

## From G. W. F. Hegel to J. Keating: An Introduction to G. Gentile's Philosophy of (Political) Education

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In this paper, I will try to highlight some features of Giovanni Gentile's idealistic philosophy of education while showing how and why his educational approach is based on the assumption that the teacher/student separation needs to be overcome. Main points of interest of this research will therefore be the comparison between Fichte, Hegel, von Humboldt, and Gentile with regard to the theory of Bildung, leading to some conclusive reflections about the way education, freedom and John Keating's *carpe diem* from the *Dead Poets Society* film are deeply linked.

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It could seem—and indeed, it is—quite surprising to associate the names of G. W. F. Hegel, G. Gentile, and J. Keating, and not only because two of them are real philosophers while the other is a fictional character. Neither has the reason for the surprise something to do with the fact that the three figures do not share anything, since on the contrary, they do share at least one issue, which is the attention to the problem of education. I think that the real reason for the surprise is that while when we think to John Keating and to the *Dead Poets Society* film we associate it to lessons without course books, to teacher and students standing on teacher's desk and to a pedagogical model based on the relation between teacher and learner, when we think to Hegel and Gentile we instinctively refer them to an educational model based on a strong separation between the aforementioned roles. In some way, we refer Keating to something belonging to the present, and Hegel and Gentile to something belonging to the past of philosophy of education.

Nevertheless, Hegel's thought did largely influence not only Gentile's philosophy of education, but just every philosopher of education in the 20th Century, since the problem of individuals, State and society was crucial in a century that, to say it with Ortega y Gasset, was dominated by the rise of masses. Now, both Hegel and Gentile share the focus on how State and society contribute to shaping the individual point of view and way of life.

Gentile's philosophy of education and Gentile's political culture:

Still today, in Italy, it is never that easy to reflect on Gentile's philosophy of education just because it was so deeply involved with his political culture and views, which were, as it is known, clearly not liberal neither democratic. His last and maybe most interesting work, *Genesi e struttura della società*, was finished in September 1943, less than one year before the author was murdered by communist partisans, due to Gentile's

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support to Mussolini's regime. Gentile was not one fascist intellectual among the others, but the intellectual. During the Twenties and the Thirties Giovanni Gentile reshaped the entire Italian educational system, from primary school to university; more than this, he was—along with Gabriele D'Annunzio—Italy's most influential thinker and man of culture, whose leading role as Fascism's philosophical official voice remained vastly undisputed. His philosophical position—called *attualismo*, which means philosophy of act—conceives itself as a prosecution and radicalization of Hegelian idealism, with some fundamental issues regarding both political philosophy and philosophy of education.

These two issues are deeply tied in Gentile's thought, since, if the law in itself is nothing but act insofar it is free: which means an act which is not immediate, but realizes and develops himself willingly *ex se*,<sup>1</sup> and if in the concept of *autoctisis* to want is equal to know, so that the spirit creates himself and art, religion, science, economy, philosophy, it must then be true that politics and education share the same subject which, once again, is the spirit himself. The spirit, and not the man, its individual nature tends to move him far from his own recognition. In order to achieve his true recognition, the human being needs to re-discover the deep spiritual nature of political institutions. It is interesting to note that Gentile sees the first and worst danger linked to individualism in materialism: for him materialism means firstly the collapse of every morality and of every value, because who talks of value talks of freedom and materialism begins just by denying freedom.

Education, politics, freedom, and spirit are therefore deeply related. Before Gentile and before Hegel as well, it was Fichte to stress the relation between idealism and freedom and, on the contrary, materialism and not-freedom. In his *First Introduction to Doctrine of Science*, he claims that this fundamental choice simply cannot be explained, since everyone makes this first choice depending on what sort of human being he wants to be: determined by the Self or by the other-than-Self. But for Fichte the human being—as an I which is not absolute—simply cannot avoid to be determined by other human beings. The solution to this problem is found by Fichte arguing that every rational being, insofar it is not absolute, not only is not *condemned* to live along with other human beings, but rather can realize himself as free only by living along with other human beings. The man, concludes Fichte, can be authentically free only by answering yes to the *Aufforderung*, the request, which he receives from other men and which is a request of recognition of the human—and therefore free—nature of the other being. It is here not the case of a mysterious and unexplicable duty of being free, just like in Kant, but of an exhortation to improve the other's freedom and, by doing so, mine as well. The point is, that this is precisely what we can define *Bildung*, education. Education is liberation. Here we come back to one of Gentile's keywords, yet Fichte has something else to teach. Since the main instrument of education is *self-limitation*, what actually happens when two human beings recognize reciprocally is that they both limit themselves just in the moment in which they address the other with the *Aufforderung* to be free. What happens is this: a being which exists outside of my self-determination, and whose very existence proves my finitude, asks me to be free, thus letting himself be determined by me and therefore proving at the same time his own freedom. Education's most important aim is to make this possible over and over again, so that an educated man is primarily a man capable of giving himself a limit and just because of this a free man as well.

Education, as a matter of fact, involves therefore society, and is precisely in this point that Gentile's philosophy of education comes closer to his political views. The focus is on the relation which binds individuals and people. For Gentile, there are two kinds of *voces populi*. One is *ratio cognoscendi*, the *consensus gentium* upon which every sort of liberal-democratic political position is based. The other is *ratio essendi* of truth, the voice of individuals who only think and act through and within a nation, a community of

destiny, an I who always is a We as well. What happens between individuals, and mostly between teachers and students, reveals a meaning which goes back to the roots of Gentile's theory of act.

It is indeed really difficult to understand whether Gentile leaves, as he claims to do, a real difference between philosophy and pedagogy. In chapter XVIII of *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (1916), he writes: "Idealism resolves every difference, but it does not erase them just like mysticism does, while it affirms the limited not less than the unlimited and difference not less than identity."<sup>2</sup>

In truth, Gentile's thought aims to resolve any possible separation, and it is at the same time obvious that the field where this solution takes place is philosophy. Many interpreters and scholars have therefore argued that in such a system there is no room for pedagogy as an independent form of knowledge. As a matter of fact, a big part of the problem lies in this word: education. It is certain that Gentile understands pedagogy more as theory and praxis of *education* than of *instruction*. Of the two, the former is the more philosophically challenging term. It involves, in fact, what the ancients called *paideia* and the moderns *Bildung*. This is the idea of a moral and cultural construction of human being, related more to a way of life made possible and learned only within a community of human beings linked by a common destiny and common values, than to a certain amount of contents.

The idea of *Bildung* is therefore a turning point of contemporary speculation regarding philosophy of education. Even if Fichte, as we have seen, deeply reflected on this topic, another thinker was capable of using it in order to change the way education was realized in Europe, and this thinker was Wilhelm von Humboldt. He, as it is known, was not only the founder of the University of Berlin, meant to serve as a model to all European universities, but he also gave a decisive contribution to the theoretical development of the concept of education as *Bildung* which has and continues to have a huge significance in Western pedagogy.

According to von Humboldt, the development of human qualities rests entirely on what the human beings can understand and realize of themselves in the training process which is then proposed as a place of first constitution of sociality. The isolated human being is a being in chains, and as such cannot proceed unless with serious limitations of speed and movement. Precisely for this reason, social life has always characterized every educational context, from the most basic to the highest:

the so-called superior scientific institutes are nothing, free from any form of state, but the spiritual life of men, whose outer availability or inner tension pushes towards science and research. Even without them some man would reflect and would collect on his own account, another one would meet with other like him, some other man would create around him a circle of fellows.<sup>3</sup> (2006; 2009)

The educational life, both in schools as in scientific and academic institutions, is social life not by accident, nor for any use determined by the State or any public political, religious or cultural benefit, but under a not written obligation arising from the ontological status of human being. Von Humboldt's words highlight a trait that could be called idealistic, namely the implicit emphasis of what, like G. Gentile would say, we could define the absolute *priority of the educational act*, which always comes first, and which always proves strong enough to go beyond the very distinction between learner and teacher.

I will come later to stress this point which will lead us back to J. Keating, G. Gentile and Hegel.

Just let me conclude with von Humboldt by saying that the similarities between his educational approach and the idealistic one end here, since, unlike Hegel, von Humboldt does not believe that the importance of the educational act has as its subject *the Spirit*, but rather that the educational act is a place of expression of

irreducible tension that binds individual spirits with each other. Von Humboldt believes therefore that the state should not be a major player in this process, rather quite the contrary. This profound difference separates von Humboldt from Hegel and Gentile, since for the idealists the state has the unique role of giving education its *ethical*—spiritual and public—form.

At the same time, everything that happens within the individual has for idealists a meaning just because what matters is not the individual in time and space, but the individual as universal being, not purely existing along with others, like in Fichte, but *per se*.

If this has for sure consequences regarding the subsistence of pedagogy as a science separated from philosophy, it also enables Gentile to think the relation teacher/student in a very peculiar way. The individual as universal being, in fact, requires a space where various individuals come in contact and become parts of something larger than them. When it goes on pedagogy and philosophy of education, Gentile introduces here the idea of an *educational act* where the very difference between teacher and learner is condemned to fade, since neither the teacher nor the student is the focus, but something which needs them both in order to happen: an *event*.

What in Italy is normally referred to Gentile's educational model—the so called "*scuola gentiliana*"—as synonym of an almost military-disciplined context based on a harsh separation between the roles of teacher and learners, reveals here to be what it is: a big misunderstanding. We encounter here the reason of the aforementioned relation between Hegel, Gentile and John Keating.

In the film, *Dead Poets Society* Keating struggles to make his students understand that what really matters in school is not to learn something neither from books—which, of course, still are important but only if they make us possible to create a dialogue with the great spirits of the past and do not make us waste time to understand how to create this dialogue: the course books—nor from teachers—since they are only human beings just like the students, yet more educated and older—but from the universal spirit itself, which, as he claims in the aforementioned *Genesi e struttura*, is "only true teacher of humanity."

It is therefore not important to choose whether to focus on teacher—as it is often said about Gentile's pedagogy—or on students—which seems to be the aim of other positions quite far from Gentile such as those of Maria Montessori, John Dewey, or Don Lorenzo Milani—but on the universal spirit which uses—so to say—both of them as its "tools."

In one of the film's most famous scenes, we see Keating explaining to his students the importance of *carpe diem*, seize the moment. Apparently, this could be seen as exhortation not to wait, to live by the day, and undoubtedly some of his students seem to understand this teaching right in this way. It is normal: Every sort of teaching involving a complex relation teacher/student implies a large amount of possible effects. Yet what Keating really means with *carpe diem* is the capacity of seizing what the Greeks called the Kairos, the *right* moment, not just *any* moment; and the right moment, the Kairos, is the moment in which something reveals itself, the moment in which, again, we become spectators of an event; the moment in which the spirit, so to say, breaks time and space and finds its place in human existence.

This is precisely what happens when a teacher successfully manages to create a relation with a student, going beyond the limits of his older age and experiences, so as to seize the moment means here to be ready to let this *revelation* speak to us; to both of us, teachers and students, since who speaks is the spirit. Breaking the external rules, something Keating does many times during the events showed in the film, is only a consequence of what really matters: breaking the rule that condemns us to separation.

The only way to, quoting Keating, make your lives extraordinary as he says to his students, is to seize the Kairos, the moment in which, literally, something extra-ordinary happens and makes us ready to look at every important moment of our education as a moment in the process of self-revelation of the Spirit. This is supposed to happen in classes. Every class thus becomes, as Gentile writes, substance that the spirit eternally dematerializes during the process of his own formation.

## Notes

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1. G. Gentile, *Genesi e struttura della società*, in Id., *Opere sistematiche*, IX, Le Lettere, Firenze 1975-2001. See Id., *Genesis and Structure of Society*, University of Illinois Press, 1960.
  2. G. Gentile, *Teoria generale dello Spirito come atto puro*, Id., *Opere sistematiche*, III, Le Lettere, Firenze 1975-2001. See Id., *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, London: MacMillan & Co., 1922.
  3. W. von Humboldt, *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen*. Reclam, Stuttgart 2006, see Id., *The Limits of State Action*, ed. J. W. Burrow, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

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