Abstract

This paper discusses the thought of Giovanni Gentile, philosopher, minister for education under Mussolini, and Fascist polemicist. It examines his epistemology and his philosophy of the person and of society, looking for the grounds for his adherence to Fascist policy in his political stance and some aspects of his educational ideas. It is concluded that his political stance was by no means an unavoidable conclusion from his general philosophical position.

A.J. Watt*

Giovanni Gentile: Mussolini's Favourite Educational Philosopher

Introduction

Perhaps some explanation is in order for writing a paper on the social and educational thought of Giovanni Gentile, who was for many years a member and a defender of Mussolini's Fascist party. Not even Fascists have been openly expressing much interest in Fascism in recent years. My attention was drawn to his work in the course of following an interest in the influence of individualistic social thought on contemporary educational philosophy. By individualism I mean that network of attitudes and beliefs within which only individual people, one by one, have rights or claims or purposes: only they are the locus of fundamental values; society, the community, has in itself no rights or claims, and no value except insofar as it serves the separate purposes of separate individuals.

I looked to Gentile for a statement of the opposing collectivist view, that society does *not* exist merely to serve the separate ends of individuals, but that it has value in its own right: that it has claims and rights of its own, to which the claims of individuals must sometimes take second place. It is from this orientation that I set out to take a quick and inevitably superficial look at some of Gentile's social and educational ideas.

His work is not at all well-known in the world of English-language philosophy, and so a short biographical sketch might be useful. He was born in 1875, died in 1944. He was professor of philosophy successively at the universities of Palermo, Pisa and Rome, and a rough contemporary of Benedetto Croce, who is somewhat better-known in the English-speaking philosophical world, mainly for his writing on aesthetics. The two were probably the foremost intellectuals of their generation in Italy, and were friends and collaborators until the rise of Mussolini and the Fascist party to power in 1922. After this their different political stances pushed them steadily apart into the positions of antagonists. Croce, at some risk to his own safety, publicly opposed Mussolini's regime, while Gentile became its most intellectually respected spokesman and defender.

On Mussolini's assumption of power, Gentile was appointed minister for education. His brief was to plan a sweeping reform of the national education system, and he completed this within a surprisingly short time. As this appointment would suggest, he had a history of speaking and writing about education which extended back for many years; he could be

*Murdock University, Murdock, Western Australia

compared with John Dewey in the importance given to education in his philosophical thought. After two years he was dropped as education minister, but appointed president of the National Fascist Institute of Culture, editor of its journal (successively named *Political Education, Fascist Education* and *Fascist Civilization*) and editor of the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. He wrote a number of polemical pieces explaining and defending Fascism to the unconverted. He was shot by partisans in 1944.

Even such a brief sketch of his life suggests a legitimate claim to greater fame than he enjoys. How many philosophers have ever been taken sufficiently seriously to be entrusted with political power by their friends, or murdered by their enemies? Outside Italy he tends to be either dismissed, unread on the assumption that nobody with his political sympathies could be worth reading as a philosopher, or patronised with the theory that he was only used by Mussolini as a respectable front: that Gentile didn't really understand the nature of the system which he defended.[1] Of these reactions, the former is not an understanding of him, but a pretext for not trying to understand. The latter is much more defensible; however it does not look plausible as a general account of Gentile's relations with Fascism. It cannot be supposed that he was stupid, and he was in an excellent position to see what Mussolini's regime stood for, in practice as well as in propaganda. He was on the moderate wing of the Fascist party, and was apparently neither liked nor trusted by some of the extremists, but there must be some aspects of his own thought which account for his support for Mussolini and his government: this did not arise from a momentary enthusiasm, but from a stance maintained for well over twenty years.

I think it is possible to point out two major forces in Gentile's philosophical ideas, one of which would in isolation tend to pull his social and educational thought away from Fascism, the other tending to pull towards Fascism. Or, to revert to the terms of my opening paragraphs, one component tends towards individualism, the other towards collectivism. It was the latter component which he allowed to dictate his political stance and some aspects of his approach to education, although no compelling explanation can be found in his philosophical writing why he *had* to follow that road rather than the one trodden by Croce, who had been quite close to him both personally and philosophically.

Gentile's Idealism

Together with Croce, Gentile was part of the tradition of idealist philosophy descended from Hegel. This tradition does not translate at all well into the more familiar terms of English-language philosophy. For instance he is described in histories and encyclopedias of philosophy as an *actual idealist*. This must be an unsuccessful translation, because it fails to convey anything to the reader except the very odd suggestion that some idealists are only imaginary. So I want to set that label aside and try to get to grips with what Gentile meant by idealism.

He began his *Theory of Mind as Pure Act* by referring with approval to the idealism of Berkeley:

> 'To Berkeley it was evident that the concept of a corporeal, external, material substance, that is, the concept of bodies existing generally outside the mind, is a self-contradictory concept, since we can only speak of things that are perceived, and in being perceived, things are objects of consciousness, ideas.'[2]

But he went on to argue that Berkeley lost his nerve and failed to follow through the implications of this beginning, falling back on the mind of God to guarantee the continued existence of ideas in the intervals when none of us is thinking about them. The objects of our perception and knowledge, he asserted, are neither material objects existing independently,

nor ideas in the mind of God, but our own ideas, our own activities of perception and thought. Throughout his writings one finds him castigating what he called realism or naturalism, as a superficial account of perception and thought, which remains at the level of what seems to be. He allowed that:

> 'our whole life, if we consider the data of experience, *seems* to unfold itself on the substratum of a natural world, which therefore, far from depending on human life, represents the very condition of it.'[3]

But he thought that the untenability of this, the realist's position, would reveal itself to anyone who gave any consideration to the issues rather than remaining on the level of superficial appearances:

> 'All forms of realism are very naive, since very little reflection is needed to realize that whatever we can discover, invent or construct by means of thought cannot itself be anything but thought.'[4]

So the objects of perception and thought are not independently real things,but our own ideas. This is likely to be a puzzling doctrine for readers brought up in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition. Anyone exposed to the critical style of G.E. Moore will react by setting up against it a 'Paradigm Case' argument along the following lines. Here I am, perceiving and thinking about this table, which I can see, touch, damage my ankles against, and so on. This is a paradigm case of what we *mean* by thinking about an idea, say the idea of a unicorn or the idea of justice. If Gentile rejects this as an example of thinking about a real physical thing, he doesn't appear to understand the terminology which he is using, and he has left himself no way of making the obviously necessary distinction between situations like this and situations like those involving unicorns, or justice. What could I do that would count for him as thinking about an independent material object? and so on.

Being well brought up in the style of Moore, I feel a great deal of force in this argument. However it is a rather blunt instrument, and does not penetrate to everything that Gentile was trying to say. Much can be said in his defence, in terms more readily intelligible within the English-language philosophical tradition.

Let us consider briefly the realist epistemological tradition against which Gentile was fighting. It was expressed in its simplest and most extreme form, perhaps, by John Locke. According to Locke the world is people with material things, already existing and separated from each other. The mind at birth is like a sheet of blank paper waiting for the things in the outside world to make impressions on it. These are sense impressions, our simplest ideas, from which our complex ideas are built up. They are like copies or pictures of the outside things; when I see a dog I have in my mind an image of the dog, which is my idea of it. The mind is given a passive role in perception; it is the medium upon which the things in the real world print their impressions, as the film in a camera receives the image thrown on it.

This extraordinarily crude model for the operation of the mind was still alive and well in British philosophy when Gentile was writing. It leaves out of account the necessity to make sense of what we see and hear; making sense is an activity, something that we do, not a process of passive, camera-like reception. We must impose a body of concepts, expectations and assumptions in order to get meaning out of what, without this sense-making activity, would be in William James' words, a blooming buzzing confusion.

Consider, for example, what would happen if a man from a desert Australian tribe without any previous experience of western life, one of a people who make no shelters except low brushwood windbreaks, who sit and rest implements only on the ground, were suddenly confronted with this table at which I sit. What does he perceive: a table? This is impossible because he has no conception of a table: his mode of life has no place for such a

concept. He would not know what he was looking at, and it could scarcely be explained to him until he had had a little experience of the mode of life within which the concept of a table has its place.

So even perception, the end of the spectrum of thinking most securely anchored to concrete reality, depends on concepts, and concepts must be acquired by active experience of life, and actively applied. We *do make* our ideas, even our sense impressions of tangible objects, rather than simply receiving images of things from the outside world. These and similar attacks on the simple-minded Lockean tradition have of course been made within the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition, and are prominent in recent philosophy of science. However because of the differences of style and terminology it remains difficult to recognize that Gentile was saying something very similar. One might decide, on balance, that he overstated the subjective element in perception and thought: the element contributed by the subject, the perceiver and thinker. But he did not overstate it to a greater degree than Locke understated it.

Some of the passages quoted from Gentile seem to verge upon solipsism, but he was not really a solipsist. When he confronted the question whether anything exists prior to being thought about, his answer was not a bold 'no', but was much more cautious. The fifth chapter of *Theory of Mind as Pure Act* is entitled 'The Problem of Nature', and addresses itself to the question 'What is this nature which the mind finds outside itself as its own antecedent?'[5] A solipsist could answer this question quite succinctly, but he did not. In his discussion of it he wrote passages like this:

> 'It is impossible ever to see reality otherwise than by the light of an idea,'[6] and 'A nature which with its individuals is contraposed to thought cannot be grasped.'[7]

What he set out to deny was not that anything can exist outside the mind, but that we can be simply and directly aware of anything outside the mind. This impossibility he sometimes presented as an obvious tautology: as soon as we think about something it necessarily becomes an object of thought, an idea, which is shaped and related to other ideas in accordance with our concepts and categories. Gentile was not a solipsist, but his epistemology certainly tends sometimes in that direction.

This aspect of his thought has a strongly individualistic flavour. In his view, and he emphasised this throughout any works concerned with epistemology or education, knowledge does not exist, properly speaking, out there in an interpersonal world of objective reality, in libraries, museums and so on. Knowledge exists in the mental activity of individual people. We must each build it up for ourselves. In this task we will no doubt make use of books, diagrams, tables of figures and so on, but these ought to be used as suggestions upon which we must act, rather than as models which we must reproduce.

This emphasis on the subjectivity of knowledge had a great influence on his educational thought. It is obvious how it would lead him to an intense disapproval of rote learning, and in general of the presentation of ready-made and organised facts and rules for regurgitation by the student. In connection with this he held a low opinion of the educational value of the natural sciences, at least as they were customarily taught in his day, because they were seen and presented as bodies of settled fact, existing outside the mind in textbooks, which students had simply to absorb. Accordingly he gave them very low priority:

> 'Only the particular sciences, that is, the sciences properly so called, may be freely moved in a student's schedule; they may be added or taken away, they may be grouped this way or that, and be variously distributed according to the needs of the moment.'[8]

As generally taught, he went on to complain, they constitute 'merely material instruction', 'informative education', which in reality is not education at all. In other moods, however, he could acknowledge that the sciences *can* be taught in such a way as to engage the active, creative thinking of the student, rather than his capacity to absorb and reproduce information which someone else has organised for him. 'The modern teacher knows of no science which is not an act of a personality.'[9] Clearly he was not against science as such, but against the style of teaching in which knowledge is seen as settled and objective, and the role of the student is passive absorption.

In line with these comments on science, he stated a general distinction between *education*, conceived as developing the capacity for active, independent, creative thinking, and *instruction*, conceived as feeding in a collection of separate facts for regurgitation:

> 'The antithesis between instruction and education is the antithesis between realistic and idealistic culture, or again, that existing between a material and a spiritual conception of life . . . We must learn to react against a system of education which, conceiving its role to be merely intellectualistic, and such as to make of the human spirit a clear mirror of things, proceeds to an infinite subdivision to match the infinite multiplicity of things. Unity ought to be our constant aim. We should never look away from the living, that is, the person, the pupil into whose soul our loving solicitude should strive to gain access in order to help him create his own world.'[10]

It is not hard to see parallels with Dewey's objection to the presentation of masses of separate facts, and his insistence that knowledge should instead be unified, incorporated into the co-ordinated equipment of the student.

Gentile's intellectual interests were obviously in the areas of literature and history, as well as philosophy. These are the fields of the curriculum which he emphasised, rather than the scientific areas. In this respect, of course, he differed sharply from Dewey. His most favoured fields of study, then, were those pre-eminently concerned with the written word. However he argued against the excessive and indiscriminate use of books, which are, in his view, educationally valuable only insofar as they engage the imaginations of students, and provoke them to think their own thoughts in response to those of the author. He warned teachers:

> 'When their book, the book they selected for their pupils, as the means of imparting the culture for which the school stands, ceases to be the pupils' book, cherished by them as a thing of their own, intimately bound up with their persons, then it is high time to throw it away.'[11]

This caution about the use of the written word is in accord with Gentile's general epistemological position, that the objects of knowledge are one's own ideas. Other people's ideas, as such, cannot constitute *my* knowledge; I must, with the help of suggestions provided by other people and their writings, create my own world, reconstruct the ideas for myself, and in the process I shall inevitably alter them to some extent.

> 'What happens with language happens with everything else that enters into the life of the spirit. There is no imitation or repetition, and nothing is preserved intact; everything is renewed. The man who lives a truly human life is bound to be an innovator, a creator who lets nothing leave his forge, as it were, that does not bear the stamp of his personality.'[12]

This is one aspect of Gentile's thought about knowledge and education. It involves a strong antipathy to teaching children a digested and organised set of facts, a powerful insistence on the importance of their growing up active and creative, to think their own thoughts, and create their own world. If one read only the passages which I have quoted, and the numerous other passages along similar lines which can be found in his works, with their emphasis on the interior life of the individual, it would be difficult to understand how the man could have had even a passing enthusiasm for Fascism, muchless how he could have

become its major intellectual propagandist over a period of many years. There is no connection, or even compatibility, between this side of Gentile and the indoctrination, the suppression of dissent, the general authoritarianism of Fascist society. One can see how he might have admired Mussolini, as a man who put the stamp of his own strong personality on all his thoughts and actions, but not how he could have had any sympathy for his imposition of conformity on the mass of the people.

However there is another aspect of Gentile's thought where one *can* find a link with Fascism. To this I now want to turn.

The Individual and Society

In reading Gentile one is inevitably struck by his strong consciousness of his Italian nationality. Although he was obviously proficient and well-read in several languages (at least French, German and Latin as well as Italian) his writing does not convey the impression of a cosmopolitan culture in the way that much European writing does. His many literary references are almost exclusively to Italian authors: to Dante, Leopardi, Manzoni. His philosophical references range more widely, but one finds him very often addressing himself to Italian writers who outside that country would not be generally given the highest degree of prominence in the history of philosophy: Machiavelli, Vico, Giordano Bruno. He devoted a large part of his academic research to editing and discussing the works of such figures as these in the history of Italian philosophy. He edited for a period a journal called *Critical Journal of Italian Philosophy;* the difference in form between this title and that of a journal of the present day, such as the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, is significant; in the latter it is only the journal, not the philosophy, which is tied to a specific country.

Not only was he himself intensely conscious of his Italian nationality, but he thought it important for all children to grow up with the same feeling of national identity. In *The Reform of Education*, his most accessible work on education for the English-speaking world, he wrote that the school must be 'animated, and vivified by the spiritual breath of the fatherland.'[13] Indeed the first chapter of that book has the title "Education and Nationality", and is devoted to urging at length the same argument, that teachers must share this strong consciousness of national identity, and foster it in their students by means which are relatively obvious: a concentration of attention and admiration on *Italian* literature, *Italian* geography, history, heroes, policital tradition, and so on.

One might suspect that this emphasis was due to the peculiar circumstances that produced this book. It originated in a series of lectures which he gave to teachers in Trieste, after that city had been incorporated into Italy as part of the sweeping territorial re-arrangements that followed World War I. Perhaps *anyone* would have stressed Italian national identity in speaking to a group of teachers who, together with their students, had only recently had that nationality conferred on them. However one finds the same emphasis in his writing on education and society both before and after this work. He was not adjusting his message to the occasion; he was chosen for the occasion because his message could be relied on to suit it so neatly. It is stated equally clearly and strongly in this passage from his last book, which was not written for a specific audience of any sort:

> 'The political sense is the soil in which the tree of the State sends down its roots. Abstract conviction of the intimate connection between oneself and the life of the State is not enough. There are so many things we know and believe, but we do not feel them.'[14]

Why did he lay so much importance on this strong feeling, of being involved in the communal life of the society? I want to explore this question over the next few pages.

Gentile thought very poorly of the tradition of social thought variously labelled individualism or liberalism: the tradition to which Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill were notable contributors, and which is still alive and well, particularly in the U.S.A.

According to this school of thought one should begin with individual human beings, each singly looking after his or her own affairs and seeking his or her fortune, as the starting-point for the explanation and justification of social organisations. In some statements of this theory of society there is a myth of an original social contract, before which no society existed; there were only unco-ordinated, perhaps mutually hositle, single individuals. These individuals decided that there was a better way to live, and agreed to co-operate, to form a society, for certain specific purposes, notably for the maintenance of order and safety, for protection against external aggression, and for the greater efficiency in production made possible by the division of labour.

Society was, and ought always to remain, a device for the convenience of the individual members, who, according to the social contract myth, preceded it in time, and whose existence is seen as more fundamental. Only individuals should be seen as having rights or claims or purposes; all references to communal goals which cannot be reduced to individual goals are illegitimate. (In spite of the title of his *Social Contract*, Rousseau does not really fit into this individualistic pattern). Society has no ultimate value in itself; it is only an instrument for securing what is valued by individuals.

The method usually recommended for ensuring this proper subordination of society to the individuals who compose it is to cut the scope of communal, state activities to the bare minimum, leaving as much scope as possible for individual freedom and initiative. This line of argument, applied to various specific topics, may be traced through the political writings of John Locke to those of John Stuart Mill, and through to the 20th century proponents of individualism. So it is argued that religion should be a matter for personal decision, private enterprise should control all economic activities, and in the more extreme forms, as in the writings of Ayn Rand, there are proposals to abandon public schooling and social welfare programmes, reducing the scope of government almost to law enforcement. All such proposals display the same tendency to regard with antagonism any encroachments of the public sector on what is seen as properly the private sector of life.

Gentile strongly disapproved of this view of the relation between the individual and society: a view which, as he correctly observed, denies 'that the State is anything original', and holds that 'the individual must be the only source of legal right since he alone really exists'.[15] He put the contrary view, that society, the State, is just as original and fundamental an entity as the individual person, and cannot be regarded as a device created by independently existing individuals for their own purposes. His argument was that it is impossible even to conceive of an individual person existing prior to or apart from a social context.

> 'The conception of the individual as a social atom is a pure fiction of the imagination based on an analogy with material composites whose parts exist prior to their composition.'[16]

This notion of the individual as the basic, original, potentially independent entity is, he claimed, an *abstract idea*. The second chapter of *The Reform of Education* is designed to show that 'the particular or empirical personality, as we are usually accustomed to consider it, is nothing more than an abstraction.'[17]

Here is one of the points at which a reader brought up in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical style is likely to pause, puzzled, and suspect a printers' error. Surely, we feel inclined to

protest, the individual person must be a real concrete thing; if one or other of individual and society is an abstract concept, then it must be society.

However, Gentile meant what he wrote. He was drawing on a line of idealist thinking going back as far as Hegel, in whom so many of his ideas have their roots. This is the doctrine of internal relations, according to which the distinction between the qualities internal to a thing, which are essential to it, and its relations with other things, which are not part of its essential character, is not made. It is held, rather, that a thing is changed, and therefore partly constituted by, the relations which it has with other things. These relations are therefore not external to the thing, but parts of its essential nature. It follows that nothing can be properly understood if it is examined in isolation. If you study it apart from its context, the wholes of which it is a part, you have *abstracted* it from its environment (hence the conclusion that the idea of the individual, original and independent, is an *abstract* idea) and you are sure to miss something essential about it.[18]

So Gentile insists that an individual person is essentially and fundamentally a member of a society; if he were not this, then he would not be an individual person either. He illustrates this in two ways. The first is with reference to the acquisition and use of language:

> 'The language that every man uses is that of his fathers, the language of his tribe or of his clan, of his city or his nation. It is his and yet not his; and he cannot use it to say "This is *my* view" unless at the same time he can say "This is *our* view." The community to which an individual belongs is the basis of his spiritual existence; it speaks through his mouth, feels with his heart, and thinks with his brain."[19]

This would be difficult to question as a whole; no individual ever created his own language. The passage in which it is asserted that opinions are necessarily communal views as well as individual views must be worrying to the individualist, who habitually thinks of *personal* conviction, *private* conscience. But it is undeniable that the language of a particular historic community, which any individual learns, has embedded in it a complex of concepts, assumptions, evaluative orientations, which he cannot *entirely* reject while continuing to use the language.

Gentile was not saying that all members of a society speak, write and think alike, or that they ought to do so. On the contrary, he went on to say that it is in the use of language that individuals most develop and display their individuality. But he argued that they could not do this unless they had already absorbed the language of the group, together with the body of concepts and assumptions embedded in it. They need the collective medium, the communal tradition, in order to express any individuality of their own.

So membership of a community, involvement in a community, on the one hand, and individuality on the other, are not in conflict with each other, as some forms of the individualistic tradition would have it. They are essential to each other: different aspects of the one concrete reality. The example of language acquisition is really a neat illustration of the point. In this argument, readers well-versed in the thought of Dewey will hear a snatch of a familiar theme: the dissolution of what are mistakenly considered antagonistic dualities, into mutually necessary aspects of single realities. One can, of course, feel the force of this argument of Gentile's, without being committed to his recommendations about fostering in children a strong, narrow feeling of national identity: a policy which would make the schools nationalistic to the point of chauvinism. The linguistic and cultural heritage of any nation includes a vast amount which originated beyond its boundaries, and which could lead to a much broader self-identification. To foster strong nationalistic feeling teachers must be quite selective in what they choose from the cultural tradition. Gentile's argument could be put to different uses, but there is no doubt about the use to which he wanted to put it.

The second illustration of his assertion that one cannot adequately conceive of the single person as a separate unit independent of the social whole, draws on the moral philosophy of Kant. Kant argued that rational moral action was action in accordance with a maxim which I could clear-headedly and consistently will to be a law universally obeyed. In the most powerful of his examples, he takes the case of a man who needs money, and who considers borrowing it and giving a promise of repayment which he knows that he will be unable to fulfil. He is entitled to regard this as justified, only if he can will that *everybody* who is in need of money, should raise a loan by giving a promise that cannot be fulfilled. However, he cannot will this, since if everybody did behave in this way, then the social practices of promising, and of lending and borrowing, could not exist.

Gentile picked up this Kantian account of the core of morality and used it for his own purposes. As he argued, this disposition to see one's behaviour in a universal light (how would it be if *everyone* behaved like this?) is essential to rational, consciously decided action. Whether conforming to the general morality of the time or sinning against it, a person 'sets up a law for himself and observes it at that moment as one which ought to be universally valid.'[20] His claim was that in considered decision and action one necessarily sees oneself not just as a single individual, but as a member, a representative member, of a group whose members all act in this way. Anyone who did not see his actions in this collective, communal light would not be an individual person either: he would be merely animal, acting from simple impulse without any rational consideration of what he *ought* to do.

This is presented as a second argument, following the one based on language acquisition, to support the contention that the individual cannot be thought about in isolation: that he must be seen as essentially and fundamentally a member of a society. Not much consideration is needed to see that the two arguments, even if both are accepted as beyond criticism, do not support the same conclusion. They do not illustrate the same point. When I speak English I do so both as an individual and as a representative member of the English-speaking people. This is an actually existing tradition constituted by historical groups of real people speaking in certain ways. Unless I conform fairly closely to the accepted patterns of speech, then what I say will not make much sense to anyone.

But when I am deciding something in accordance with the principles of Kant's moral philosophy, that is, considering what it would be like if everyone behaved like this, I am not seeing myself as a representative member of an actual historical community. Perhaps in fact people keep only 70% of their promises. To be a fair sample of that community I should keep only 70% of mine. But on the basis of his argument, Kant would conclude that I ought *never* break mine. In acting like this I would see myself as representative not for the somewhat unreliable real community in which I live, but for an imaginary community — an ideal community, in which everyone keeps promises all the time. Obviously this ideal community is not restricted to any geographical boundaries. Kant would have us consider how we would want *all mankind* to act, in deciding how we ought to act.

Let me stress again, perhaps to the point of tedium, how different these two notions are: a) the notion that rational individuals must see themselves as conforming to and representing the actual community in which they live, and b) the notion that rational individuals must see themselves as conforming to and representing the ideal community in which they would want to live. One finds Gentile shifting backwards and forwards between these two notions, especially in his last book, in a way that makes one wonder whether he appreciated how

large a gap there is between them. For instance on two successive pages of *Genesis and Structure of Society* he wrote:

> 'Everyone does only what, at the moment of action, he regards as conforming to a law which is law for him because it is law for all who belong to the community to which he may at a given moment have reference'[21] and 'We must distinguish here between what is *de facto* and what is *de jure;* between the community as it is and the community as it ought to be, and as an unconquerable moral conviction assures us that in the end it will be. For in the end *vox Populi vox Dei,* but only in the end.'[22]

So his arguments, as I said at the outset, do not all point in the same direction. His epistemology is individualistic to the point where it hints at solipsism. On the relation between the individual and society, some strands of his argument are about the necessity for solidarity with the actual society in which one lives, while other strands defend the possibility of the individual's being quite sceptical about his country and its policies, and even standing out against the actual society in which he lives, for the sake of an ideal image of society, to which his commitment really belongs.

In spite of this ambiguity in his theoretical arguments, when he addressed himself to more practical issues in educational and political policy he could produce some very unambiguous statements, which make it clear that his support for Mussolini was not entirely a case of mistaken identity. For the Hegelian reasons which have been mentioned, he presented an organic view of the community as a complex whole just as original and fundamental as the individual, and therefore equally a locus of ultimate value. He criticised the individualistic tradition because it 'smashes and destroys the substantial unity of human community, making it no more than an accident and depriving it of value as an end in itself.'[23]

The State or society, in his view, is the individual writ large, just as the individual is the society writ small: 'The State is the universal aspect of the individual.'[24] Because of this he saw it as not only proper, but essential, for the State to influence and control *all* aspects of the lives of its citizens, by schooling, control of the media, and legislation. He rejected the individualistic concept of a *limited* State, set up to perform specified functions such as the maintenance of law and order, and restricting its concern for education to ensuring the availability of non-ideological core of learning, while leaving other areas of life, such as religion, to private choice, unrestricted by State educational policy or legislation. In short he rejected wholesale the distinction between public and private:

> 'The State includes, unifies and fulfils every human activity, every form or element of human nature, so that every concept of the State that omits some element of human nature is inadequate.'[25]

In writing this he rejected the distinction between society, as involving almost all human activity, much of it through *voluntary* co-operation, and the State, as involving a more limited range of communal activity which is properly under communal *control.* For him the scope of the State is unlimited.

In particular, because the State is the universal aspect of the individual, the person writ large, it should have a set of purposes, communal goals, in which all its members participate. This position sets Gentile in sharp conflict with the individualistic tradition, within which only individual people, fundamentally, are entitled to claim intentions or purposes. Referring with approval to the ideas of Mazzini, Gentile wrote:

> 'The nation is substantially . . . the common will of a people which affirms itself and thus secures self-realisation. A nation is a nation only when it wills to be one. I said, when it really wills, not when it merely says it does. It must therefore act in such a manner as to realise its own personality in the form of a State beyond which there is no collective will, no common personality of the people. And it must act seriously, sacrificing the individual to the collective whole, and welcoming martyrdom, which in every case is but the sacrifice of the

individual to the universal, the lavishing of our own self to the ideal for which we toil.'[26]

This is a typically strong expression of his insistence that individuals should be brought up with a strong feeling of involvement in the traditions, the communal life and the collective purposes of the society in which they live. In practice, in matters of more concrete policy, he tended to come down on the side of solidarity with the collective will of the actual, historical society, rather than with the ideal community of all human beings, to which some strands of his argument make reference. Accordingly he had little interest in defending for the individual areas of liberty from the power of the State, as the following passage makes clear:

> 'Mazzini desired liberty, as every man does who is aware of his own nature; but he knew that it does not belong to an individual in the abstract, but to the People, the concrete substance of every individual.'[27]

In a footnote to this paragraph he followed the same disturbing line of argument to a more extreme and explicit position:

> 'The liberty of the citizen is the liberty of the State. There can be no liberty within the State unless it is independent in external relations. But external independence involves war and hence a limitation of internal liberty; and without this limit liberty is impossible because independence is impossible. Generally speaking, when the authority and autonomy of the State is shaken, the foundation of liberty is compromised and undermined.'

It should be noted that neither these passages nor the last previous passage quoted are taken from his polemical writings in defence of Fascism; the last two are from *Genesis and Structure of Society,* written in retirement several months before the author's death, and the preceding passage was from *The Reform of Education,* written before Mussolini's rise to power.

Quite apart, then, from what he wrote for propaganda purposes, Gentile was prepared on sober reflection to defend unlimited authority for the State over its own citizens, and a belligerent attitude to other countries. He seemed to consider external aggression necessary to provide focus and exercise for the national feeling, the collective will and collective effort of the People. He criticised the ideal of world peace in this way:

> 'The State, despite its name, is not something static. It is a process . . . If the State presented itself to us as something fine and finished, if . . . there were no more *otherness* to conquer, since the dream of *perpetual peace,* the eternal heart's desire of humanity fleeing from the horrors of war, had come true, then the movement which constitutes the life of the State, the life of the spirit itself, would cease. And instead of the best of all States we should have the death of all States.'[28]

One sees how he could support even much a military adventure as Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia.

Yet he was not a national or racial chauvinist, arguing for Italy's right to supremacy over its neighbours as Hitler argued for German supremacy. Gentile's position was general: *any* State must continue to struggle with its neighbours, as an expression of its own collective personality and will.

Philosophy and Real Life

It is in the last few passages quoted that Gentile was closest to the internal authoritarianism and external belligerence of Fascism. But the opinions expressed here are not really necessitated by the whole sweep of his views on the person and society. His view on the necessity for each person to build up his own idea of reality in his own way might well have led him to the conclusion that children should grow up in an environment which is open to and tolerant of a wide variety of opinions. His view on the need to see oneself, in rational action, as representing the ideal society, the community of all mankind, might well have

suggested to him that children ought to be educated to take a very cautious and critical attitude towards the society in which they live, rather than to feel deeply involved in and committed to it. His view of an organic society did not have to be identified with the *State;* he might have insisted on the need for individuals to be deeply involved in the collective purposes and the collective identity of *voluntary* social organisations, while limiting the *coercive* power of the State, in the fashion of John Stuart Mill, to a restricted sphere. And a people might surely find a set of shared purposes on which to focus its collective personality, and will, which is more intelligent and constructive than victory in territorial squabbles with its neighbours. There are many points at which his own arguments might well have led him in a different direction, and made it impossible for him to support a Fascist government.

Even as it stands there is a great deal in his social thought, and the personality which it displays, which commands respect. I have habitually and not very thoughtfully regarded myself as an individualist, without much sympathy with arguments for the necessity of identification with and involvement in collective purposes. But reading him in contrast with more recent American expressions of an extreme individualistic viewpoint by writers such as Ayn Rand and Robert J. Ringer, for whom the only rational motive is self-interest, and who regard taxation for communal purposes such as social welfare as closely akin to armed robbery, I feel the force of Gentile's attack on at least this form of individualism.

How can we explain his practical support of Mussolini, and those of his views which were in tune with Facsim, when there are so many points at which his thought might have taken a different turn? It is interesting to note that many of his arguments have fairly close counterparts in the arguments of John Dewey. He too was highly critical of the passive model for perception and thought which is presented in the epistemological tradition fathered by Locke, and stressed the *activity* of the mind. He too insisted that thought and action always have a social, a communal aspect, which is just as fundamental and original as their individual aspect. But he did not lean towards Fascism, either in his political stance or in his educational thought.

No doubt many factors were involved in Gentile's bridging of the gap between his general arguments and his pro-Fascist stance in politics and education. His own personality must have inclined him to favour the community solidarity of thought and feeling which Mussolini tried to inspire and impose, and a psychologist could have something to say about this. A Marxist would be disposed to ask which class in Italian Society stood to profit from a Fascist regime, and whether Gentile was identified with that class.

But probably more important than either of these factors was the social and economic condition of Gentile's Italy. It had a short history as a unified nation in modern times. Its people were (and still are, to a degree) more inclined to think of themselves as Tuscans, Romans, Sicilians, than as Italians; there was little feeling of a single national identity. And there was little to point to in the present or recent past on which a sense of national identity might be built. Italy was not a powerful nation, economically or militarily; its greatest glories were the crumbling remnants of a distant past. It is not hard to see how a man with Gentile's own personal feeling for Italy could have come to believe that it was just such a leader as Mussolini, with all his authoritarianism and his belligerence, who could weld together, out of this collection of regional fragments and remote memories, a single nation with confidence and pride in itself. The outcome, as far as he lived to see it, no doubt fell short of his ideals, but evidently he saw no available alternative.

Notes

[1] For comments of the latter sort, see H.S. Harris' splendidly informed and documented *Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960), and his translation of Gentile's *Genesis and Structure of Society* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960).

[2] Giovanni Gentile, *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 1.

[3] Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, trans. D. Bigongiari (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), p. 65.

[4] Giovanni Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, trans. H.S. Harris (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 79.

[5] Gentile, *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, p. 58.

[6] *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, p. 64.

[7] *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, p. 67.

[8] Gentile, *The Reform of Eduction*, p. 241.

[9] *The Reform of Education*, p. 17.

[10] *The Reform of Education*, p. 190-1.

[11] *The Reform of Education*, p. 157.

[12] Gentile, Genesis and Structure of Society, p. 85.

[13] Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, p. 17.

[14] Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 182.

[15] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 180.

[16] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 81.

[17] Gentile, The Reform of Education, p. 18.

[18] For a clear discussion of this doctrine and some of its applications, see D.C. Phillips, *Holistic Thought in Social Science* (Stanford: Standord Univ. Press, 1976).

[19] Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 82.

[20] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 82.

[21] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 82.

[22] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 83.

[23] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 80.

[24] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 131.

[25] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 135.

[26] Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, p. 13.

[27] Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 130.

[28] *Genesis and Structure of Society*, p. 164.