esp. pp. 110–131.



the discrete, fine-grained arguments through which his philosophy is expressed, the object of assessment. If we start to regard actualism as the masterwork of a 'great man' rather than just a philosopher, as an artefact of Italian literature rather than a set of arguments, our interpretive priorities change. Actualism, on this view, stands as a monument in the history of Italian ideas. The beauty of a cathedral, we might say, is not best appreciated by someone looking at it through a microscope. There is something to be said for viewing actualism in this way, but I think that there is scope for narrowly philosophical engagement, too.

#### *4. Universal implications of actualism*

Actualism is not only, nor even primarily, a political doctrine. It also includes a rich account of human experience, especially the social dimensions of thought and personal identity. The starting point for actualism is the observation that, for each thinker, there is and can be only *one act of thinking*, which plays out continuously in the eternal present of her consciousness. No thinker can escape the activity of her consciousness and see the world as it *really* or *objectively* is. As such, the standpoint of actual thinking is not just one point of view among others. For all that we often talk about the world as if we were all subjects sharing an objective reality, strictly speaking, there can never be an objective plurality of consciousnesses, independent of that singular act of thinking, since all but one consciousness is a construction, a creation, of the one that conceives of them.<sup>19</sup>

Gentile recognises that, given these assumptions, actualism might be considered an isolating, solipsistic doctrine, depriving the world, even life itself, of meaning and value. This, he believes, is a misinterpretation. To counter it, he introduces the image of the 'internal society', or *società in interiore homine*, suggesting that thinking is to be thought of as a dialogue we have with ourselves, not only in the familiar Socratic sense in which we ask and answer questions, but in the sense that our self-conceptions are informed

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<sup>19</sup> This is well put by Alberto Signorini: 'Gentile's self cannot be thought of as a mere point of view among others. In reality there is but one point of view, which is that of thought *in the act*, which is always singular and is made plural only in its works, which are manifest through it as *living spirit*. We are not always thinking: our thought is not uninterrupted; ...and yet when we are thinking, the only reality that exists is that of thought, because every possible objection to that reality occurs within the ambit of (our) thought. Nothing is outside the thought that thinks, and all attempts to disprove this thesis will come to nothing'. See A. Signorini, *Giovanni Gentile e la filosofia*, p. 100.

by our interactions with other people. Despite the fact that we cannot be party to their subjective experiences, we make them part of our conscious reality as we think with and for them. Antonio G. Pesce has written movingly of the implications of this image:

This society in and through which I live... 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 to find the deepest sense of my existence. And this deep root will never snap... [C]an [we]... doubt those attachments that cradled us through our adolescent years... 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.<sup>20</sup>

We human beings are inescapably social creatures, even in our private thoughts. Our social nature is manifest in how we think and feel about ourselves; it shapes our identities as individuals. We are able to think critically, to refine and correct our beliefs, thanks to our ability to picture ourselves at points of view other than the one we now actually occupy. Despite the fact that there can only be one actual site of consciousness, none of us lives and thinks in a private, subjective universe. As we think, we are *always* in the company of other selves, since we speak to ourselves in voices besides our own. And the fact that we belong to this 'internal society' (*società interna*) should inform our relations to other people, not only in our private reflections, but in the world of ordinary social interactions. To 'secure the truthfulness of [our] existence', to live in truth, to be authentic, we must recognise this essential part of ourselves and reject the abstraction of crude individualism, as well as the selfishness and isolation that result from it. Pesce elsewhere develops this view:

As one grows up one comes to recognise that one is not alone in the world. Loneliness is but the failure of human existence, a cancer that saps the life of those who are sick, just as it does society as a whole. We would do well today to think about whether we cannot profit from this lesson... Think of the broken society made up of social, cultural and economic particularities; think of the solitude in which some people live, a solitude which eats away at them day after day, which pushes so many to suicide, to

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<sup>20</sup> A. G. Pesce, *The Integral Philosophical Experience of Actualism*, in *Thought Thinking*, pp. 45–72; p. 68.

depression, to moral listlessness. Do we really think that actualism no longer has anything to teach us?<sup>21</sup>

This interpretation of actualism differs subtly but significantly from those already discussed. Pesce reads it as a doctrine concerned with *what we most fundamentally are* and how this bears upon our relationships to each other. Gentile's political theory can be fitted more or less exactly around these commitments, but really, at bottom, actualism is a moral and humanistic doctrine. The fact that the historical Gentile was a Fascist who presented much of his theory in explicitly Fascist terms is, on this view, precisely that and no more: a historical consideration, the result, perhaps, of poor decisions on his part, but in no way decisive as we read his philosophy in the twenty-first century, when the political circumstances in which he lived and worked no longer obtain. His enduring message is one of solidarity, social responsibility and self-conscious commitment to other people. 'It is striking', writes Alberto Signorini,

that Gentile's life represents a close approximation of the spirit of his philosophy. His was a life of hard work, as well as painstaking consideration for other people, not only his friends – evidence may be seen in the humanism of his endless letters, in his works and in his actions throughout his industrious existence.<sup>22</sup>

The passages above show how Gentile and actualism can be kept simultaneously in view without either obscuring the other. Again the historical figure is somewhat redeemed by this interpretation. A careful and sensitive reading of his philosophy reveals something of his character and his attitude toward other people, prompting new questions about how he must have thought about his own position as the full ramifications of the Fascist project became clear.

I nonetheless believe that there is more to be done with actualism and that the tools of analytic philosophy are the means by which to do it. To apply those methods, we will need to put Gentile out of the picture altogether. In the next section I will try to explain why this is so and what this procedure would involve.

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<sup>21</sup> A. G. Pesce, *L'interiorità intersoggettiva dell'attualismo. Il personalismo di Giovanni Gentile*, Aracne, Roma 2012, p. 151.

<sup>22</sup> A. Signorini, *Giovanni Gentile e la filosofia*, cit., p. 64.

### 5. Actualism and analytic philosophy

Let us first be clear about what I mean when I say ‘analytic philosophy’. By this I mean the broad view of philosophy currently prevalent in, but by no means exclusive to, the English-speaking world. Shaped in debates over language in the twentieth century, analytic philosophy may be distinguished by its narrow focus on the forms and functions of *arguments*. The business of *doing philosophy*, on this view, is to be regarded as a problem-solving exercise. Related biographical, literary, historical and cultural issues, or themes of ‘meaning’, broadly construed, which feature prominently in much philosophy in the ‘continental’ tradition, are for the most part set aside by analytic philosophers unless they bear directly on arguments as written.

It might be thought that analytic philosophy’s unrelenting focus on arguments makes it a poor tool with which to probe Gentile’s work. It is tempting to think of actualism (although I do not wholly agree with this view) as a collection of concepts, images and stirring phrases, all founded on the idea, described in seminal works like ‘L’atto del pensare come atto puro’, of the inescapable standpoint of *pensiero pensante*, the thinker in action.<sup>23</sup> So conceived, it amounts to a general vision, impressively comprehensive in scope, of the world as each of us experiences it in the eternal here-and-now. As an incentive to adopt the peculiar standpoint that this vision demands, we are made a tantalising offer: a vindication of human agency and the boundless creative capacities of active, self-conscious thinking. For this vision alone Gentile would deserve his place on the pantheon of great Italian thinkers. Actualism represents a great and culturally significant body of literature, containing imaginative, provocative accounts of long-standing (I hesitate to say ‘permanent’) problems. The answers it provides are ingenious and stimulating irrespective of whether they, or the premises supporting them, are sound.

I am not convinced that this way of thinking about Gentile and actualism does them justice. If he had offered us *only* imaginative, evocative but ultimately faulty treatments of various familiar philosophical problems, we could rightly relegate Gentile studies to the history department, or the department of cultural studies, rather than the philosophy department across the street. The history of philosophy is a narrower discipline than the history

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<sup>23</sup> G. Gentile, *L’atto del pensare come atto puro*, in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, Sansoni, Florence, 2003 [1913], pp. 183–195.

of ideas. It is not enough for philosophers to write evocatively or to impress us with their prolificacy, their erudition or their breadth of vision. Their job is not, first and foremost, to inspire us as mystics or poets do, and certainly not to furnish future intellectual historians with texts to ponder and set in the proper historical context. It is conceivable that someone should be an excellent philosopher without doing any of these things, or else that one should do them all and still be a poor philosopher. At bottom, it is their business to tell their readers something *true*, and more pointedly to disentangle the truth from the falsities, half-truths and nonsense in which the truth often comes to us, whether deliberately or mistakenly, entangled. If it can be shown that actualism contains insights that are not only ingenious and evocative but *true*, we will have reason to treat Gentile not only as a great Italian thinker, but as a major philosopher in his own right.

This is where analytic philosophy can do its work. Since I know of no comparable analytic treatment of actualism, let me refer to my own example. I examine the arguments of actualism, with specific interest in its implications for moral theory, in my book *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*.<sup>24</sup> The writing of this book was prompted by some of the observations I have described above. Gentile seemed to me both a remarkable figure in the history of philosophy and a better philosopher than his English-speaking critics usually acknowledged. It struck me, too, that certain major themes in his work – in particular the intrinsically moral status of self-conscious thought, the possibility of truth in the context of subjective fallibility, and the role of thinking in the *creation* or *construction* of reality – overlapped suggestively with some of those prominent in today's analytic philosophy. Given my special interest in meta-ethics, and since none of Gentile's systematic works is straightforwardly concerned with moral questions, I sought to determine what an actualist moral theory might look like.

Remarks on moral matters can be found scattered throughout Gentile's works, but his most substantial and detailed accounts are to be found in works on law, religion and politics.<sup>25</sup> Further generous hints are contained in works on

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<sup>24</sup> J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism: a Study of Actual Idealist Moral Theory*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> In particular, G. Gentile, *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, cited above; *Il problema morale*, in *Discorsi di religione*, fourth revised and expanded edition, Sansoni, Florence,

education and even logic.<sup>26</sup> My aim was to subject actualism to the acid of analysis, treating it *simply* as philosophy, and to discuss it in the same register we use to talk about the works of Kant or Wittgenstein, in order to determine whether its recurrent motif of the creation or construction of reality might have something new, or at least hitherto unappreciated, to tell us (that is, anti-realists in contemporary moral philosophy) about how we can make sense of moral commitments without either taking them for granted or making them too flimsy to have any practical hold on us.

Since Gentile's treatments of moral themes are widely spread, various motivated and often spliced into discussions of other philosophers' ideas, it was necessary to employ certain contrivances. I began by explicitly setting aside the biographical and political controversies of Gentile's life. I sought to develop a broadly ahistorical account of actualism by divorcing my examination of its workings from its author's 'personality, motives, and allegiances' in order that I could realise my aim of presenting it as 'a series of arguments'. Thus I sought to present a 'rational re-construction of [Gentile's] ideas, assembling a composite doctrine from those that are persuasive and rejecting those that are faulty. By operating at this carefully maintained level of abstraction', I intended 'to keep the discussion firmly within the realm of moral philosophy and divorced as cleanly as possible from the soul-searching intellectual biographies that [had] dominated the literature elsewhere'.<sup>27</sup>

Now, it may be objected that that is something amiss about viewing actualism in this way, as though it were supposed to be, or at least to contain, a theory by which to solve moral problems. Gentile, our imaginary objector might say, was simply not that kind of philosopher. His chief concern was with the system, the full scope of what can be seen from the rigorously defined *standpoint of actualism*, not with the rather mundane question of how the thinker, whatever her situation might be, should make up her mind about what to do. To expect actualism to yield such a theory is to misunderstand Gentile's intentions and, by extension, the kind of philosopher he was. The fact that he does not spell out a moral theory should tell us that he did not

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1957/1920, pp. 76–107; and *Genesi e struttura della società. Saggio di filosofia pratica*, Sansoni, Florence, 1975/1946.

<sup>26</sup> In particular, G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, two vols., Sansoni, Florence, 1959–1962/1913–1914; and *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere*, two vols., Laterza, Bari, 1922–1923.

<sup>27</sup> J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*, p. 13.

think this kind of inquiry could proceed, like Kant's, from first principles. He thinks instead that, to solve moral problems, or even to make them intelligible, we must first set ourselves self-consciously at the standpoint of actualism. From there the solutions will appear obvious, but the role of the philosopher, as Gentile sees it, is to show us how to attain that standpoint, not to describe to us in advance what we will see when we get there.

In this light it is easy to see why analytic philosophers have been so reluctant to engage with Gentile. He employs a host of concepts fitted to problems he has set himself and makes little effort to explain himself or to provide a firm basis for predictions and judgements in other domains. He is little concerned about easing readers into the standpoint of actualism, gradually tracing a path from conventional wisdom through to the counterintuitive but, in his view, incontrovertible conclusions he supports. Rather, he defines his position rapidly, in broad, bold strokes, before describing to the reader what view his standpoint offers of each in a sequence of related philosophical questions. The reader is left to supply the fine details (and sometimes not only those) of the arguments which convey Gentile from one step to the next, and to guess at his reasons for choosing one line of travel rather than another. For this reason, his arguments, even when painstakingly reconstructed, never seem finished, but always open to further development if only some appropriate vantage point can be found. The connections he draws between ethics, religion, education and politics are rich with insight and often beyond the scope of philosophy that occurs within more conventionally circumscribed categories. Yet this also why our analysis of Gentile's view of one conceptual issue, however exhaustive it might appear, can never be confidently concluded.<sup>28</sup> Context is king; no actualist argument, such as it is, can be considered correctly formulated unless the vast edifice of actualism, the entire system, is erected around it.

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<sup>28</sup> It is for these reasons that Gregor identifies the 'omnibus character' of actualism as '[p]erhaps the most formidable difficulty' for analytic philosophers. 'In attempting to come to grips with any aspect of [actual idealism]', he goes on, 'one finds oneself inevitably drawn into a complex conceptual web... [I]t is all but impossible to devote oneself to a single conceptual issue to the exclusion of indeterminate number of others'. See A. J. Gregor, *Giovanni Gentile, contemporary analytic philosophy, and the concept of political obligation*, in Simonetta Betti, Franca Rovigatti and Gianni Eugenio Viola (eds.) *Enciclopedia 76-77. Il pensiero di Giovanni Gentile*, vol. 1, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Florence, 1977, pp. 445-55; p. 445.

For all that Gentile is at times wilfully obscure and frustratingly self-referential, and for all that he would most likely reject the conception of philosophy that underlay my treatment of him – that is, as a technical discipline concerned with problem-solving, in practice as far removed from culture and even its history as painting is from art criticism – his work is in one respect peculiarly well suited to this kind of analysis. This is because, in contrast to so many system-building idealists, he goes to great pains to connect each extension of his doctrine to a single, basic conception of thinking and the necessity of absolute immanence. There is some truth to Guido de Ruggiero's complaint that Gentile tended to reduce all problems to one, namely, that of distinguishing unreal abstractions from the concrete reality our thinking perpetually generates.<sup>29</sup> Yet it does provide his interpreters with a clearly defined starting point and a set of questions to answer as they set out. What does it mean to say that the self is an activity? What does this view imply for our theories of knowledge and action? What conceptual space, if any, does this view leave open for a conception of moral value?

Each of these questions is answered, more or less directly, in Gentile's works. However, his answers are often unclear. At times he takes tremendous things for granted. He notoriously equates the 'transcendental society' or 'the society inside the person' (*la società in interiore homine*) – the device, already mentioned, by which he distinguishes his theory from solipsism, introducing a second-person standpoint even within the confines of consciousness of the sole actual thinker – with 'the state inside the person' (*lo Stato in interiore homine*), then that with the empirical state and, in a further leap, the empirical state with the dictator at its head.<sup>30</sup> In a few rapid steps, aided by little more than a play on words, Gentile concludes that the dictator has the moral authority to tell the individual thinker what she 'really' wants and thinks. This is precisely the kind of equivocation for which Gentile became so notorious in the Fascist period, leading his critics to believe that

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. G. de Ruggiero, *Revisioni idealistiche*, in *L'educazione nazionale*, 1933, pp. 138–145; and *Main Currents of Contemporary Philosophy in Italy*, in *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 1 (3), 1926, pp. 320–332, trans. Constance M. Allen.

<sup>30</sup> This transition appears in G. Gentile *Fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, p. 137. My discussion of these issues can be found in J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*, pp. 74–75 and 93–95.



his ethics amounted to no more than a demand for uncritical obedience to an arbitrary authority.

I argued instead that while his equivocation of the two kinds of state is illegitimate, the theory can be saved. What it lacks is a plausible account of how the empirical state and the transcendental state are connected, and by extension how claims of political authority can be justified when each thinker is *necessarily* responsible for creating her own frame of reference. Such an account can be reconstructed, I argued, from Gentile's various remarks on the nature of truth and judgement, as applied to the 'internal dialogue'. Thus, by means of bootstrapping, actualist moral theory, or at least a version of it, can be redeemed.<sup>31</sup>

There is another possible objection to be faced. This is the objection that, by separating actualism from its author and volunteering an ahistorical and, crucially, *revisionist* account of a part of the doctrine that, as I acknowledged at the outset, Gentile leaves undeveloped, the best I could have hoped to develop was a moral theory that looked somewhat like his but was, in fact, a new, speculative creation. Critics with contrasting opinions of the merits of actualism might reasonably worry either that I am linking Gentile with my theory in order to profit from his newly revived reputation, or else that by doing this I am failing to take seriously the close tie between actualism and political authoritarianism. My selective reconstruction of Gentile has made him little more than a Kantian liberal, while the moral grit and gristle of his life, the facts that make him such a remarkable figure in history and philosophy alike, go unacknowledged.

I appreciate the force of this objection, although I cannot accept the implication that a revisionist interpretation of actualism is illegitimate. Fundamental to my own reading of actualism, and necessary, I would suggest, to anyone who seeks to treat it simply as philosophy, is the thought that the historical Gentile was effectively the first reader of his own philosophy. His life was complicated by any standard. He found himself facing choices that would be hard for anyone, even without his rock-bottom belief in the moral significance of integrity and autonomy. There is an argument to be had – an argument which began in the 1920s and shows no signs of concluding – about how he should have responded to those choices

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<sup>31</sup> The task described in these two sentences takes roughly half of the book to complete. See J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism*, pp. 117–240

and how far he was complicit in their consequences. But for all that he willingly bound his theory to the institutions of his day, the theory is separable from the context. It can mean something for us, here and now, long after Gentile's death, even if it did not and cannot have that meaning for him. And it is worth trying to find out what that meaning is, even if the results are not all we might want them to be.

My final observation for this section is that while I know of no other strictly analytic treatments of actualism, it would be a mistake to imagine that further such treatments of other parts of the doctrine would have to be constructed from the ground up. Analytic philosophy is sometimes talked about as though it were something different in kind from 'continental' philosophy of the type most commonly practised in Italy, but in truth the differences are in stress and approach rather than substance. My own examination of actualism owes much to the richness of the Italian literature that preceded it, including several of the sources I have mentioned here. Continental philosophers routinely employ cold-blooded analysis to determine whether arguments make sense, just as analytic philosophers sometimes refer to history, biography and all the rest to help orient their interpretations. These traditions give us a choice of perspectives, perhaps mutually beneficial, from which to view the same material.

#### *6. The case for an ahistorical Gentile*

Actualism and its author have for a long time been treated as a complete package. Gentile has come down to us laden with a considerable burden of prior judgements, some of his own making, others applied later by his interpreters. Actualism, if I may be permitted another metaphor, might seem to come with *strings attached*, as the idiom goes; with the expectation that, by taking actualism seriously, we are somehow taking sides in the long-standing controversies over Gentile's reputation. But the recent revival of Gentile studies has shown us, I think, that with our great luxury of hindsight, we can see how philosophy, and even philosophers themselves, might come to mean something, even to *stand for* something, that in their own time they did not. To see what that something might be, we need to treat philosophy simply as philosophy, to indulge in the old business of taking ideas apart, seeing how they work, fixing any faults and putting them back together again. There is nothing unusual about any of this. It is what philosophy has been about since the beginning.

The enduring strength of actualism, it seems to me, resides in the fact that it has at its heart a set of simple but suggestive claims. Our experience of the world, and indeed of ourselves, is mediated through the act of thinking; thought is something that we do, not something that happens to us; it therefore falls to us to think as well as we can, without illusion, complacency or false consciousness, and to do what we can in the present to make the as-yet-unrealised future the best it can be. This view of actualism enables and emboldens us to distinguish between what is and is not essential to it; to distinguish Gentile-as-philosopher from Gentile-as-historical-figure, while recognising the independence of the latter as a legitimate object of study and the first reader, so to speak, of the former; and to salvage from an endlessly complicated period of Italian history a body of ideas that need not be bound to them. There is more to philosophy than what Gentile saw or found interesting. If we can make actualism live and speak for itself, I daresay we will find that it has something worthwhile to tell us.

There can be scarcely any greater compliment to a philosopher, any clearer indication of how far his rehabilitation has come, for us to address his arguments, to criticise and amend them, as though he were alive here and now – to treat his ideas, in Croce’s phrase, as something *living* rather than *dead*.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this will seem perverse to some readers, understandably chary of the idea of turning to such a notorious figure, or at least a figure with such notorious connections, for new insight, or else of corrupting the legacy of a historically or culturally important thinker, by reinterpreting and revising his ideas in ways over which he can have no say. But to treat Gentile in this way will not harm the existing scholarship; quite the contrary, it will reveal both flaws and strengths that even he may not have recognised. There can be no surer vindication of the independence of thought than to think with even those with whom we disagree. That, I suspect, might rather have pleased him.



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<sup>32</sup> The allusion here is, of course, to B. Croce, *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel, con un saggio di bibliografia hegeliana*, Laterza, Bari, 1907.