**Giovanni Gentile and the “Humanism of Labor”**

Spartaco Pupo

(University of Calabria)

ABSTRACT

Considered by some to be the most prominent Italian philosopher of the twentieth century, Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) organically fulfilled the “humanism of labor” in his work-testament, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (published posthumously in 1946). Gentile believed that the modern world had come to understand the spiritual value of labor in the same way that he had understood the spiritual value of culture. He recognized the “sense” of intellectual and manual labor as having a methodological and crucial significance because of its unbreakable connection to the “Absolute Spirit,” which enables understanding of the formative significance of working action. Gentile’s thesis emphasizes the significance of the interaction between “intellectuals” and “workers” in the framework of human values, identifying a real union of labor and culture.

*The international misfortune*

The final and little-known phase of Giovanni Gentile’s intellectual work, considered by many to be the finest Italian philosopher of the twentieth century, is realized in the organic concept of “humanism of labour.” This is a historicist, philosophical, and religious humanism that prosecutes and defends classical humanism while also interpreting the most prominent examples of contemporaneity.

This doctrine is especially unknown in the English-speaking world, where, moreover, only three of Gentile’s publications translated into English exist to date: *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (1916), dating back to1922[[1]](#footnote-1) and commissioned by Gentile’s contemporary, the great British philosopher Herbert Wildon Carr; *Genesi e struttura della società* (1943), dated 1966[[2]](#footnote-2) by the laudable initiative of Henry Silton Harris, who was the author, by his admission, of “a rescue operation”[[3]](#footnote-3) of the Italian philosopher; and *Origini e dottrina del fascismo* (1929), brought to print in 2002 by professor James A. Gregor.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Gentile’s “misfortune” in the Anglo-American area, moreover, is probably to be attributed to the initiative of Guido De Ruggiero, who, after having long been inspired by Gentile’s philosophy, was pleased to let the international academic world know, in an article in English, that his master’s thought was enclosed “in one or more formulae, which he is wont to repeat and to amplify and vary with invincible monotony,” thus promoting “an abstruse and tiresome theology,” a “religious oratory, full of unction and false rhetorical emotion”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet De Ruggiero had been the only one to follow Gentile in his courageous affirmation of the identity of thought and action, because to think is to act, and to act is to think, a maxim with which Gentile justified his “actualism” as a doctrine not so much of the identity between philosophy and history, emulated moreover by Benedetto Croce, as of the immanence of philosophy in life. De Ruggiero’s failure to develop an accomplished philosophical system for political reasons inspired his strong bitterness towards Gentile.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Finally, despite being nine years younger than the other great figure in the rebirth of idealism in Italy, Croce, whose international fame completely eclipsed his own, Gentile did not inspire organic and noteworthy monographic studies abroad on his political thought, except those of the aforementioned Harris and Gregor.[[7]](#footnote-7) This indifference, as is well known, is primarily due to two factors: Gentile’s failure to systematically expound his doctrine and its consequences because he was not given the time; and his association with fascism, of which he was an ardent supporter from 1923 until his death, even though Gentile’s entire intellectual production had already been organically copied well before his affiliation with fascism, as evidenced by the chronology of his main works.

*Beyond individualism and collectivism*

*Humanism of Labor* is the title of the seventh paragraph of Chapter XI(*History*) in his work *Genesis and Structure of Society*, written on the spur of the moment in the summer of 1943 and published two years after his bloody death on 15 April 1944 in Florence at the hands of communist partisans who did not forgive him for being the “philosopher of fascism,” which was in the process of dissolving at that time. Gentile concludes his speculative trip with this text of “practical philosophy,” as the subtitle puts it, though not without tying it into a rigorous theoretical and logical investigation. Gentile leaves us with his “spiritual testament,” as this work has been properly dubbed.

It is possible to argue that this final work, which is of the utmost ethical and pedagogical importance, represents the organic synthesis of Gentile’s philosophical-political philosophy. The idea of a society *in interiore homine*, which was first introduced in *I fondamenti della filosofia del diritto* (1916) but had not yet gained centrality, serves as its fundamental basis. For Gentile, this notion should be interpreted as a dialectical overcoming of individualism and collectivism, which were both based on a naturalistic mindset drawn from the Enlightenment that was unable to recognize the human being in the historical concreteness of his life as a person, society, and state—that is, the three forms in which the discourse found in the pages of *Genesis and Structure of Society* is expressed.

For Gentile, a human person is ultimately an object of mind, not a natural entity, but rather “thought” in and of itself. It is not an abstract, lifeless mind, but rather a cognition identified in concrete action—the historical application of thought—in which the “responsibility” that endows the subject with special, one-of-a-kind human value is exercised. The human being “exists as a particular person, but not as one among others”, as a “unique, and therefore infinite and universal.”[[8]](#footnote-8) It is not the numerical and mechanical entity of atomistic and materialistic interpretations, but the “Ego” as freedom and value, with which it becomes an active part of society and “speaks and sings, thinks and feels, desires and wills, and in general constitutes its own reality through its continual activity.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In other words, the individual is not a human being in general, who has never lived; rather, he is the true person, who is, for example, each of us gathered here: the historical person, who exists and is reality. But he is above all individuality in sociality, for it is in sociality that he abandons the area of natural immediacy and proclaims himself as spirituality and freedom, knowledge and will, a language shared by all men. Human history is the history of thought in action, in which each person acts and contributes to the realization of good, in one word, *works*. The universality of mankind, Gentile maintains, is conquest, which is achieved through self-consciousness: “For, as we shall never tire of repeating, the consciousness of self is not an immediate attribute of the spirit but the product of its eternal labor—the bread that is earned only in the sweat of the brow.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Humans moulds their personalities into constancies of will both internally and via their reciprocal relationships with other persons, with whom they identify. Gentile writes: “At the root of the *I* there is a *We*. 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.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

To put it succinctly, the Gentile community of belonging stands for both the rejection of atomistic and materialistic collectivism and the release from the constraints of empirical individuality inherent in naturalistic individualism. In the “dialectical linking of *alter* with *ipse*,” the *societas in interiore homine* is ultimately an expression of the substantive unity between mankind, which exists before their differences and “infinite forms.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

*The ethical nature of the State*

This need for humanistic synthesis also serves as the foundation for Gentile’s doctrine of the State, which was developed during the actualistic arrangement and is given a thorough and articulate treatment in *Genesis and Structure of Society*, emphasizing the institutional structures’ authentically renewed nature. “In its spiritual essence the State exists always and yet it never exists”, argues Gentile. Consequently, it cannot be described by immanence in its purest form or, at the very least, by immanence that is the straightforward opposite of transcendence: “Its ideal is always in advance of its present mode of existence; like every spiritual value, it has life because it is sensible of its own true self above and beyond its present self, as an ideal to be reached, a transcendent reality. This transcendence is the reason why it belongs to the world of liberty.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The “universal common aspect of the will,” the “concrete and actual expression” of the will shielded from the empirical aspects appropriate to naturalistic interpretations, is how Gentile views the State. The State’s history is linked to human history when it comes to its independence, universality, and spiritual unity. Gentile argues against the idea of “nationality” which holds that a nation is inherently entitled to unity and autonomy: “It is not nationality that creates the State, but the State which creates nationality, by setting the seal of actual existence on it. It is through the *conquest* of unity and independence that the nation gives proof of its political will, and establishes its existence as a State.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The State is not an abstract concept; rather, it is an idea of concrete reality, real to the extent that it functions in reality, and it serves a unifying and moralizing role in the lives of individuals and groups of individuals, rather than being limited to serving as an administrative tool for sector-specific interests. The State is not *among* individuals but rather “in that unity of particular and universal which constitutes is individuality;”[[15]](#footnote-15) rather it is the actual and concrete reality, both universal and particular, social and individual, of the human being, the protagonist of historical becoming. The State is not an entity opposed to or superimposed upon individuals, but rather the universal consciousness of individuals, united by the awareness of their mutual and unbreakable unity.

The State is entitled to the same morality and tangible actuality of the individual’s will as the latter because both are “ethical” in the same sense that people are. It cannot disregard religion because it is fundamental to people’s morality and their souls. Gentile opposes both the notion of the confessional state and the secular state—that is, the uninformed and helpless secular state—in its narrower sense of secularism. In response to these proposals, Gentile rejects the notion that the State should not take an active role in the advancement of religion, protect and promote religious education, and support national religion because it recognizes that religion “constitutes the moral earnestness of every man” and has a significant impact on “every aspect of his activity (scientific, artistic, etc.).”[[16]](#footnote-16)

This fundamentally moral character allows the State to devotedly carry out its educational purpose through a tangible program that not only tackles today’s issues but also looks toward the future. Thus, every individual honors the past, navigates the present, intentionally plans the future, and behaves accordingly. Therefore, the State is a champion of genuine progress, personal development, and societal advancement—all of which are only possible via the methodical application of critical inquiry. Thus, the statesman’s “philosophy:” “In fact, there is no statesman who has not, at least *in nuce*, a philosophy of his own.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Since philosophy is “the leaven, the very soul of life,”[[18]](#footnote-18) it is in the air one breathes and is therefore vital to the State’s ethical existence. Without philosophy, there could be no State, religion, art, science, and ethics.

*Unitarianism and ethicality of labor*

The humanism of labor, which was paved over by the social upheavals of the 19th century but whose “political concreteness” is a product of the 20th, is announced by Gentile in light of this vision, which holds that man is the active subject of history and the responsible creator of society and the State as a spiritual community. From this perspective, all of the manifestations of man’s productive activity are included in the “culture” proper to artistic, literary, and philosophical humanism, which is defined as knowledge that forms man by clearing and enlarging the consciousness that every man must have of himself, and therefore by exercising reflection on the content of his thought and his own character. In other words, the humanism of culture, which periodically made an appearance till reaching its pinnacle during the Renaissance, is the unalienable basis of the new humanism since it promotes the shared awareness of “universal dignity of humanity.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The humanistic cultural movement that spread across Europe in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, originating in Italy, is supported by a more comprehensive exaltation of labor, which is interpreted as a cohesive manifestation of the diverse intellectual, planning, and creative capacities inherent to humanity. Gentile is conscious that the modern and current world has grafted new social and political structures on top of the humanistic legacy, which has fostered an increasingly complex labor problem. The utilitarianism and agnosticism are inherent to the administrative State and the abstract person cannot provide a solution to the complexity and urgency of the work environment. The worker, as it is, with its interests differentiated according to the natural categories that are gradually being constituted, is the State of today and the State of the future, notes Gentile. By default, the citizen is the actual, flesh-and-blood individual who works and is valued according to his or her labor, not the abstract human being or a member of the ruling class. Since labor has a true value, “a man’s worth is to be measured according to the quantity and quality of his work.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The foundation of Gentile humanism of labor is the idea of the unified nature of labor, which, in opposition to Croce’s dialectic of “distinct concepts,”[[21]](#footnote-21) subdues any intellectualistic division between labor and culture or between manual and intellectual labor. For Gentile, a person works by deploying “that same activity of thought which forever sets and solves the problems in which his actual existence is continually knotted and untied in the world of art, literature, scholarship, or philosophy.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The various forms of labor are not intrinsically different from one another; rather, the peculiar interests of the numerous productive categories in modern society, which are inclined to support an ever-growing variety of labor in its many specializations, give rise to differences between them. The development of the “system of civil society which is the raw matter of the State,” however, is motivated by a common interest that unites them all. This is an expression of a differentiated will operating “into an organic system, in which every individual by willing himself wills the system.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Furthermore, there is a growing societal awareness of the necessity to plan and manage the diverse labor activities that together comprise what Italy called the “corporative” State during the 1930s. The latter tends to perfect all those artificial forms, responding to mere conventional principles rather than to the needs and tendencies of individuals, according to their actual interests. This is because it accords equal importance to all labor representations and permits them to ascend to the highest managerial responsibilities and powers of the State (both legislative and executive).

For Gentile, parties and parliaments in liberal-inspired States are these artificial forms, each of which sought to educate the person in a political sense and public affairs. Since the corporative State upholds the actual decisions made by the people to whom freedom is attributed, unless demonstrated otherwise, it is the State of freedom in the truest sense of the word due to the unique predominance of labor in all of its expressions. In this sense, Gentile contends that freedom fails to fulfil its potential and runs the risk of being a hoax if it is bestowed upon an intangible and non-existent people rather than the people as it truly is. Thus, the “free State” is not the one that liberals understand in an abstract way as an institution defending the rights of an ostensibly equal and free individual; rather, it is, in fact, “the state of the man who works,” which recognizes the “moral and economic essence of labor” and refuses to turn its back “on the living individual in pursuit of a man of straw.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

If labor is seen by liberalism as a commodity, toil, and sweat, and by communism as alienation, then it is seen by Gentile as a civilization, a means of self-education, a duty to the society, and a sincere love of country. For Gentile, work that is both guided and supported by culture is the concrete affirmation of man’s freedom. This is because, just as genuine culture cannot exist without the individual efforts of those who fight to establish and expand it, so too does work have greater validity and efficacy the more it is individualistic and the more it considers the material and spiritual needs of the community, which it serves to meet in harmony with the most disparate work performances.

Gentile can claim that organized civil society cannot be careless toward him because culture and employment are inseparable. The promotion of culture in the pedagogical sense—that is, assisting individuals in realizing the importance of the values found in the history of previous generations to encourage them to adopt them and pass them on to future generations—is, in fact, one of the most significant tasks he gives to civil society that is firmly organized in the state. As a result, one of the pillars of classical humanism is the Gentile’s realization of the fundamental “ethicality” of labor, which is consistent with the ethicality of culture. All work, from the most basic practical activity to the highest form of theoretical speculation, is ethically based, and this allows us to fully comprehend the proposal for a new formulation of the relationship between the individual and the State, as well as between the individual and society, going beyond the deceptive Enlightenment suggestions that gave rise to the opposing ideologies of Marxist collectivism and liberal individualism.

Gentile is adamantly opposed to the Enlightenment idea of man as self-sufficient and inherently free, viewing it as a path toward a radical naturalistic atomism that reduces society to a “mechanical aggregate of units independent of each other and irrelative,” leading to the collapse of both individual “functionality” and all value. The Enlightenment’s establishment of intellectual, moral, and political self-sufficiency as a necessary condition for human dignity and pleasure is fake for Gentile since it posits the coexistence of men in a society that is thought to be merely a multitude that happens to converge by accident. To avoid creating “a shadow that looms over the field of politics and makes it sterile,” it is necessary to overcome any covert dualistic opposition between a sociality as such and the individuality of the individual, who is “the fulcrum of liberty in liberalism, and the absolute principle of liberty in individualism.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Instead, a concretely unified vision of social reality must be used, as it is the vivid and real expression of true human freedom and is not that stratum of liberal individualism but rather a quality of every individual in concrete, “the people;” “an Italian can only be free insofar as the Italian people is free; if his people is enslaved, he can only be a slave.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Thus, the kind of freedom that has been promoted by the agnostic, relativist, and materialist Enlightenment and its successors over the past two centuries is not real freedom; rather, it stems from an unrealistic conception of society as a multitude that exists outside of the individual, which the individual opposes because he feels constrained by it. Ultimately, this vision was responsible for the eventual development of the “third state,” which was unable to achieve universal freedom. It also cleared the way for the rise of socialism and communism, which were movements that opposed worker exploitation and marginalization.

Contrary to the Enlightenment’s naturalistic interpretation, Gentile proposes the creation of a hierarchy of values in which *homo faber* and *homo sapiens* discover their reciprocal reversal, and in which authority and freedom, right and duty, find a historical synthesis that honors the mechanistic and deterministic perspective that gave rise to both Marxist-inspired collectivism and liberal-inspired individualism.

*The modern humanist viewpoint*

If Gentile’s humanism of labor viewpoint cannot be credited with advancing political theory or leading to tangible accomplishments eighty years after his passing, then it also cannot be credited with being disproved or contradicted by alternative theoretical positions. Because of the incapacity and stubbornness of people and governments, the debate between individuality and collectivism has persisted up to this point, both theoretically and practically. So much so that the materialism born from the Enlightenment still splits into its two classic forms.

According to Gentile’s forecast, the humanism of labor aims to bring tradition and development together in the dialectical coherence of the two concepts, which are believed to be incompatible and irreconcilable yet are rooted in the spirit’s eternal existence. First and foremost, its novelty lies in substituting the atomistic, one-sided understanding of man and society with a vision that encompasses the integrity of spirit and matter, universal and particular, singularity and multiplicity; second, it reveals work as an explanation of all human activity, both theoretical and practical, that is put to the service of each person’s freedom, understood both individually and communally, starting with the family and extending to the city, the nation, and humanity as a whole; third, in the request to launch an extensive educational program covering the entirety of human history and the lineage of generations, grounded in a primarily spiritualistic understanding of human reality and a successful revitalization of social norms oriented toward the new humanism, realised in tangible historical forms and thus in social and political institutions; lastly, in the possibility of ensuring the protection of individuals’ natural rights, freeing them from selfishness and atomism and bringing them into awareness of their own personalities in respect of others’, as well as in mutual and solidarity-based cooperation subordinate to the achievement of community interest. The fourth and final point is the recompositing of the dialectical unity of human history interrupted by the Enlightenment climate tending to subvert tradition as a result of a radical hostility to inherited institutions and the past.

Gentile aims to assert the institutional forms and practical contents of social justice to supplement commutative and distributive fairness, which is its premise, as opposed to the mere notion of social justice, which is currently very popular in liberal-socialist societies. The tool is the ethical, legal, and financial involvement of employees in the collective management of businesses, whether they are public or private, and it translates into practice the standards of professional competence in a civil society that are established and structured through equitable attitudinal selection.

While humanism of labor acknowledges the qualities included in science and technology, it rejects the idea that these fields are the source of scientistic and technicist errors that threaten the organic unity between thought and action, which is the central objective of the humanistic worldview. Naturalism, not humanism, is the source of scientism and technicism. They draw attention to how human knowledge is fragmenting into a more intricate web of specialized and in-depth research, endangering the unity of knowledge embodied by the transcendent and metaphysical aspect of human existence.

*Concluding remarks*

The humanism of labor is the product of a mind devoted to comprehending the human being in his totality, in his union between freedom and spirituality, which he strives for during his personal life but which is inextricably linked to the activities of his society. Gentile’s viewpoint aims to overthrow the naturalistic and materialistic practices that still exist in modern culture and institutional forms, which are exemplified by both neo-collectivist doctrines and praxis and unbridled individualism. Instead, Gentile proposes a humanistic conception of reality that is precisely capable of establishing a lasting social justice that follows from the moral and legal recognition of work in all of its manifestations within a community of solidarity that is based on the tangible affirmation of each person’s rights and obligations.

As effective solidarity among men in an essentially ethical synthesis, the new order of labor humanism is that of justice, insofar as it fosters the ensuing acknowledgement of a true hierarchy of values of man, who is both *sapiens* and *faber*. It is feasible to fight both any atomistic and mechanistic conception of man and his history, as well as the levelling of intelligence and the ensuing degradation of the human person’s potentialities and freedoms, with such a synthesis.

Authority and freedom, responsibility and right, tradition and progress are all harmonized in this organic and cohesive vision of man in a historical and ethical synthesis that rejects any individualistic and collectivistic hardening, even if it results from a naturalistic and deterministic conception of man and history. Furthermore, the historical record seems to confirm humanity’s profound religious yearning for harmony and veracity: faith is inherent to the human spirit, which rises above itself to eternity and the absolute, escaping the shackles of matter.

The humanism of labor, which offers the man of today and tomorrow new, unrestricted vistas, can be accessed by the consciousness of our day, which is imprisoned in consumerism and technicism. However, this will require him to permanently break free from the sectarianism that is prevalent even in many academic circles and beyond.

1. G. Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. H. W. Carr (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, trans. H. S. Harris (Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. S. Harris, *Preface*, in *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. G. Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, trans. A. J. Gregor (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Guido de Ruggiero, “Main Currents of Contemporary Philosophy in Italy,” trans. C. M. Allen, *Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (1926): 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See C. Gily Reda, *Guido de Ruggiero. Un ritratto filosofico* (Napoli: Società Editrice Napoletana, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A. J. Gregor, Giovanni Gentile: Philosopher of Fascism (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 121-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. # See B. Croce, *A Croce Reader: Aesthetics, Philosophy, History, and Literary Criticism*, trans. M. Verdicchio (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 27-30.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)