Idealism Reconsidered

Guido de Ruggiero[1]

In this pivotal essay, first published in 1933, de Ruggiero explains why he no longer considers himself an idealist. He criticizes the forms of Hegelian and post-Hegelian idealism that had animated his early philosophical work, as well as that of Croce and Gentile. While acknowledging the value of its 'incomparably profound exploration of the life of the mind', he argues that modern idealism, especially in its recent forms, has resulted in intellectual narcissism—claiming privileged insight into the truth, while in fact making real problems incomprehensible and insoluble. The essay concludes with a brief sketch of the kind of inquiry with which de Ruggiero thinks we should engage, motivated by a sincere concern for concrete problems and a corresponding desire to solve them.

Can we still call ourselves idealists?

My use of the plural is intentional. Really I am putting the question to myself in the singular, but I am hesitant to present it like that, first because I do not presume that the public is interested in what is personal to me, and further because when thinking, one always entertains the belief or the illusion of being in company. The *pluralis maiestatis* of writers is generally less majestic than it appears to be.

Let's move without delay to the real substance of the question. Those who began their philosophical studies as I did, at the time of the idealist revival against positivism and naturalism, who threw themselves zealously into the dispute and who sincerely believed that the tone of spiritual life was being elevated, cannot have failed to notice that today something has profoundly changed. Idealism has triumphed over its adversaries; it has permeated all the highest echelons of culture; its place is secure in the official curriculum and in journals. But

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this outpouring of idealist thought has pooled and stagnated into easy, convenient formulae that take the work out of thinking; and, what is worse, it has lost its original meaning. Those who speak of idealism think of or imagine a cult of the ideal, something removed from empirical and contingent things and elevated to a nobler and purer sphere, a spirit of disinterest and abnegation, and so on. This, at least, is the popular and unsophisticated representation of idealism which corresponds, in its most essential features, to the historical tradition.

Like Plato's dualism or Hegel's dialecticism, idealism is inconceivable without a scission, a profound opposition, which grants sense and import to the points of the contrast and distinguishes the spirit from nature, the ideal from the real and the immaterial from the material. If this contrast is removed and reality is thought of as entirely idealized, dematerialized, spiritualized and hammered flat, the spirit takes on the appearance of nature and the immaterial the appearance of matter. One of the most obvious and thus striking examples of such prevarication occurs in moral life, where that vital distance is shrunk and idealistic monism predominates: the spirit, compelled to account for and to justify everything, lacks any basis for discrimination, so it cannot reject and condemn anything for being at odds with its true reason for being and acting. Thus the bounds of good and evil, wisdom and madness, indifference and attention are blurred. And in the name of idealism we run the risk of sanctioning totally opposing attitudes, which stem from it like the classic *lucus a non lucendo*.

It is good for us that life, that most fecund of resources, continually presents us with oppositions and contrasts, which every now and then enable us to reintegrate those distinctions, which the system tends to cancel out, and provides new opportunities to argue about philosophy. If we did not have this reserve of fuel to burn, if we had no such external support from without, if idealism were left to its own resources, we would end up with our

wills in stasis and our minds blank. Where everything is thought, what is worth thinking about? Where all is well, why resist? In this way every kind of idealism is marked by indolence and lassitude. The spirit, which ought to be a factor of differentiation and individualization in the world, is typically reduced to the level of matter, and thus takes on the functions of matter. Where everything is spirit, nothing is really spirit: the difference between the pure idealist and the pure materialist is less than is commonly supposed. And it is all very well to say that thought is dialectical in nature, like a scale that culminates in a point at which there is no need for any scale; or to say that reality is nothing but the synthetic moment of the dialectic, with its illusory appearance of mutually opposed positions. There must be two ideas in order for there to be a clash; but where there is no clash, the dialectic cannot get to grips with something insubstantial. This is why idealists try to insert an adversary into this one-man play. But this adversary is no more than a shadow, for all that we might try to attribute to it movements and attitudes of its own, as though it were capable of prompting any new and original response from the other party in the drama. As a shadow, it is forever bound to its body, whose every movement it copies. Hence not only does the drama lack any variety or plot, but it is impossible to perform. Owing to the impossibility of distinguishing one character from another, it can be narrated only after the fact.

The idealists' need for unity reflects a profound truth. Without a unity of contraries, there can be no conflict. Unless the adversary can be found within us, there can be no adversary at all; we cannot be opposed to anything unless there is an opposition within us. But the risk for idealism is that this unifying tendency will prevail to such an extent that the very substance of the opposition is removed, giving it the appearance of a hallucination. These traits are plain to see in Hegel's system, which represents the truly critical point of idealism. In Hegel there is undoubtedly a profound sense of the antithesis and contrast of cosmic life, but at the same time, the conflicts in which he pictures us play out in an

atmosphere of dream-like unreality. No one can deny it. Reading Hegel, one gets the impression that the current of becoming in which he pretends to immerse himself is no deeper than a *pictura in tabula*. One is presented with only the final moment, at which the conflict is already over, a fleeting, contrived change reflected in a clear and transparent mirror. Yet Hegel does not wholly disappoint our need for concreteness, for if the speculative demands of the system lead him to make a mirage of the phases of the drama, his realistic sense of life and of its problems goes some way to compensate for the abstractness of the formulae and the unreality of the illusions. But this realistic sense has its origins outside the system, in life and experience, which animate the empty schemata of deduction.

Post-Hegelian idealism has in certain respects exacerbated the crisis of Hegelianism. From its more rigorously logical point of view, it has seen that the entire prehistory of the Idea, being artificial, had no reason to exist; and that, by removing the scaffolding which connected it to the foundations of nature and logic, it had in fact eliminated all the strangest and most baroque features of Hegelianism, while at the same time it severed any links between the Hegelian superstructure (*sopramondo*) and the world around us. There are those who, through this reductive treatment of Hegelianism, have managed to retain the points of access it grants us to life and its problems. Croce, for example, who distinguishes between thought and action, has assigned the latter the job of providing new food for thought, new material for reflection. But for this reason I do not know whether he can still be called a Hegelian and an idealist. These are two labels he would be disinclined to self-apply unless he could change their meanings, taking from Hegelianism not the schemata, but the richness and variety of mental interests that are revealed in spite of it, and from idealism the notion of spirit, freed from the panlogism that degraded it and rendered it fruitless.

Others have followed the Hegelian programme to the letter, enclosing themselves in the superstructure as though it were a fortress and breaking every bridge to the external

world. Idealism was thus conveyed, by rigorous logic, to absurd conclusions, entirely emptied of content and left in a state of deadening, near-perfect self-sufficiency. Hegelianism bubbled over until nothing was left of it but foam, dense enough to obscure the characteristics of all things. In the last analysis, Hegelian idealism is a kind of intellectual narcissism: thought's idle contemplation of itself, which is at the same time its own equally idle realization. Reality is philosophy, so there is nothing for philosophy to do. And thus Hegelianism ends up deprived of any basis for discrimination between one philosophy and another. Reality is spirit, so there is nothing with which to experiment. How, then, could it come into contact with anything new, or encounter that resistance, that contrast, which gives sense and value to our capacities to assimilate, comprehend and control? Reality is thought in action, but then what difference can there be between one thought and another, between content and mental content, if all that matters is the common designation of being enacted (*in atto*)? Thought has nothing to tell us except that it is present; its function is not to affirm certain content, but instead to affirm only itself. Every problem is solved as it enters the ambit of thought, through the attention that it receives there, without any need for anyone effectively to think it through. Hence each individual has the rights of citizenship in the kingdom of the spirit, so long as he repeats the magic formula. The emptier the formula, the better, for then it is all the purer. The result of all this is a situation analogous to that of certain Gnostic sects of antiquity: their adepts were believed to be privileged creations of the spirit by right of nature and, what is worse, they maintained that this indelible quality was a kind of magical panacea.

Do not think that I am exaggerating for the sake of argument. I intend to criticize myself before I criticize anyone else. I had direct experience of idealism, even before actual idealism came to light; and since this experience was gained in the course of intense historiographic work, I found it stimulating and salutary. But just when I wanted to explore its deepest reaches, I found myself stuck in its shallows. Hegelian idealism, in the form

already discussed, in the rarefied atmosphere through which it came to me from Spaventa and the early historical writings of Gentile (not his systematic works, which were to come later), was a closed system, for which there was no possibility of opening up or developing, being instead irreversibly destined to undergo a self-referential regress, all the greater as the system became more perfect. It ended up in a kind of *cul-de-sac*, in which it went round and round in an effort to catch the uncatchable. It was my good fortune to escape that *cul-de-sac* before long, since my interest in things, my curiosity about the unknown and the very vitality of my spirit kicked against the mental indolence which had left me oscillating between a subject and an object without learning anything useful.

Through my experience of idealism I have come to see plainly an error which occurs at the beginning of its method and is then reproduced, in a thousand variations, at every phase of its development. It is to be found in the immediate conversion of problems of knowledge into metaphysical problems, which is to say, into the presuppositions of the metaphysics of knowledge which post-Kantian philosophers believed themselves to have drawn from Kant's first Critique. I certainly do not deny that reflection on cognitive activity may have a decisive influence on the comprehension of the intrinsic structure of reality. The fact that things come to be known is not accidental with respect to their nature; but it is rather their self-revelation, the bright epilogue to the obscure and indifferent labours of the world, in light of which even the more opaque parts of the cosmic structure can be glimpsed, and some of the mystery that surrounds it can be uncovered. A world that is known is not a world of inert matter, but has a plan, a course, a definite meaning. Enclosed in all the moments of its becoming is the mind's need for a way to actuate itself, a need of which we can find vestiges even in the remotest and mutest of things, and of which we can find indelible signs of development, like the detritus that gathers at the edges of a stream. Knowledge gives the world a new dimension, which enables us to see all the others in perspective. This does not mean, naturally, that the things

seen in perspective are mere hallucinations. I would rather say, though in this sense only, that the idealist conception of the creative capacity of thought has a concrete significance. Values and experience are seen in a new light, and their mere naturalness is redeemed and spiritualized.

But the metaphysics of knowledge does not exhort us to set about patiently probing, assimilating and mediating inferences. It pretends to solve the problem of the world's spirituality by magical fiat, merely by affirming that the being of things is the same as their being known, and that objects are resolved without residue into the activity of thinking about them. From the incontestably certain fact that we cannot stand outside our own thinking or our own consciousness, and that whatever we seek to capture in thought, we cannot touch except with thought itself, that is, in its mental form, the metaphysics of knowledge would have us infer that each object is nothing but a moment of the thinking subject. Behind this inference is the mistaken assumption that thought should be able to step outside itself, or better that we need not think at all in order to attain a truly objective reality, as if the attestation of thought were not enough, or had no validity, unless the object thought about were not distinct from it. On this strange foundation stands panlogism, which denies the validity of what is attested and affirmed by thought after the hard toil of criticism, analysis and objectification. This mutilation of the intrinsic meaning of the business of thinking can occur only if the content of thought is set aside in favour of the other element of thought, the act of thinking, so that effective thinking is identified with the empty form of the thinking act. It is by studying that content that we are in fact conveyed into the world of things, events and the links between them, which are real precisely because they are thought of as such. Yet the reality of these is not to be confused with that of the act of thinking. Indeed, the two are mutually distinct, since thought operates while conscious of the difference between two levels: being and being known, the real and the true, object and subject. To consider the act in

isolation results not in that difference, but in the confusion between oneself and what merely belongs to one, and between attestation and what is being attested. It leads, in the end, to not thinking at all, but instead indicating the mere presence of thought wherever thought leads us. But this much is obvious and quite irrelevant to the question of how to determine the nature of the things we think. The fact that something exists in thought is not enough to tell us what it is. Yet the whole metaphysics of knowledge is based on the exchange of *what is thought* for what *is* and the fallacy that the latter can be resolved completely into the former. The mystery of the universe would be too facile if it could be revealed in a truism, as though it were not so much a mystery as a riddle.

Idealism made the mistake of taking the game too seriously. Rather than making an effort to think things through, it deliriously believed that all the secrets of things were contained in the act of thinking about them and that it could claim possession of the world, as though carrying around a signpost with the inscription, 'Here is the thought', rather like the cat in the fairytale *Puss in Boots*, who with a few little words passes off his master as a Marquis with estates and castles. The problem is that these expedients do not reflect the true richness of thought. On any question it prompts the objection that it exists to the extent that we think about it, whereas what matters is that we know *how* we think about it. On the contrary, being acquires meaning and value in thought as a function of the world which is revealed in it; thinking realises being within thought, not the other way around. Idealism, by contrast, moves its target and ends up entangled in trivial problems. It refers to itself, builds on itself, believing that it is already in possession of reality, if only implicitly, while in fact it stands outside reality, having lost touch with it altogether.

In saying this I do not mean to suggest that there is nothing more to idealism than this vain effort. I am merely pointing out a slippery slope, or a limiting case of idealistic involution, which follows from the assumption of an erroneous premise.

Concretely, then, each idealist, inasmuch as he has enough mental energy and a sense of natural or human problems, responds to the tendency to involution and manages to derive claims that have a semblance of truth. I must add that none of the great post-Kantian idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) believed that the secret of the universe was contained in the formula of subject and object. To make this point clear, it is enough to remember their efforts to construct a philosophy of nature, which stands, despite its many errors, as testament to the tenacious, vital and realistic preoccupations of their thought. But more than anything else, the danger that I have pointed out concerns contemporary Italian idealism, which, with its simplifying tendencies, is at risk of degenerating into unhelpful involution and self-reference. An inescapable consequence of accentuating the present (*attuale*) moment of thought is a kind of mental indifferentism. In fact, from that point of view, the business of thinking consists of moving not from one connection to the next, each of which owes its value to its intrinsic connective capacity, but from one act to another, in such a way that what is essential and concrete is nothing but the enactment, whatever this indiscriminate actuality might mean or stand for. Thus, thoughts only really differ from each other in their precise and extrinsic features. Were our thinking about the world to become less clear, the actualistic thermometer would be strictly unable to register even the slightest difference.

Here we have two options. One is to shatter and pulverize mental activity into an infinite series of acts, resulting in an extreme relativism that distorts everything. But the logic of idealism rules out this solution, since acts of thinking cannot be viewed as separate things except so far as one is the object thought about by the other. It follows that the act of thinking is always unique and unmultipliable. The universe hinges on the one act of thinking that actualizes all the others. Thus the involution is completed: from nature to mental acts, from these to the one act that comprises them, like Chinese boxes that fit inside one another. And what is it that enacts this single act? Idealism calls this ‘absolute spirit’: a rather ambiguous

figure, which oscillates between the thinker himself, inasmuch as he thinks, and God, so far as He is the immanent synthesis of the thinking activity. In truth, it is neither, but rather the mere residue of an analytic regress, an exacting scheme of thought emptied of any content. But, precisely because it is an empty scheme, it can be anything one wants it to be, so long as one has some way to introduce whatever it is one wants. Timid souls might identify the absolute spirit with the God of religion and, by laying the weight of the world on His shoulders, they will enjoy a well-deserved rest, unburdened and calm. Titanic souls might identify it with the superman immanent in mankind. Practical spirits can see it incarnate in the human collective, and so on.

Yet the idea of the absolute spirit does have a ring of truth to it, provided that it is understood in a different way. Every thinking person needs a unifying principle in order to express the need for a coordinated, coherent world of experience, without which any scientific investigation and any meaningful communication of one's thoughts would be impossible. Anyone who lives in human society needs to feel that he is part of a unified moral world, governed by one set of laws. All this is right and true so long as this unifying motif is already in place, not in the act of thinking, but as an ideal tendency, a canon of interpretation in theoretical life, a duty to be involved in moral life. Problems arise for us in our ordinary practices, as both obstacles and stimuli to the realization of those ideals. But where the unifying motif prevails alone and uncontested, where there is no possibility of resistance or conflict, because the very source from which something new might originate has been blocked off, the unity of the spirit loses its proper meaning and may end up saddled with alien and degrading meanings instead. In interpreting the relations between persons, then, idealism has too readily forgotten the deepest and most impenetrable part of consciousness, and what can spring dramatically from the collision of that deepest part with the opposite unifying tendency, to impose itself as a higher consciousness, which should express the unity in the act

of the universal consciousness, but which might instead be the brutal imposition of a foreign consciousness. The idealist does not see that the spirit is thereby mortified. He has eyes only for the spirit, for the Leviathan which, as a universal type, commonly expresses nothing but a subjective passion, a product of the subjective imagination. It is convenient to talk about a spirit that thinks and acts for everyone, or about the liberty of the universal spirit, while the person who is speaking casts himself as the interpreter and minister of the spirit. Doing this does not promote spiritual life, but turns individuals into the marionettes of the absolute spirit.

It is time to bring this already overlong discussion to a close. The conclusion to be drawn, the answer to the question posed, is negative, but only in a limited sense. We do not oppose the general philosophical tendencies of idealism, but those of a certain form of idealism, in which we see a principle of theoretical and moral involution. Since this form is closer to us, or else closer to our heart, we have felt that we must mount a livelier response to it in order to make a clear distinction between it and what we believe is still living, and thus worth saving, in idealistic thought. We stand firmly on the premises of modern spiritualism. We believe that idealistic philosophy, from Plato to the present day, has carried out an incomparably profound exploration of the life of the mind, revealing a spontaneous, creative activity of limitless fecundity where more superficial examinations found only passivity, imitation and mechanism. But to keep intact this conviction, this belief, and indeed to promote it, we must overcome the impasse at which idealism presently stands. We are now in a state of idealistic saturation, such that thought, no longer capable of taking in or assimilating any kind of nourishment from the outside, has been reduced to feeding on itself. It is enough to glance through the philosophical literature of our youth to see how every question is turned into a game of formulae, and that every instance of mental labour involves pressing a conventional seal onto the argument under discussion. The fault cannot be blamed

on the immaturity of youth. On the contrary, it is the fault of an orientation that has left the young and the old alike exhausted and dried up.

How are we to resolve this dilemma? By freeing the mind from the formulae that encumber it and that, as in the time of the decline of the Scholastics, have drawn a veil of fiction over any clear comprehension of things and problems; by convincing ourselves that there is no privileged philosophical system, idealist or otherwise, in which one can entertain the illusion of having special insight into the truth; and above all, by forcing ourselves to think about what is concrete, rather than empty ideas, taking the idealistic principle, according to which the spirit exists so far as it does something, as a goal to be realised, not a trophy already won. Perhaps, following some vivifying mental experience, we will see those idealistic concepts, which for now have the appearance and taste of dry straw, regenerated and imbued with new life.

Translated by J. R. M. Wakefield