

## Fichte and Gentile - Notes about the relationship between Transcendental Idealism and Actual Idealism.

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay is to express some considerations about the theoretical relation which bonds the Actual Idealism of Giovanni Gentile to the "system of freedom" concerning the *Wissenschaftslehre* or 'Doctrine of Science' of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The Doctrine seems to have rightful claim to be the philosophical system nearest to the Actualistic code, which was to be openly developed by Gentile in the early years of twentieth century, and the seeds of which had already been sewn by the monographic studies dedicated to Rosmini and Gioberti, from one side, and to Marx, from another. The essay discusses the conceptual lineage of Actual Idealism, it's specific links to Doctrine of Science as a critique of Kant and Hegel, and possible reasons for the widely perceived lack of acknowledgement perceptible in the Italian thinker's work.

**Key-Words:** Gentile, Fichte, praxis, Actual Idealism, Doctrine of science

"An Idealism so strictly conceived to play the role assigned by Fichte to philosophy as epistemological doctrine; a role neglected even by Hegel." (G. GENTILE, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*)

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### 1. Foreword

The principal idea of this essay is to express some considerations about the theoretical relation which bonds the Actual Idealism of Giovanni Gentile to the "system of freedom"<sup>1</sup> concerning the *Wissenschaftslehre* of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

On the basis of an accurate analysis, widely underlined by a vast amount of critical study<sup>2</sup>, the Doctrine of Science seems to have right to the claim that it is the philosophical system is nearest to the Actualistic code, which was to be openly developed by Gentile from the early years of twentieth century, and which had already germinated in his monographic studies dedicated to Rosmini and Gioberti<sup>3</sup>, from one perspective, and to Marx<sup>4</sup>, from another.

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<sup>1</sup> See L. Pareyson, *Fichte. Il sistema libertà*, Mursia, Milano 1976 (first edition: 1950), pp. 13-22.

<sup>2</sup>Such studies will be examined and discussed furthermore in this essay.

<sup>3</sup>See G. Gentile, *Rosmini e Gioberti. Saggio storico sulla Filosofia italiana del Risorgimento*, 1898, Sansoni, Firenze 1955, p. 81 (all quotations from the pages of the Italian edition are translated directly by the author since Gentile's works are lacking a full definitive translation in English and moreover the body of the translated works is not always consistent). In the text on Rosmini and Gioberti, it is already present the assumption of the idea of "how the reality itself and the thought seen as the same principle of being"

This kind of consideration necessarily implies taking seriously the theoretical bond that links the philosophical reflection of Gentile to the *System der Freiheit* of Fichte, first of all by exploring the principal points in Gentile's works where the Fichteian system is explicitly discussed, but also by critically analysing the theoretical plexus which, though not directly invoking Fichte's name, develops - with some very strong echoes- some of the main cores of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Such an operation mainly involves an exploration and a provisional discussion of the critical studies on the subject appearing over the years. On the other hand, it is irrelevant to the principal purposes of this survey to enter an analysis of the relations that, on the social and political level, bond the Gentile's system to Fichte's.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. A Fichteian reform of Hegel's dialectical method?

With regards to the theoretical relation between Gentile's Actual Idealism and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, there seems to be an apparent paradox which has been underlined by Aldo Masullo in his important research of 1982, dedicated to "The thought of G.A. Fichte in the Italian culture"<sup>6</sup>. The paradox can be so formulated, in deliberately radical terms - as we'll see - so as to require a further investigation: On the one hand, Fichte's "system of freedom" represents the real "secret source", the inspiration on which Gentile built the code of Actual Idealism, through a so-called Fichteian reform of Hegel's argumentation; by virtue of which reform the fundamental category becomes that of the 'act-in-act,' already present, though in a form not so easily assimilated as that of Gentile, in Fichte's Doctrine of science. On the other hand Gentile, who incessantly refers to Kant, Spaventa, and most often to Hegel - a "reformed" Hegel in any case - rarely mentions Fichte, and only then a marginal way;

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(*ibidem*). See A. Galimberti, *Gioberti, Gentile, Rosmini*, in "Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana", n. 2 (1978), pp. 172-187.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Gentile, *La filosofia di Marx*, Sansoni, Firenze 1974<sup>5</sup> (1899), p. 78. See G. Sasso, *Giovanni Gentile: gli scritti su Marx*, in "La Cultura", anno XXXV, n. 1 (1977), pp. 33-82; P. Serra, *Una critica al materialismo storico. Gentile su Marx*, in "Il Cannocchiale", n. 2 (1993), pp. 69-81; A. Signorini, *Il giovane Gentile e Marx*, Giuffrè, Milano 1966. In the two juvenile works it is established the coincidence between dissociated Marxism, seen as praxis philosophy, from materialism, and dissociated Giobertism, seen as philosophy of creation, from the Platonism and ontological philosophy: this coincidence defines Actual Idealism (see A. Del Noce, *Giovanni Gentile. Per una interpretazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1990, p. 93).

<sup>5</sup> See R.S. Harris, *Fichte e Gentile*, in "Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana", 1964, p. 557: "Fichte e Gentile come to identical results in interpreting the history of their nations, they preach the same political doctrines and keep in the same high consideration the problem of national education".

<sup>6</sup> See A. Masullo, *Il pensiero di Fichte nella cultura italiana*, in "Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Napoli", Giannini, Napoli 1984, pp. 159-160.

never recognizing the latter's importance for the genesis of the Actualistic dialectic, and quoting him only in order to criticize him and to stress the distance which separates him from that system of thought which, at a first sight, would seem to be so near to Actual Idealism.

Therefore, the paradox underlined by Masullo lies in the fact that Gentile's reform of Hegel's dialectic ends up being conceived by the Sicilian philosopher in a way that removes Fichte's contribution to the movement in which it, in reality, it is not only utilised, but systematically assimilated. Hence Gentile's Actual Idealism would come to a maturation in the elaborating of theoretical points already present in Fichte, albeit with a different slant (e.g. the centrality of the act as a supposition of the fact, the deduction of the being from act-in-act, the declination of the Idealism in a subjective way, the accomplishment of the changing *transzendentalphilosophisch* started by Kant,) and likewise it could be read as a continuous reducing, or in some ways neutralizing *tout court* the importance of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as the main source of its own discourse.

As regards the removal of the Fichteian element, a convincing answer can be found in the aforementioned text by Masullo. Retracing in its essential features Fichte's *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the Italian nineteenth-century culture, Masullo has shown how reductively, in the Italian environment, the thinker of Rammenau was interpreted: that there was a surreptitious flattening of the perspective of Transcendental Idealism in reference to the epistemological problems, with the attendant neglect of the "extraordinary richness of Fichte's ethical, juridical and political ideas, and the relations intrinsically linking these to their theoretical elaborations, which are sufficient in their own right to allow the inference of one another's true significance".<sup>7</sup>

In other words, according to Masullo, in the dominant Italian nineteenth-century reception, (Bertrando Spaventa primarily), Fichte has been exclusively read as a theorist of epistemology, in a hermeneutical way which not only doesn't do justice to, but indeed, tends to remove the socio-political as well as the ontological and metaphysical perspective.

The consequence of such a background manifests, to Masullo's mind in a disquieting and paradoxical form, "In Giovanni Gentile's 'silence'<sup>8</sup>", namely the aforementioned conspicuous and continuously repeated omission of any discussion of Fichteian thought, so present in the theoretical foundations of Actualist code.

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<sup>7</sup>Ivi, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 160.

This is a silence that, in one respect, inherits the nineteenth-century interpretative mode which, with Spaventa, makes Fichte a mere point of transition – in itself scarcely relevant - in the evolution of the German thought leading from Kant to Hegel (this hermeneutical tradition is not only Italian; if we consider that it is found, albeit in a different shape, also in the Richard Kroner by *Von Kant bis Hegel*<sup>9</sup>), and in another respect, it marks the presence of a deliberate neglect .

In the *General Theory of Spirit as Pure Act* as well as in the *Reform of Hegel's dialectic*, Gentile discusses with a particular rigor and method the passage from the Kantian to the Hegelian system, yet always omitting the theoretical solutions proposed by Fichte (in contrast, they were at least analyzed by Kroner, though he presented them as a mere point of transition to the Hegelian absolute ideal).

The aforementioned removal would be due to the fact that Gentile was, after all, perfectly aware – to the point of having to hide it - of the profound influence exerted by the *Wissenschaftslehre* on the genesis of Actual Idealism and its Hegelian reform<sup>10</sup>. Yet at the same time Gentile, son of his time and heir to the aforementioned only-epistemological interpretation of Fichte typical in the Italian tradition, ends up criticising - in the rare passages of his works where he confronts himself with the German philosopher - not properly Fichte, but his stereotyped image: this last construction being not only incongruent with Fichte's authentic profile, but could also, strictly speaking, be deconstructed on its own terms.

So, on the one hand Gentile - after Spaventa - tends to undervalue Fichte's contribute (as well as Schelling's) as a mere point of transition between Kant and Hegel (the only two authors of that time with whom Gentile engages directly, assuming them perhaps to be the most credible references for Actual Idealism): with the obvious and logical consequence that, in the system of Actual Idealism, neither is there nor can there be any space for a critical and strict discussion of the Doctrine of Science, dismissively regarded as a transition system between Kant and Hegel, or as a mere epistemological Doctrine devoid of ontological interest. And yet, on the other hand, Gentile would have had to remove Fichte's presence due to the excessive theoretical proximity between his

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<sup>9</sup>R. Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, Mohr, Tübingen 1921-1924, 2 voll.

<sup>10</sup>Roger Holmes unconvincingly resolves the issue inherent to the reasons why Gentile never expressed the name of Fichte, though he metabolized his thought: "Fichte was principally concerned about replacing the empirical deduction of categories executed by Kant with a systematic deduction of them as necessary act of the Ego. This problem, the second of the huge problems Fichte inherits from Kant, is according to Gentile a pseudo-problem" (R. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1937, p. 563).

own system and the Fichteian one: proximity by virtue of which Gentile would have to face his own theoretical dependence in reference to the *Wissenschaftslehre* and, moreover, accept the assumption of the latter as the foundation of Actual Idealism and of his own Fichteian reform of Hegel's dialectic.

In Masullo's words, it would clearly emerge how, as Gentile "recognized his problem once and for all identical to that already questioned a century before by Fichte ... i.e. that the assumption that "the absolute reality is the same activity of the mind in its expression", he couldn't have helped but lose interest in the erroneous solution being attempted by himself, and so abandon it to its own destiny, avoiding the distraction and the delay of a futile close comparison and an analytical examination. The Gentilian removal of Fichte should be, consequently, interpreted as a systematically and deliberately taken choice<sup>11</sup>, intended to - this is the main point - hide the thinker towards whom the Actualistic dialectic owes most in theoretical terms.

Therefore, in the light of these considerations, it is necessary to explore more closely and in a more concrete way the connection between Gentile and Fichte, questioning Gentile's works as well as examining the core of the Actualistic dialectic where the assimilation of the *Transzendentalphilosophie* of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is most in evidence.

### 3. Gentile as reader of Fichte

The fact of the dependence of Gentile's Actualist code on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, the critical studies have always maintained, though from different points of view with different results. Besides the already mentioned Masullo, Roger Holmes, in his monographic study *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile* (1937) –a true milestone in the studies on the Actualistic dialectic – openly addressed the nexus which unmistakably links the philosophy of Pure Act to the Doctrine of science:

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<sup>11</sup>A. Masullo, *Il pensiero di Fichte nella cultura italiana*, cit., p. 160. "So, in the Italian speculative speech till the second world war, the destiny of Fichte's presence has been consumed, sterilized and what has remained is the problematic charge, repressing every scientific and historical reconnaissance, in the lanes of the double and the opposing extreme refusal of those anti-idealistic who were getting rid of that thought for being an arrogant philosophy of the claimed infinity of the Ego, and of those idealistic who abruptly handled that as it were a missing Idealism, incapable of intending the infinity of the Ego" (*ibidem*).

“When Gentile defines his own system as Actual Idealism he should acknowledge as his direct forerunner the Actual Idealism of Fichte's Philosophy”<sup>12</sup>.

Another largely converging interpretation lies in *History of Italian Philosophy* by Eugenio Garin<sup>13</sup>. If, as it has emerged, the scholars have unanimously underlined Gentile's missing acknowledgement of his very and crystal-clear dependence from the *System der Freiheit*, it is also necessary to point out that it establishes, so as to say, a real anomaly in the established practice of the philosopher of Actual Idealism. Indeed we know that Gentile has the habit of showing, with extreme academic rigour, the previous positions instead of his own, his own philosophy which, in a Hegelian way, questions the circularity between philosophy and its history and, in so doing, acknowledges the development of the thought in its own historical emergence.

Being always careful to show the heritage and dependence nexus of philosophies in their essential historical development, and thus of Actual Idealism as a synthesis of the achievements of the German Idealism and of its reception by Spaventa, Gentile seems to omit Fichte's exact name, which rarely appears in his reference records, based on the suggestion of Henry Siltou Harris in his important essay *Fichte and Gentile* (1964), in these references the space made for Fichte is truly modest”<sup>14</sup>, as much in the historical records as in the theoretical works.

Also Harris, like Masullo, underlines Gentile's dependence from Fichte: without the German philosopher it could not have been possible to “reform” Hegel, nor to realize the “Copernican revolution” started by Kant. To be more specific, as pointed out by Harris, “Gentile moves from the same position from which Fichte started<sup>15</sup>, not as to abandon Kant, but to develop his thought in a more coherent and, so to speak, “more Kantian” way, removing him from the dogmatic residual of *Ding an sich*. Gentile's own works, then, examine and critically discuss Kant with an essentially Fichteian aim, overcoming as well as actualizing the philosopher of Königsberg in an Idealist system (*Wissenschaftslehre* in Fichte, Actual Idealism in Gentile) assumed as the realized Copernican revolution.

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<sup>12</sup> R. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> E. Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, Einaudi, Torino 1966, II, p. 654.

<sup>14</sup> H.S. Harris, *Fichte e Gentile*, cit., p. 557.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 558.

Therefore, Fichte and Gentile "build on a radical critique of the Kantian philosophy"<sup>16</sup> in order to develop it while leading it to its realization. Gentile, in a Fichteian way, completes Kant without clearly mentioning his own solution's being based on Fichte: not only, as historian of philosophy, does he fail take into consideration, beyond the merest of hints, the perspective with which Fichte had realized Kant, but nor does he, from a theoretical point of view, force himself to make his dependence clear, or even, later on, his own discordance in reference to the Fichteian solution to Kant's illogicality<sup>17</sup>.

What is certain is that, from a *rein theoretisch* point of view, Gentile overcomes Kant in the same way Fichte did: concerning knowledge, the Ego discovers nothing but itself as a pure activity in act (the *Tat-Handlung* of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is metabolized by Gentile into the category of "autoctisi"), with the consequence - entirely Fichteian - by virtue of which the object of philosophy is not the being considered in itself, but the laws thanks to which the Ego discovers itself as an act-in-act, as unlimited autoctical activity.

Hence philosophy cannot be a *scientia scientiae*, namely a *Wissenschaftslehre*<sup>18</sup>: the way to achieve it is through an original reflection with which the Ego limits itself (becoming an object and, in so doing, presenting itself as a Non-Ego), so as to gain awareness of itself through the dialectic process of the relation of mutual mediation between the Ego and the Non-Ego<sup>19</sup>. This operation puts into effect a rhythm thanks to which the Ego, in its development, denies itself continuously - simultaneously becoming Non-Ego - in order to be able to realize itself (act-in-act), in other words to overcome actively, by action, its own negation. In Fichte, as well as in Gentile, the Ego resolves itself into a practical energy, into a constant negation of its own negating. Being an activity, the Ego cannot rest statically, in an inactive form. It must indeed negate itself again and again, which means objectivizing itself, then again and again it must continuously overcome the negation imposed and removed. The Ego cannot be Ego if not by being Non-Ego.

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<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 559.

<sup>17</sup> "He [Gentile] acknowledges that Fichte has hugely stepped on in the Kantian criticism and in the development of the dialectic method; but he is not concerned about pointing out in what Fichte failed and what differences his concept of dialectic from that of the forerunner" (*ibidem*).

<sup>18</sup> "He [Gentile] believes, as well as Fichte, that the origin of knowledge has to be found in the dialectic process of the thought" (ivi, p. 558).

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 561.



Not only does Gentile metabolize the overcoming-realization of Kantianism operated by Fichte, but uses the Doctrine of Science foundations so as to reform Hegel's dialectic: so far that the collection of essays dated 1913, *The reform of the Hegelian Dialectic*, might be conceived in some ways as a Fichteian reform of Hegelianism. As duly explained by Harris, Actual Idealism, to the extent that it “tries to acknowledge the content of the thought in the act itself of thinking, it is obliged to walk again the same path from Hegel to Fichte”<sup>20</sup>.

As we know, the 1913 collection aspires to prove the Hegelian philosophy, liberating it from what remains of the "dialectic of the past" which is still present in a contradictory way.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in Gentile's perspective, Hegel failed to coherently conceptualise “becoming”, since he remained, at least in part, nested in the metaphysics that – on this point converging with materialism - identifies its own object as distinct and pre-existing, in contrast with the thought which conceives it and, while conceiving it, posits it as pre-existing and with "the thought in the reality that itself realizes by conceiving it”<sup>22</sup>.

Without exaggeration, we could argue that, strictly speaking, if Hegel himself is identified by Gentile as one of the historical figures of the "dialectic of thought" (along with Kant and Plato), only Fichte seems to have a legitimate claim to the branch of lineage to which Actual Idealism itself stakes a claim: Gentile, instead, does not mention Fichte at all, refusing to give him room and, in so doing, removing him and his presence *tout court*.

As we know, in the path of Spaventa, Gentile refuses Hegel's perspective which puts, so to speak, the ideas in opposition to the thought which conceives them ("abstract concepts therefore unmoveable"), and conceives the thought and being identity in a still too static form, as if it had been already realized once for all.<sup>23</sup> This is misleading since, in this manner, the thought itself becomes objective compared with an activity that is the contemplation of the thought itself. This is the way we are led towards that "materialistic moment"<sup>24</sup> already possessed by Platonism, which used to conceive the reality as ideal but, at the same level of the material reality, unmoveable and external

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<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 558.

<sup>21</sup> See G. Plastino, *La dialettica hegeliana nella critica del Gentile*, in “Theorein”, 1966, pp. 58-63.

<sup>22</sup> G. Gentile, *I fondamenti della filosofia del diritto*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2003 (1916), p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> See F. Pardo, *La filosofia di Giovanni Gentile: genesi, sviluppo, unità sistematica, critica*, Sansoni, Firenze 1972, pp. 137 ff. With regards to a critic of the Actualistic reform, see L. Basile, *La mediazione mancata. Saggio su Giovanni Gentile*, Marsilio, Padova 2008.

<sup>24</sup> G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, vol. I, *Sommario di pedagogia generale*, 1913, Sansoni, Firenze 1982, p. 215.



compared with the thinking thought. Exactly as materialism, also spiritualism, and Hegelianism as well, end up abstracting the spirit and in so doing falling again into the contradiction inherent to the "dialectic of the thought".

With all due respect to Hegel and Plato, according to Gentile the thought, no less than consciousness of it, is never liable to be made objective because - as the Sicilian philosopher says – the thought is that which is being thought (act-in-act of thinking), in other words, as it posits itself with absolute liberty. Objectifying it has the same function as conceiving it as "been thought", i.e. as an object standing on its own, while forgetting the act that, by conceiving it, poses the thought as object in the act of the thought which conceives it during its action<sup>25</sup>.

It is in this sense that Hegel has conceived the identity of being and thought in a still too rigid form (as - we could say - *identity of being and thought* and not of *being and thinking in act*). In so doing he has not questioned the fact that such an identity is guaranteed by the thinking as act-in-act, that is the concrete act of the thinking thought that, while conceiving it, puts the subject and the object in a relation of identity and opposition. For this reason Hegel's limit is presented by the assimilating the subject with the object, the thinking with the thought, Actual present with the past. The philosopher from Stuttgart, to put it simply, failed to conceive in a coherent way "becoming" as an endless act-in-act: seen this way by Hegel, "'becoming" is truthfully a "became". Thus wrote Gentile in 1916, in *General Theory of Spirit as pure act*:

"The transcendental point of view is that which you can perceive in the reality of our thought when this is considered not as an *end-act*, but as an *act-in-act*. An act which we cannot possibly transcend, since it is our own subjectivity, ourselves; an act which never and by no means can be objectified"<sup>26</sup>.

The "dialectic of the thought" on which is based the true core of Actual Idealism reforms Hegel's dialectic<sup>27</sup>, as it considers in a Fichteian way the idea as act-in-act, or more precisely as an act of thought which put simultaneously the subject and the object into an unbreakable unity, by opposing them and resolving the opposition within the subject-object identity. In fact "the thought is - so it is in the *Reform of Hegel's dialect* -

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<sup>25</sup> See G. Chiavacci, *Il centro della speculazione gentiliana: l'attualità dell'atto*, in "Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana", 1947, pp. 74-94. See, inoltre, H.A. Cavallera, *Immagine e costruzione del reale nel pensiero di Giovanni Gentile*, Fondazione Ugo Spirito, Roma 1994.

<sup>26</sup> G. Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, Le Lettere, Firenze 1987 (1916), p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Ciardo's criticism, *Un fallito tentativo di riforma dello hegelismo: l'Idealismo attuale*, Laterza, Bari 1948.

an Act of thinking, where the thought has its foundation”<sup>28</sup>. But, perhaps, would it not be possible to find in this movement clear evidence of Gentile’s return to the *Wissenschaftslehre* as well as to the main concept of *Tat-Handlung*? Is, perhaps, the case that Actual Idealism keeps reforming the Hegelianism through Fichte?

In part is Gentile himself who concedes it, but only in a marginal form. In a brief passage of the *General Theory of Spirit as pure act*, there is an decisive recognition of the importance of the Doctrine of Science in reference to the elaboration of the Actualistic Dialectic as overcoming-realizing of Kant’s *transzendentalphilosophisch* turn as well as a reform of Hegelianism:

“An idealistic conception aims to conceive the same absolute, the overall, as idea: hence it is intrinsically absolute Idealism. But it cannot be absolute Idealism, if the idea does not coincide with the same act of knowing it. [...] A so strictly conceived Idealism plays the role assigned by Fichte to philosophy as epistemological doctrine. A role unaccomplished even by Hegel”<sup>29</sup>.

Actual Idealism - as Gentile here suggests - performs the theoretical task assigned by Fichte to knowledge; such a task that Hegel himself had not been able to perform to its conclusion (falling, indeed, into the "dialectic of the thought") and now that the Sicilian philosopher believes to have resolved with the philosophy of pure act, which of course can be assumed as the achievement of the Fichteian *Wissenschaftslehre*, or as its realization in an even more coherent form compared to Fichte’s elaboration of it. Hence the latter – it could be also maintained, making clear what the *General Theory of Spirit as Pure Act* explained - is the one who first questions the theoretical necessity of a dialectic of the thought that does not allow itself to be reabsorbed within the dialectic of the thought.

According to Gentile as well as to Fichte, the real is determined by the act-in-act of the thought that, while thinking it over, posits it into being. The object (the "Thought", The Non-Ego) never exists as a presupposition of the thought which conceives it and, in the act of so thinking it, posits itself in opposition. The being is thought, but in the sense that the being is given always and only in the act-in-act of the thinking thought, since it is Thought that - as in the *Logic System as Theory of Knowing* – “Has nothing known outside of itself, but its knowledge is the act itself of knowing”<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> G. Gentile, *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2003 (1913), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Id., *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, cit., pp. 243-244.

<sup>30</sup> Id., *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere*, 1917-1922, Le Lettere, Firenze 2003, 2 voll., I, p. 18.

Every thought presupposes an ongoing act of thought that, while thinking over it, puts it into being: "the only thought that is apparently real is the ongoing act of thinking, the determinate thought, our own thinking"<sup>31</sup> such as that concretely realized in the act that puts it in a subject-object unity and in the thinking-thought duality, always realizing the unity of the act of thinking. The subject-objective identity is not given, but it is always put on action again and again in the act of the never-ending furnace of the thinking thought.<sup>32</sup>

It is in this sense that the dialectic of the thought "does not know any previously existing world"<sup>33</sup>, as it conceives the world as the result, always recreated, of the "cosmogonic" act of the thinking thought. Such a system of thought can be found quite literally in the Fichteian *Bestimmung des Menschen* dated 1800, in which it is expressly assumed that the act-in-act of the thinking thought is *Weltschöpfer*, "creator of world"<sup>34</sup>. There is a famous passage of the *General Theory of Spirit as Pure Act* which quite literally follows the words of *Wissenschaftslehre*:

"Defy the ordinary and ignorant abstraction for which reality is what you conceive of it, whereas, if you conceive that, it can be no less than your own thought: point with a firm eye to this true and concrete reality that is the thought in act; and the dialectic of the real will appear so clear and certain as clear and certain it is to each of us having the consciousness of that which is thought: the seeing, for example, that which is seen"<sup>35</sup>.

It was Fichte who recognises in the *Ichform* as condition of possibility for the conscience the fundamental practical principle, capable of justifying the conscience and the representation in form of "facts".

In Fichte's view, in the act of thinking there is coincidence between thinking and thought (the Ego corresponds to what is determined by putting itself in the same act by which an object is confronted). As sustained in the *Sittenlehre* of Jena dated 1798, "the concept of Ego is conceived when, in the act of thinking, the *thinker* (*das Denkende*) and the *thought* (*das Gedachte*) are supposed to be identical and, vice versa, what

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<sup>31</sup> Id., *Frammenti di estetica e teoria della storia*, Le Lettere, Firenze 1992, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Id., *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere*, cit., I, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Id., *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (= GA), edited by R. Lauth and H. Jacob, Fromman-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1962 ff., I, 6, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> G. Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, cit., p. 57.

emerges in such an act of thinking is the concept of the Ego<sup>36</sup>, intended as an endless activity, as it puts itself and the object in the identity of the *putting* and the *self-putting*, in the concrete act which is put by opposing some other to the Ego.

In Gentile's as well as Fichte's opinion, the same theoretical activity ends up, therefore, falling again into the practical field, by the light of which it can be understood (in this sense, both agree that the practical justifies the reason in its unity). Gentile's example of the seeing is in itself completely Fichteian: conceiving the seeing means, likewise, "making it", that is properly seeing, in an active manner. In the *in-actu* seeing, both theory and praxis of the seeing coincide with the act in the act of the vision. According to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804, "the seeing does not allow itself to be posited other than in the form of existing as immediately alive, energetic and active"<sup>37</sup>. With the words of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova Methodo*, "the Ego of the Doctrine of Science is not a mirror but an eye"<sup>38</sup>: it does not reflect passively, but is the activity of the ongoing seeing, in accordance to a theme that will find its own proper expression in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of Königsberg dated 1807 (which indeed thematises the "Wissenschaftslehre as the art of seeing"<sup>39</sup>).

In the light of this brief crossing of some of the main theoretical plexuses of Actual dialectic, we can rightly maintain that also the Pure Act philosophy, as well as the *Wissenschaftslehre*, configures itself as a subjective Idealism: and this not only if we analyse Gentile's philosophical nomenclature (which almost literally takes after the Fichteian one considering the metaphorical of the seeing, the dialectic between Ego and Non-Ego, between thinking thought and thought being thought), but also if we examine the foundation of his own philosophising, the assumption of the ongoing activity of the Ego as constitutive of the reality.

As far as it concerns Fichte and Gentile's philosophies - as suggested by Harris - "both are based on the dialectical activity of the subject - the Ego which, by putting itself into being, at the same time does likewise with the Non-Ego, the world – seen as the origin of all the reality"<sup>40</sup>. Both resolve subjectively the subject-object dialectic

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<sup>36</sup>J.G. Fichte, *System der Sittenlehre*, 1798 (GA, I, 5, p. 37). See W. Metz, *Der oberste Deduktionsgrund der Sittlichkeit. Fichtes Sittenlehre von 1798 in ihrem Verhältnis zur Wissenschaftslehre*, in "Fichte-Studien", n. 11 (1997), pp. 147-159.

<sup>37</sup> GA, II, 8, p. 398.

<sup>38</sup> GA, IV, 3, p. 365.

<sup>39</sup> GA, II, 10, p. 113. So it is written in the twelfth lesson: the seeing itself is seen, the seeing is seen" (see GA, II, 10, p. 146). "Whatever thing exists effectively, it only exists in the knowing and to the extent in which is known effectively" (GA, II, 10, p. 190).

<sup>40</sup> H.S. Harris, *Fichte e Gentile*, cit., p. 557.

nexus by means of the act-in-act identified as the place of forming the subject-object unity, thinking and thought, Ego and Non-Ego<sup>41</sup>.

Were the Gentilian Actual Idealism to be rightly understood as a form of subjective Idealism, then, as a recovery of Fichte's Doctrine of Science in order to reform Hegel, it is Gentile himself who confirms it *apertis verbis*:

[“Upon these concepts I have continued my work, steady on the original principle that, from the subject as being subject, would have to originate all reality ,and that therefore the subject would have to be conceived in the right way in reference to this absolute fiction ”]42.

Also from this perspective it clearly arises how – according to what we just recalled by quoting the *General Theory of the Spirit as Pure Act* - Gentile unmistakably maintains that the Actualistic dialect plays the "role assigned by Fichte to philosophy as epistemology" conceiving the reality in the thought intended as an act of thinking. Actual dialectic goes beyond Kant and, concurrently, reforms Hegel on the foundation of the centrality of the ongoing activity of the Ego borrowed from the Doctrine of science.

This perspective, developed by the subjective Actual Idealism, was already central in Fichte's transcendental Idealism: not only in the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794-1795), but also in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova Methodo* (1796-1799). Fichte demonstrates, *more geometrico*, how the objective world is determined by the activity of the subject's thought, in the knowledge that all we are able to conceive presupposes the act of thinking, the action of knowing: "the basis of every consciousness must grow through the action".<sup>43</sup>

As in Gentile's opinion, also Fichte maintains that knowledge is not to be understood as inert contemplation of being as a prerequisite of the thought, but on the contrary as creative and cosmogonic action that, bringing itself into being, similarly puts the objective world in the act of knowing<sup>44</sup>. Far from being the prerequisite of the thought, the Non-Ego has the thought as prerequisite. Proceeding in a transcendental way and genetically conceiving its own object in the form of *Vorstellung des*

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<sup>41</sup> “This is the large debt Gentile owes Fichte. In fact, according to Gentile's Actual Idealism, the epistemological law of the spiritual reality is "that the object has to be resolved in the subject" (ivi, p. 562).

<sup>42</sup> G. Gentile, *Saggi critici*, Ricciardi, Napoli 1921, II, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre 1798 nova methodo*, 1798; *GA*, IV, 2, p. 40.

<sup>44</sup> “If in our view something is made in a certain way, the reason is that we see it so through our making”: *GA*, IV, 2, p. 41.

*Vorstellenden*<sup>45</sup>, the *Wissenschaftslehre* relies on the transcendental principle by which the experience as fact resolves itself in the act which actively produces the fact of the experience.

The practical act of our thought coincides with the subject that resolves in itself the object as a constructive process leaded by the same subject who, in order to objectivize the object in itself, must polarise in thinking and thought thanks to the concrete act of thinking which determines such a polarity. In the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, the theme of knowing as action is declined in a way that really seems to anticipate *in toto* the Gentilian solution also with regards to the terminology used.

The thinking process - Fichte writes - is *Act deines Geistes*, act of your Soul<sup>46</sup>: the act which generates the consciousness of the object. Then, the last "is nothing but the consciousness of your putting an object into being"<sup>47</sup>: as a consequence, the Ego is subject as well as object, namely subject-object in the sense of a returning-in-itself knowledge, which posits itself by opposing an object and which has, as condition of consciousness, the appearance of the subject as well as of the object as distinct elements in the same unitary act of thinking. By intuition of the object, the Ego concurrently identifies itself as active, as conceiving and determining the Non-Ego.

Gentile builds on the pursuit of the same subjectively-resolved subject-object unity on which Fichte laid the foundations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as well as of the activity of the *Ich* as pure *Tätigkeit*. Now, in Gentile's perspective, Fichte failed to question the problem in clear terms, leaving to Actual Idealism the legacy of the solution for the ambiguities which till then belonged to the Doctrine of science<sup>48</sup>. Gentile writes:

“Such a defect, such a contradiction within Kantianism is the issue raised by Fichte, who moves from the concept of Ego as the prior synthetic unity yet absolute making. The unity, as absolute making and thus presupposing nothing, is necessarily the imposition of itself: therefore self-making. Kant did not conceive the making as self-making; so in his making there were no total possibilities of knowing, therefore the thing originated of itself, the limit of the activity of the Ego, or rather, the same Ego, who is nothing but activity. The knowing only in part was

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<sup>45</sup> GA, I, 2, p. 361.

<sup>46</sup> J.G. Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 1800; tr. it. a cura di C. Cesa, *La destinazione dell'uomo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2001, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> H.S. Harris, *Fichte e Gentile*, cit., p. 564.



making; but in part was made. The absolute making is self-making; the conscience is consciousness, the absolute production of the Ego. The which implies not only the position of the self (thesis) and the position relative to another of which one has consciousness (antithesis), but the identity of the Ego and the other (synthesis): it is indeed for this rhythm that the Ego posits itself while positing the opposition of itself, the Non-Ego; who is not its limit, since that is overcome by its very positing act of the Ego, and actually means its realization. Purely formal realization, of course. That is, the process by which Fichte resolves the Ego suggested by Kant is not the same as the real Ego that becomes aware of itself and at the same time conceives the real Non-Ego, of whom the Ego is aware. The Ego and the Non-Ego in which is realized the auto-conscience are, in Fichte's opinion, a mere form of knowing, but they are not the reality of knowing; they express the knowability of it, the internal mediation of the act by which it is known, but they neither give us the Being, nor the Ego. Fichte's achievement is that of the concept of the Ego as unity of Ego and Non-Ego; that is, he has the merit of having deepened the Kantian concept of category, and in general of the priority of the same Ego, by showing its genesis, and demonstrating that the Ego cannot conceive itself other than as itself together with the other: positive synthesis of the opposites"<sup>49</sup>.

Here Gentile openly acknowledges Fichte's merit in having surpassed the contradictions of the Kantianism and the dogmatism which still characterises it. The ambiguity of Kantian knowing, based in part on "making" and "made"; are resolved by the Doctrine of science, which considers the Ego "nothing but the activity", the act-in-act which, by putting itself, also puts its own contrary, bringing together the duality and the unity of the thinking in act ("the positive synthesis of the opposites", as Gentile says).

"Fichte's achievement" is that of having conceived the Ego as a unity in the act of the Ego and Non-Ego, abandoning the Kantian *Ding an sich* and the contradictions brought about. And yet, in the way Fichte overcomes and realizes Kant, there is a limit which for Actual Idealism is necessary to overcome and correct: the process delineated by Fichte through the dialectic between Ego and Non-Ego remains on the ground of the "simple form of knowing", while never achieving the dimension of the "reality of

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<sup>49</sup> G. Gentile, *Le origine della filosofia contemporanea in Italia*, Sansoni, Firenze 1935, p. 157.



knowing". In other terms, the nexus of reciprocal mediation between Ego and Non-Ego at the core of the several *Darstellungen* of the *Wissenschaftslehre* expresses nothing but the "knowability" of the reality, "the internal mediation of the act" through which the real is being known.

From this point of view Fichte would remain, in Gentile's view, on the epistemological level while never reaching the ontological one; that is what happens instead with Actual dialectic. In the aforementioned passage, the latter is conceived by the author as a transposition, on the ontological level, of the dialectic which the *Wissenschaftslehre* had applied to the merely epistemological dimension.

Such an interpretation also emerges from one of the rare passages where Gentile, in the pages of the *Reform of the Hegel's Dialectic*, briefly discusses Fichte's thesis while assuming it, in this case as well, as the one who set in a correct form the fundamental theoretical problem after Kant, yet without being able to resolve it in a satisfactory way, remaining always prisoner of an epistemological perspective, *stricto sensu* epistemological rather than ontological:

"Fichte raised the new issue; but he failed to solve it, because he did not raise it with the proper rigour; and without practical faith his subjective Idealism remained a reality closed inside an unsurpassable limit"<sup>50</sup>.

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From this viewpoint, we can rightly affirm that Gentile himself conceives Actual dialectic as the realization of the Doctrine of science, as well as a coherent conclusion of the theoretical program started but not-fully accomplished by Fichte. Hence, in Gentile's opinion Fichte, as has been pointed out, had assigned to philosophy the right task, by suggesting the direction so as to bring to completion the Kantian *transzendentalphilosophisch* change: but then he had not proved able to fulfil it to completion. That is why, after Fichte, it is still necessary to establish a unity in which the process is real and not only formal, ontological rather than epistemological.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, with Holmes, we can assert that "if it is true that Fichte was the discoverer of the dialectic on which Gentile build his own logic, still he did not give it the same

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<sup>50</sup> Id., *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, cit., p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> So brilliantly has summarized Harris a possible solution: "Fichte's Non-Ego is the non-Ego of the Ego, namely the ideal, or rather ideality of the real Non-Ego, because on the other hand Fichte saw that the Ego is the combination of Ego and Non-Ego; but he did not realize that the Non-Ego is equally the Non-Ego and the Ego together. In other words, his Non-Ego is not real, since he did not see that the real itself is ideal and cognizable" (H.S. Harris, *Fichte e Gentile*, cit., p. 566).

ontological meaning"<sup>52</sup>, remaining - as has been seen - prisoner in the epistemological dimension (and, in this, revealing his own and ineradicable debt towards the Kantianism).

Even in the *Philosophy Introduction* (1933), Gentile acknowledges, between the lines, Fichte's absolute importance, as well as that of the *Wissenschaftslehre*: the same Actual Idealism corresponds to "that dialectic of the thought whose main problem was first questioned by Fichte"<sup>53</sup>. Therefore Fichte, after Kant, was the first to point out which was the path to follow for the philosophy, by putting himself as the forerunner of Gentile's Actual Idealism, *Fichte redivivus*. Then Gentile adds that, after having clarified that the issue of the dialectic of the thought was formerly raised by the philosopher from Rammenau: "but Hegel firstly faced it with thorough awareness of the necessity of a new logic to oppose Aristotle's analytic one"<sup>54</sup>.

On the other hand Hegel, as we know, faced it in such a way that he unwillingly fell again in the dialectic of the thought, suggesting to Gentile the theoretical need for a reform in reference to the Hegelian dialectic from a Fichteian perspective, in order to return to the prosperous issuing, by Fichte, of the subject-object identity subjectively resolved through the act-in-act of the thinking thought. In this sense, Actual Idealism would correct Hegel, reforming him through Fichte (he considers the former in the dialectic of the thought level, thanks to the act-in-act category); then, concurrently, he would reform Fichte through Hegel, by letting the former abandon the mere epistemological dimension in which he is still prisoner and take him in a more properly ontological field.

In the light of these considerations, it becomes once more evident in which sense Gentile's Actual Idealism is built on the groundwork of the problems and the paths suggested by the Fichteian *Wissenschaftslehre*, yet without any possible solution in itself.

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<sup>52</sup> R. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile*, cit., p. 4.

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