
The Absolute Historicism of Benedetto Croce: Its Birth, Meaning, and Fate

Franco Manni

Liceo Leonardo Brescia

In this essay, I propose to discuss a school of philosophy that originated in Italy and spread, to a limited extent, throughout the United Kingdom and United States, namely absolute historicism. Given the many uses to which the word “historicism” has been put, the chosen term can easily be misunderstood and its meaning will have to be carefully elaborated.

I wish to answer three historical-theoretical questions: firstly, how absolute historicism came into being as a school of thought in its own right; secondly, where and how it first spread and subsequently declined, and, finally, what influence it has today and may exercise in the future. I am here assuming that the philosophy in question is of great value and deserves close attention.

The Inception of Absolute Historicism

In the twentieth century, two leading but in important ways very different Italian disciples of the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel were the Abruzzese Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and the Sicilian Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944). While the former was self-taught and never took a degree or lectured at a university, the latter graduated from the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa and taught at various Italian universities until his death. While the former had Giovan Battista Vico, Immanuel Kant, Johann F. Herbart, Francesco De Sanctis, Antonio Labriola, and Karl Marx as his secondary philosophical inspirations, in addition to Hegel as his primary influence, the latter looked to Giordano

FRANCO MANNI teaches History of Philosophy at Liceo Leonardo in Brescia, Italy.

Bruno, Baruch Spinoza, Johann G. Fichte, Vincenzo Gioberti, and the Neapolitan Hegelian philosopher Bertrando Spaventa (1817–1883) as his guides subordinate to Hegel.

Gentile, nine years younger than Croce, at first presented himself as a disciple of Croce, who in 1902 had already become the most famous Italian philosopher of his time. Croce took him on as a regular contributor to his philosophy journal *La Critica*, and Gentile was editor of several important philosophical classics for the Laterza publishing house, which was run and directed by Croce himself.

For some ten years, the two philosophers presented themselves to the Italian public as the two neo-Hegelian *Dioscuri* who heroically had to contend—*in primis*—against the philosophical errors of the positivism then prevailing in Italy and Europe and—*in secundis*—against the philosophical errors of both the extreme irrationalism of existentialism/decadentism and the moderate irrationalism of spiritualism.

We must ask, what did Croce and Gentile share as their intellectual foundations, and what constituted their neo-Hegelianism (a current that also developed in the UK and US during the same period)?

A profound rationalism characterizes the Italian and Anglophone neo-Hegelianism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As rationalism, it relates back to Hegel's battle against the 'beautiful souls' of the contemporary romanticists, such as Friedrich Hölderlin. As profound rationalism, it stems from Hegel's battle against the 'abstract intellectualism' of the philosophers of the Enlightenment who had just preceded him. As a rationalist thinker, Hegel believed that Reason should have sovereignty over sentiment; as a profound rationalist thinker, Hegel thought that the investigation of the universe, the soul, and God were fully within the orbit of reason, quite contrary to the arguments of the most acute Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in the *Transcendental Dialectic*. Moreover, as a rationalist thinker, Hegel believed that art and religion were imperfect forms of philosophy and subordinate to it; as a profound rationalist philosopher, Hegel held that art and religion were precious, vital, and indispensable spheres of the human spirit and that the Enlightenment was wrong to deal only with social, political, legal, and economic matters.¹

Yet in 1913, Gentile and Croce declared their theoretical parting of the ways. This had already begun in 1907, but had not been made public:

¹ The masterpieces of the great doyens of the Enlightenment deal with these topics: Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Adam Smith's *Enquiry into the Origin of the Wealth of Nations*, and Cesare Beccaria's *Crimes and Punishments*.

Croce had written his seminal book *Ciò che è Vivo e ciò che è Morto della Filosofia di Hegel* (*What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* in the translation of D. Ainslie, 1969), in which he radically separated what was “living” from what was “dead” in Hegel’s philosophy. Gentile had written a review of his friend’s book, but had not published it and had only communicated his thoughts to Croce privately by letter.

In essence, Croce rejected Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*. Instead, he valued the *Encyclopaedia* (of which he himself made an unsurpassed Italian translation) because of its systematic spirit, which “put everything philosophical in its place” without omissions, and above all the *Berlin Lectures*, for having masterfully demonstrated that “everything”—psychology, law, politics, art, religion, and philosophy—is “nothing but history.” While Gentile considered Hegel’s “dialectic of opposites” a valuable discovery, Croce opposed it and proposed in its place the “dialectic of the distincts”; while Gentile evaluated the *Logic* as an idealistic foundation of reality, as in the Fichtian Ego, Croce termed Hegel’s *Logic* a “Platonic theological residue”; while Gentile followed and validated Hegel in his idea of art and religion as mere imperfect forms of philosophy that are superseded by it (thus implying the death of art and the death of religion), Croce, by contrast, considered this prediction illogical as a concept and false in fact. Furthermore, while Gentile followed Hegel in the idea of the ethical state as “God on earth,” Croce strenuously denied the concept in favor of the liberal state with limited powers, although his liberalism was very different from the abstract, ahistorical theorizing of a John Locke. Finally, while Gentile endorsed the Hegelian idea of a philosophy of history that assumes the possibility that the philosopher could understand the structure/design of history, and thus foresee future developments, Croce fought all his life against such a claim, which, in his words, “deludes man into knowing God’s thoughts.” Croce thus anticipated Karl Popper’s demonstration of the impossibility of foreseeing the future.

Later, in 1921 and 1923, the two philosophers collaborated for the last time on a practical level to implement in Italian schools an understanding of Hegel on which they both agreed, namely that philosophy is in the end reducible to history, though history now understood in a broadened, much deepened sense. Croce, as Minister of Public Education in Giovanni Giolitti’s last government in 1921, prepared a bill that provided for three compulsory years of studying the history of philosophy in the Italian *licei*, or grammar schools. This bill did not become law due to sabotage by a section of the majority that supported the government, but

in 1923 Gentile, when he became Minister of Public Education in Mussolini's first government, saw Croce's earlier idea enshrined in statute. This reform, implemented by two neo-Hegelian ministers, produced a practice (unique in the world) that lasts to this day in Italian *licei*.²

In this period, Croce and Gentile had largely won their battle against positivism, decadentism, and spiritualism; and Italian philosophical culture had become, at least on the surface, neo-Hegelian. We have proof of this in the writings of the young Antonio Gramsci, who founded the Italian Communist Party in 1921, and who, although a follower of Karl Marx, proposed the philosophy of Benedetto Croce to young people, and to all Italians, as a new religion capable of replacing Christianity and building a 'Future City.'³

But then, in 1925, the conflict between the two friends widened and went from the theoretical to the political: Gentile sided with fascism and wrote the famous *Manifesto degli Intellettuali Fascisti*, while Croce picked the opposite side and wrote the even more famous *Manifesto degli Intellettuali Anti-Fascisti*. No longer collaborating with Gentile in the common enterprise of *La Critica*, Croce continued his revision of Hegel. He moved further away from any timeless logicism à la Baruch Spinoza and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. His thought was calibrated partly through engagement with the concreteness of Marx's historical materialism and, above all, on the lively basis of Francesco De Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura Italiana*.⁴ Croce developed his own approach in articles and books and wrote in 1939 that he did not consider it useful to call his philosophy neo-Hegelianism. It should rather be termed absolute historicism.⁵

What does this absolute historicism entail? What ideas establish it as a school of thought in its own right? Here is a summary of its key aspects:

1. An exposition of any thought must always be done in a historical manner. That is why Croce, in all his books about his philosophical system (*Aesthetics, Logic, Economics and Ethics, Historiography*) treated

² Benedetto Croce, "Ministro col Giolitti" and "Relazioni col Mussolini," in *Nuove Pagine Sparse*, first series (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1948), 47–52, 62–63.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *La Città Futura – Scritti 1917–1918*, ed. S. Caprioglio (Torino, Italy: Einaudi, 1982). The passage from Croce's "Religion and Serenity" quoted here by Gramsci is of crucial importance because in it Croce expresses with the utmost clarity in a brief manner how historicism should replace Christianity.

⁴ Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1915); Croce *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1938).

⁵ Croce, *Il concetto della filosofia come storicismo assoluto*, 1939, in *Il carattere della filosofia moderna*, 1941, etc.

‘theory’ (the relevant ideas) and ‘history’ (how these ideas were formed) together. This implies that any philosopher or philosophy is seen as the product of individual or collective experience, and is never a preordained theorem of a “timeless reason.” If one were to study a philosopher—Marx, for example—only in an abstractly ‘theoretical’ manner, as if Marx’s thought came to his mind directly from the immobile *hyperuranion*, the critic might examine the entire corpus of Marx’s writings and go in search of an ultimate compatibility and coherence that cannot exist: that is, study Marx in a forced and artificial manner, and, in practice, find himself either accepting or rejecting that philosopher *in toto*. A historicist approach allows the scholar to *discern* and discriminate among the various intellectual, psychological, and social influences on Marx: his admiration for the Hegelian dialectic, for Feuerbachian atheism, and for Ricardo’s class struggle, his affinity for the mathematical equations of the classical economists, for the German and French liberalism which opposed the Bourbon Restoration and Napoleon III, for Blanc’s state socialism, and for Blanqui’s revolutionary socialism. Additionally, the scholar would comprehend his acceptance of the anarchic and naturalistic view of the ‘Rousseauian *bon sauvage*’ and its consequent idea of direct democracy and the abolition of private property leading to the extinction of the state, the ruthless and unprejudiced politics of Machiavelli, and the dogmatic and self-confident ‘scientism’ of the Positivists, à la Comte and Spencer. Thus, the historicist scholar of Marx will never find himself in the situation of having to discover rigid correlations or to hypothesize artificial implications in a supposedly immobile, definitive, perfect, and hyper-uranic ‘Marxism.’

2. Philosophy, Croce said, is only ‘the methodological moment of historiography.’ That is, it is not an exposition of timeless ideas in a hypothetical *hyperuranion*. Philosophical thought is actually the continuous forging of ‘concepts’ in order to explain/interpret/understand the individual facts of history. As Croce wrote: philosophy without history is empty. For example: to understand/explain the English Civil Wars of 1642–1651, political philosophy elaborates the concept of ‘liberalism’ (rights of nature over state rights, *habeas corpus*, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, association and movement, etc.). Through this concept of liberalism, historians (and indeed all of us when we act as historians) can now understand that the *individual event* of 1642–1651 was not just a repetition of civil wars that had taken place since antiquity, but was also something new, namely a liberal revolution, and so belongs to a new concept, a new *universal*. For Croce, history without phi-

losophy is blind and lost. This point in Croce's *Logic* is the very core of his gnoseology: in the proposition "the English Civil Wars of 1642–1651 are a liberal revolution," Croce shows how the universal (the predicate) comes together with the individual (the subject) within a proposition that states a new truth. In fact, he understands this proposition in Kantian terms as a 'synthesis *a priori*.'⁶

3. 'History is always contemporary.' That is, it is to be carefully distinguished from any type of chronicle. The proper study of history involves research and investigation of the past but in order to find lessons by which better to understand the problems of the present. A chronicle, by contrast, is an exercise—sometimes obsessive, sometimes narcissistic, sometimes both—of 'piling up firewood.' Croce considered a chronicle an erudite cataloguing of names, facts, and dates. But when will this huge 'woodpile' ever become a burning bonfire? Metaphors aside, philologists, archivists, palaeographers, and librarians are not historians. The former do not hold the keys to the past at all. Although certainly occupying useful and dignified positions, provided such jobs do not exceed their limits, these specialists preserve the so-called 'external documents' of history, but these documents are—without the 'internal document,' i.e., the real legacy that the past has left to the present, transforming the individual and the particular population and humanity forever—mere material objects, parchments, epigraphs, books, all irreparably mute. 'External documents' serve to clarify, rectify, correct, and refute historiographical hypotheses and theories, but can in no way create them. It is the issues of the present that revive the past and make it meaningful. Our study of the past is guided by a wish better to understand ourselves and the present. Croce waged this battle against the narcissistic deformation and useless obsessiveness of Positivism's philological and erudite historiography, but, as we shall see, this battle was never entirely won and is still very much relevant today.

4. History is never a 'philosophy of history,' that is, an understanding of the general structure of history. Human beings cannot ascertain the 'plans of God,' which is to say, the purpose or end of history. Such an endeavor is futile because of the asymmetry between past and future. The intellect understands the relationships of cause and effect between events in reality, but this realm is confined to the experienced past, to

⁶ I will return to this point below when I summarise the debate between David Roberts and Claes Ryn on the nature of 'transcendent' values in Croce's historicism and will demonstrate how Ryn locates such 'transcendence'—historicist and not Platonic—precisely in the identity of the particular and the universal.

what humanity has already apprehended or created across its broad and varied range. The future, on the other hand, is unknown: as Popper would later say, a future society will certainly be influenced by the political, psychological, scientific, and economic ideas that we will have in the future, but we cannot know our future ideas, because, if we knew them, they would be present and not future. We cannot know what direction society will take in the future, and we have no power over the past, because it is impossible to act in the past. Thus, the relationship between intellect/knowledge and will/action can only be as follows: the intellect helps us to construct plans for future action by taking into account acquired knowledge, i.e., knowing which ideas are false, which ventures have been dead ends, which relationships between causes and effects are valid; and so our will, i.e., our action, is rationally guided. But this is always a matter of action and not of knowledge. I can propose to act in the future, but I cannot predict the future, if only because my action will have to add up algebraically with billions of other actions (which are not mine) to produce the actual 'result.' Like Croce, Popper was skeptical of supposed knowledge of the future derived from Hegel's and Marx's overweening philosophies of history. But Popper, coming from a Positivist and neo-Positivist background and having lived in the Anglophone world of analytic philosophy, did not, as was the case with many thinkers after him, have sufficient knowledge of the history of philosophy to distinguish Benedetto Croce's 'historicism' from the 'philosophy of history' of a Hegel, Marx, Oswald Spengler, Alfred Rosenberg, Arnold Toynbee, or Michel Foucault. Popper was wrong to think that Croce's opposition to 'philosophies of history' aligned with his own, but he confessed his lack of expertise, saying explicitly that he knew nothing of Benedetto Croce's 'historicism' and did not wish to make 'issues of words.'⁷

5. Note carefully: history is about everything in human experience: language, artistic forms, morality, religion, living species, galaxies,

⁷ In the 'Foreword' to the Italian edition of his book *Miseria dello Storicismo* (Milano, Italy: Feltrinelli, 1975), Popper writes on p. 9: "The Italian reader will immediately notice that Croce is not mentioned at all. The reason is that I greatly admire Croce, especially for his behaviour during Fascism, and that I do not know enough about him to say anything worthwhile. I certainly agree not only with his liberalism, but also with his critical attitude towards positivism; I disagree with his Hegelianism, but I must leave it to others to analyse how coincidental or divergent his use and mine of the term 'historicism' are. In any case, I do not think the *nomen* 'historicism' is very important." In fact, this use of the term has been severely criticised and termed 'idiosyncratic' by various authors (see Georg G. Iggers, "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term," *History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 129–152).

chemical elements, mathematical postulates, astronomical theories, political institutions, desires, and psychological fears, etc. Indeed, it is the application of thought to the entirety of human experience: that is the 'absolute' aspect of absolute historicism. This historicism does not deny higher values, but, on the contrary, recovers them in their living concreteness.

The Rise and Decline of Historicism

Rise

Benedetto Croce profoundly influenced the Italian culture of his time; and because of his lengthy life and career, he directly influenced at least three generations of contemporary thinkers from 1900 to the 1960s, who not only put his philosophy into practice, but also explicitly acknowledged their debt and gratitude to him. Among the most important and best known of these are: Antonio Gramsci,⁸ Piero Gobetti,⁹ Giuseppe Prezzolini, Francesco Flora, Luigi Russo, Mario Sansone, Adolfo Omodeo, Federico Chabod, Mario Pannunzio, Fausto Nicolini, Walter Maturi, Gianfranco Contini, Fulvio Tessitore, Aldo Mautino, Carlo Antoni, Mario Corsi, Vittorio De Capraris, Rosario Romeo, Ernesto De Martino, Mario Fubini, Eugenio Montale, Mario Praz, Ernesto Paolozzi, Gennaro Sasso, Raffaello Franchini, Manlio Ciardo, Giuseppe Galasso, Vittorio Stella, Adriano Bausola, Girolamo Cotroneo, and Giuseppe Cacciatore.

I would like to focus in particular on two outstanding Italian philosophers whose own thought was strongly informed by Croce's historicism. Both were highly accomplished and were, in different ways, very influential in their fields. One of them is Sofia Vanni-Rovighi (1908–1990), who was, in my estimation, after the death of Benedetto Croce, the greatest—that is, the most intelligent, cultured, and profound—Italian philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. Since she taught at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart on behalf of the fundamentalist Catholic Agostino Gemelli, she was not allowed explicitly to praise Croce, who was considered one of the philosophical enemies of the Faith

⁸ Reading the Index of Names of his *Prison Notebooks*, one can see that by far the most cited author by Gramsci is Benedetto Croce (see F. Manni, 'Antonio Gramsci e il Liberalismo', in F. Sbarberi (ed.), *Teoria Politica e Società Industriale*, (Torino, Italy: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988): 128–45.

⁹ F. Manni, 'Piero Gobetti e la Filosofia,' in M. Cassac (ed.), *Piero Gobetti et la Culture des Années 20* (Nice, France: Éditions de l'Université de Nice, 1999): 187–96.

to be resisted by the good Catholic and whose philosophical works had been placed on the Catholic Church's *Index of Forbidden Books* until 1959. Moreover, she was a neo-Thomist, her masterpiece being a neo-Thomist philosophical system (*Elements of Philosophy*). Other prominent neo-Thomists, such as Garrigou-Lagrange, Cardinal Mercier, Charles Boyer, Richard Phillips, and many others, wrote purely theoretical treatises without an historical element. They had a timeless, more abstract view of philosophy, and in their works other philosophers were often quoted only to condemn their errors.

Vanni-Rovighi, however, also wrote many studies on great philosophers of the past, such as Anselm of Canterbury, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, John Duns Scotus, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Galileo Galilei. Both in these studies of the history of philosophy and in her most theoretical works, Vanni-Rovighi consistently applied the Crocean historicist method that was detailed in the previous section, especially the first aspect: explaining any philosophical idea with reference to its various components of historical inheritance from other thinkers. To my knowledge, her philosophical system is the only one among the many in the neo-Thomistic world that is founded upon the basic historicist premise.

The second historicist philosopher I want to focus on was the best-known Italian philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century, at least in Italy (abroad it was surely Umberto Eco): Norberto Bobbio (1909–2004). He was a professor at the University of Turin, a member of the Accademia dei Lincei, a Life Senator of the Republic, and the Italian author with the largest number of works translated into other languages; but, above all, he was the 'great sage' respected by liberals, socialists, communists, and Catholics. He wrote in many journals, not only academic ones, and regularly in a major Italian newspaper, *La Stampa*. Throughout his long intellectual life he wrote books directly in praise of Croce, such as *Politics and Culture*, *Masters and Companions*, and *Ideological Profile of Twentieth-Century Italy*, but in all of his many books on the philosophy of law and the history of philosophy (studies on Marx, Carlo Cattaneo, Jusnaturalism, Hegel, Kant, Locke, Hobbes, and positivism) he always faithfully and profoundly represented historicist philosophy, especially the first and second aspects described above. Throughout his life he explicitly stated, argued, and confirmed in documentation that his greatest teacher in both the intellectual and moral fields was Benedetto Croce,¹⁰ this in contrast to the vast majority of Italian philosophers

¹⁰ F. Manni, 'Norberto Bobbio e Benedetto Croce,' *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 5 (2022):

after WWII, as typified by Eugenio Garin and Emanuele Severino, who instead were followers of Giovanni Gentile.

Outside of Italy, the most important philosopher influenced by historicism was Robin G. Collingwood (1889–1943). Collingwood wrote many letters to Croce from 1912 to 1939, translated his *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* into English (1913), wrote an in-depth study entitled “Croce’s Philosophy of History” in 1920,¹¹ and also, thanks to his influence (and that of Herbert Wildon-Carr who had written a book *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce* in 1917), Croce was invited to Oxford for a lecture at that University as part of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy in 1930. The lecture Croce presented at the Congress was entitled “Anti-historicism.” Above all, however, apart from these external facts, Collingwood, in his own philosophical works, followed Croce’s ideas and advanced historicist philosophy, in particular the third aspect described in the previous section, namely, the understanding that true history is always contemporary. Collingwood developed this point in an original way in his theory of ‘re-enactment.’

In the United States, two historians who embraced Croce’s historicism, at least in part, are Carl L. Becker (1873–1945) and Charles Beard (1874–1948). In his 1931 proslusion to the American Historical Association, Becker argued for aspects three, on the contemporaneity of all history, and five, on the fact that any reality of the universe is historical. He partially opposed aspect four, however, because—unlike Croce—he shared the Enlightenment’s idea of progress, which was anathema to Croce.

Beard, who was president of the American Historical Association, invited Croce to give a lecture at its meeting in 1933; Croce did not go but sent a letter that was incorporated by Beard into his own lecture (“Written History as an Act of Faith”), in which Beard argued the third aspect of Croce’s historicism—the one that had struck both Collingwood and Becker—namely that the historian selects the object of his study on the basis of a strong need to understand the present reality that is most urgent and demanding for his and his people’s lives.

Another American philosopher, Irving Babbitt, had criticized Croce in 1925,¹² believing that he had detected subjectivist relativism in his

130–70.

¹¹ R. G. Collingwood, “Croce’s Philosophy of History,” *Hibbert Journal* 19 (1929): 263–278.

¹² Irving Babbitt, “Croce and the Philosophy of the Flux,” *The Yale Review* 14 no. 2 (January 1925): 377–381.

aesthetics, which stressed the view of *l'art pour l'art*. Croce's emphasis on the creativity of true art was actually similar to Babbitt's. Croce would in time explicitly associate his notion of art with the idea that great art also has profundity of moral vision, something that Babbitt stressed. It is possible that Croce gave more prominence to this aspect of his aesthetics under Babbitt's influence. Both Babbitt and Croce sought a moderate position in relation to the romantic excesses of then-contemporary aestheticians and others. Babbitt stressed the inseparability of change and continuity in history, but was not chiefly a technical philosopher and did not develop an explicitly historicist epistemology in which timeless and stable 'values' and 'transcendence' are rediscovered in history. Yet his heavy emphasis on concrete experience as the test of reality points in just that direction.

An admirer of both Croce and Babbitt, Claes Ryn (1943–), in his 1986 book, *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*,¹³ criticized Babbitt on the mentioned grounds and for not having understood the extent of his agreement with Croce. Ryn relies heavily on Croce and Babbitt to develop his own historicist position, a new way of establishing perennial values without anchoring them in a static, ahistorical transcendent reality such as the one described by Plato.¹⁴ This position has been called 'value-centered historicism.' Ryn has had important influence in China, where in 2000 he gave a lecture series at Beijing University entitled 'Unity through Diversity.' It was published in 2001 as a book in Chinese translation by the same university. A somewhat different version of that book was published in America in 2003. In this we read:

Among the thinkers who prepared the way for a new, more subtle under-

¹³ Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1986). This book was, in considerable part, the result of Ryn's collaboration with his fellow Swede and philosophical mentor Folke Leander, who was his teacher at the *Gymnasium* in Norrköping, Sweden. Much of Leander's published writing showed the strong influence of Croce. After Leander's illness and death, Ryn had to complete the mentioned book on his own. He published a revised and enlarged edition of the book in 1997.

¹⁴ Although transcendence can be understood in a much different way; indeed, in one of his articles Ryn specifies that historicism is not relativism in the ordinary sense, because it recognizes the coincidence of the universal and the particular: "[Burke] is a pioneer in recognizing that universality and historical particularity are not, as previously thought, mutually incompatible and repellent but, rather, are potentially implicated in each other, potentially aspects of one and the same higher reality. Searching for universal values, we should not, according to Burke, look to 'metaphysical abstraction' but to concrete, historically formed, experiential manifestations of value" (Ryn, "History As Transcendence: What Leo Strauss Does Not Understand About Edmund Burke," *Humanitas* 31 (2018), 82.

standing of the relation of the universal to the particular, Hegel stands out as a groundbreaking figure, though he is partially preceded by Vico in Italy and Burke in England and though his thought has serious flaws. His best insights were much strengthened, expanded, and made more lucid by Benedetto Croce, who is perhaps the greatest technical and systematic philosopher of the twentieth century.¹⁵

Three of Ryn's books have been published in China. One of them, *America the Virtuous* (an ironical title), was described in a very prominently published review as a classic to be studied by new generations of Chinese. A number of his articles have also been translated into Chinese. He has been invited seven times to lecture at leading Chinese academic institutions. It is probably thanks to Ryn that Croce's *Theory and History of Historiography* was finally translated into Mandarin in 2012.¹⁶

In the US, the person who has written the most extensively about Croce and historicism in general is the historian David D. Roberts. Two books on these topics are fundamental and unsurpassed in depth of scholarship, *Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (1987) and *Nothing but History* (1995). They emphasize the importance of Croce's absolute historicism in providing the contemporary world with a moderate and constructive version of post-modernism that does not fall into the extremes of relativism and disrespect for tradition.

Roberts points out how all those American thinkers who would like an alternative to the erudite and philological historiography of positivism are nevertheless repelled by the "radical nature" of Crocean historicism, which seems to deny the existence of a "thing in itself" beyond the historian's activity. In their view, Crocean historicism plunges the philosopher into the abyss of relativism, but, as Roberts observes, Croce thought his absolute historicism was the most effective way of dissolving relativism at a time when the Christian religion had been greatly weakened among many people.

In the 1990s there was a debate of rare philosophical depth between the two American Croce scholars—Ryn and Roberts—on the nature of Croce's absolute historicism. In an article about how to understand historicism that included an extensive discussion of Roberts's view of Croce, Ryn argued that, despite the convergences between Roberts's interpretations of Croce and his own, there were important points of

¹⁵ Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2019 [2003]), 79.

¹⁶ The three books by Ryn published in China are the Beijing University lecture series on "Unity Through Diversity," *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire*, and *The New Jacobinism: America as Revolutionary State*.

disagreement. Ryn noted that Roberts considered Croce to be “prejudicially conservative” and “elitist,” which Ryn thought might be Roberts’s way of not offending radicals setting the tone in academia. More importantly, Roberts presented Croce’s historicism as being interested only in historical particularity. According to Ryn, Roberts was here giving a one-sided picture of Croce by almost exclusively basing his interpretation of Croce’s thought primarily on his detailed historical studies while neglecting his more systematic, more challenging works of philosophy. In the latter, Ryn contends, Croce goes deeply into the intimate connection of universality and particularity. Although Croce believed that his own philosophical thought was not definitive and was destined to be modified and improved in the future, Croce stressed the systematic nature of all serious philosophy, and he regarded universality as integral to man’s historical existence. While Roberts criticizes the very idea that philosophy is ‘foundational,’ Ryn holds that Croce’s philosophy is indeed ‘foundational,’¹⁷ though in a Crocean manner not acknowledged by Roberts. Unlike Croce, Roberts describes absolute historicism as recognizing “nothing but history,” as if historical particularity had nothing to do with universality. In Ryn’s view, Croce’s central works of philosophy emphatically contradict that view.

In a reply, Roberts acknowledged that, while he and Ryn share admiration for Croce’s great mind, they differ on where to locate the center of gravity of his historicism:

Ryn insists on “historical universality,” understood as “universality in particular form.” In other words, “[t]he transcendent reveals itself in history by becoming selectively immanent in it.” Thus, for example, moral goodness is universal but we know it only through its historically specific instances [. . .] That only seems to be the issue between Ryn and me if we have not grasped the alternatives. To get what is genuinely at issue, the first question is how we conceive and characterize what endures; the second concerns the wider cultural stakes of the differences in our respective ways of doing so. What endures, most basically, is simply the inseparable tandem of human being, with its distinguishable modes of activity, and the actual particular world that endlessly comes to be in history through human activity, which responds creatively to the resultant so far.¹⁸

In his reply to Roberts, Ryn pointed out that

Croce always saw universality and particularity as existing together in union and tension. [. . .] In Croce’s view, philosophy is synthesis of conceptual thought and historical particularity, universality and individual-

¹⁷ Ryn, “Defining Historicism,” *Humanitas* 11 (1998): 89–101.

¹⁸ David D. Roberts, “Characterizing Historicist Possibilities: A Reply to Claes Ryn,” *Humanitas* 13 (2000): 71, 76, 77.

ity. He refers to philosophy for that reason as "History-Philosophy." "The principle" of philosophy," he declares, is "the identity of the universal and the individual, of the intellect and the intuition."¹⁹

Decline

In 1930, at the Seventh Congress of Philosophy in Oxford, Croce entitled his lecture "Anti-historicism." Ahead of his time (i.e., before the Nazis came to power in Germany), he had already seen the roots of the totalitarian Europe that was taking shape, and he saw these roots in philosophy, particularly in 'anti-historicist' philosophy of two types: a 'futurist/anarchist' type, which despises the past and eagerly projects itself blindly into the future, and an authoritarian type, which believes that certain forms of Being (and society, and culture) are eternal and timeless and must be imposed on everyone uniformly. The first type despises the past, the second type is not even aware that there is a past and mistakes past social forms for 'timeless eternal values.' These two attitudes are united in their hatred of liberalism:

Historical sentiment and liberal sentiment are, in truth, inseparable, so much so that no better definition of history could be given than 'the history of freedom', because only from this does it obtain meaning and only through this does it become intelligible. / And, undoubtedly, even in the past the word 'freedom' was sometimes mocked or cursed as it was by men and social groups who saw their privileges threatened and their customs inconvenienced, or by rough plebs, instigated by their priests; and what is singular, on the other hand, in our days is that this happens not on the part of the privileged nor of the plebs, or not only on this side, but on the part of intellectuals, procreated by freedom, and who do not realise that they are denying themselves with it: an open sign, as much as anything else, of morbid process [...] However, just as humanity cannot do without poetry, neither can it do without history and its traditions, and the freedom that animates and enlivens them. And this is the last religion that remains to mankind, the last not in the sense that it is a last remnant, but in the other sense that it is the highest that can be drawn upon, the only one that stands firm and does not fear the contrary winds, but rather receives them within itself and invigorates itself: it does not escape and even seeks criticism and is itself, all together, criticism and construction, thought.

Those who ignore or disavow it are, in the modern world, the true atheists, the irreligious: irreligion and atheism that is not the least offensive in the words and deeds of the anti-historicists, energetic of the new or vacuous restorers of the old. He who opens his heart to historical sentiment is no longer alone, but united with the life of the universe, brother and son and

¹⁹ Ryn, "Historicism as Synthesis," *Humanitas* 13 (2000): 93.

companion of the spirits who already worked on earth and live on in the work they accomplished, apostles and martyrs, genii, creators of beauty and truth, humble good people who spread the balm of goodness and preserved human kindness; To them all he mentally directs himself to invoke, and from them comes to him, support in his labours and travails, and in their lap he aspires to rest, pouring his work into their work.²⁰

Antonio Gramsci, from this lecture by Croce at Oxford, discerned the foundation of a new alternative, or complementary, religion to Christianity:

[Religion] has always been a source of such national and international ideological-political combinations, and with religion the other international formations, Freemasonry, Rotary Club, Jews, career diplomacy, which suggest political expedients of different historical origins and make them triumph in particular countries, functioning as an international political party operating in each nation with all its concentrated international forces; but religion, Freemasonry, Rotary, Jews, etc, can fall into the social category of 'intellectuals,' whose function, on an international scale, is to mediate between extremes, to 'socialise' the technical findings that make all leadership work, to devise compromises and ways out between extreme solutions. [. . .]

Croce's practical attitude is an element for the analysis and critique of his philosophical attitude: [it] is indeed the fundamental element: in Croce philosophy and 'ideology' are finally identified, even philosophy shows itself to be nothing other than a 'practical instrument' of organisation and action: of organisation of a party, indeed of an international of parties, and of a line of practical action. Croce's speech at the Oxford Philosophy Congress is in fact a political manifesto, of an international union of the great intellectuals of every nation, especially of Europe; and it cannot be denied that this can become an important party that can have no small function.²¹

In this last passage Gramsci conflated two categories of the spirit that Croce had distinguished, namely, the economic-political moment (of particular action) with the philosophical moment (of universal knowledge). Philosophy does ultimately serve practice, but is different from what Croce calls practical reason: a more abstract form of rationality whose aim is utility rather than truth.

Three years after that conference, Croce's fears seemed to come true:

²⁰ Croce, "Antistoricismo," in G. Ryle (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy – Held at Oxford, England, September 1–6, 1930* (London, UK: H. Milford, 1931). Claes Ryn—while quoting Croce himself—describes antihistoricism this way: "Croce writes perceptively about antihistoricist moralists that they are 'anxious to put morality outside the pale of history, and think to exalt it, so that it can agreeably be revered from afar and neglected from near at hand'" (*A Common Human Ground*, 83).

²¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana (Torino, Italy: Einaudi, 1977), notebook 13, paragraph 17, p. 1585; notebook 6, paragraph 10, p. 690.

Hitler came to power, made common cause with Mussolini and the Empire of the Sun, then allied himself with Stalin's Soviet Union, and finally conquered a large part of Europe militarily. In the meantime, Croce had occasion to witness many Italian and German intellectuals (most notably, Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt in this latter case) jumping on the bandwagons of fascism and Nazism, respectively. While at Oxford in 1930 he had seen among the speakers and listeners at the conference various neo-idealist and historicist philosophers such as Collingwood, Wildon Carr, Morris R. Cohen, Nicolai Hartmann, J. Luppol, Léon Brunschvicg, and G. R. G. Mure. But he had also seen Gilbert Ryle chairing the Congress, and he realized that most of the lectures were about problems of logic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language that constituted the inception of the new trend in Anglophone philosophy that would later be called 'analytic philosophy.'

In his homeland, Italy, in 1944, after the Allies had liberated the south and the king had assembled a government of the various anti-fascist parties in Salerno, Croce was a fellow minister in that administration, together with Palmiro Togliatti, head of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), who had just returned from Moscow, where he had lived in exile during the fascist era, protected by Stalin. Togliatti began forcefully to condemn Croce in the pages of the cultural magazine *Rinascita*, which he had founded that year. Togliatti had identified Croce as the main cultural enemy to be overthrown in order to establish communist cultural hegemony in Italy. This course of action, planned and programmed in detail, and conducted with tenacity and effectiveness for twenty years, has been called by historians the 'anti-Croce campaign' and has recently been persuasively documented by Daniela La Penna.²²

²² Daniela La Penna, "The Rise and Fall of Benedetto Croce: Intellectual Positionings in the Italian Cultural Field, 1944–1947," *Modern Italy* 21(2016): 139–55. The myth that Gramsci had preceded Togliatti in his 'anti-Croce' *Quaderni dal carcere* only testifies to one thing: the ideological bias of those who say it and their ignorance, to never having read the pages in which Gramsci criticizes Croce in *I Quaderni*. Those spreading this myth should be invited to read Gramsci's pages on Croce, written late in his life, and they should read Floriano Martino's account of them. Here you can see that while Togliatti and his communist friends wanted to erase the memory of Croce's works after the Second World War—in which they had great success—Gramsci wanted to have Croce read and meditated upon as much as possible. Martino writes: "[For Gramsci,] on the one hand, the style of his scholarly prose expresses with simplicity and nerve a subject matter that in other writers generally appears obscure and prolix, while, on the other hand, his thought 'does not present itself as a massive philosophical system that is difficult to assimilate,' but rather Croce was able to 'circulate [. . .] his conception of the world' in a series of short writings in which 'philosophy presents itself immediately and is absorbed as common sense.' [. . .] Gramsci states that the most important element of his popularity is to be found

Togliatti's campaign was very successful for several reasons: a few years after its inception Croce died (1952) and could no longer refute with documented evidence the lies told about him (as he had been able to do while part of the Bonomi government of 1944);²³ additionally, the PCI was by size the second largest party in the new Italian Republic, and many opportunist intellectuals believed that the communist 'sun of the future,' thanks to the power of Stalin and the Warsaw Pact, would be victorious in the Cold War and dominate the world.

Furthermore, there was already a strong hostility to Croce in much of the Italian Catholic world, which saw him as an atheist immanentist philosopher and, as mentioned above, had put his works on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. It is an open question whether the Church's reaction was too influenced by first impressions and a certain philosophical rigidity born of a brand of ahistorical rationalism. Was not his notion of the possible synthesis of historical particularity and universality a potential support for and elucidation of the traditional Catholic stress on tradition and most especially for the central Christian dogma of the Incarnation, that is, "the Word" becoming "Flesh"?²⁴ Relevant to an assessment of Croce's actual relationship to Catholicism is also his famous essay on "Perchè non possiamo non dirci cristiani" ("Why We Cannot But Call Ourselves Christians").

In the eyes of the fascists, who remained present in large numbers and active (even to this day) in post-war Italy, even though somehow "in

in the 'greater adherence to life' of his philosophy compared to 'any other speculative philosophy.' Croce does not seek systematicity 'in an external architectural structure but in the intimate coherence [. . .] of each particular solution.' [. . .] The critique of the concept of the system is part of Croce's attempt to 'expunge from his philosophy every trace and residue of transcendence and theology and therefore of metaphysics.' Gramsci's critique is articulated when addressing particular issues, such as Croce's ethical-political history or his consideration of the economic structure as a *dio ascoso* (hidden God) or of the superstructure as mere appearance, in the conviction that the philosophy of praxis must 'come to terms, as broadly and thoroughly as possible' with 'the philosophy of Croce [...] which represents the present world moment of classical German philosophy.' For this work Gramsci believes that 'it would be worth a whole group of men devoting ten years of activity to it.'" ("La fortuna di Croce in Italia" in *Croce e Gentile*, Enciclopedia Treccani, 2016 <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-fortuna-di-croce-in-italia_%28Croce-e-Gentile%29/>, my translation). I am here not assessing the thought of Gramsci, only demonstrating his deep and lasting admiration for Croce, which helps explain the sharp contrast between Gramsci and Togliatti.

²³ Croce, *Taccuini di Guerra* (Milano, Italy: Adelphi, 2004 [1944]), 161 and following.

²⁴ John 1:14. See the already mentioned writings by Ryn: *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* and "History As Transcendence: What Leo Strauss Does Not Understand About Edmund Burke."

disguise," Croce was to be blamed both for his longstanding and vocal personal anti-fascism, and, as a philosopher, for having been a theorist of liberalism and historicism, unlike their intellectual paladin Giovanni Gentile.

On top of all this, there resurfaced ancient opposition from the Positivists, defeated by Croce and Gentile at the turn of the century, but still present and active in academia and journals, full of resentment, and now able to take the Neo-Positivists of the Vienna Circle as their guides.

Finally, Croce fell afoul of an even older and more deeply entrenched opposition from the world of academia: the fact that Croce had never been a graduate student or professor and, indeed, that many university professors simply envied or disliked him for his resistance to the intellectual fads and fashions that make academic careers flourish in the reciprocal citations and adulations between university professors and their 'disciples,' meant that he had no shortage of enemies in the academy ready to traduce his memory.

Togliatti's 'anti-Croce' campaign was so effective that, when the Neo-Marxist movement of 1968—which still dominates much of Italian culture—began and established itself in Italy, only two well-known intellectuals, Norberto Bobbio and Pier Paolo Pasolini, both deeply influenced by Croce, were aware of, and courageous in their vehement denunciation of, the political and cultural dangers that this movement posed to Italy. All other Italian intellectuals (academics, journalists, essayists, film directors, writers) remained silent.²⁵ With so little active support, Croce's old reputation could not be maintained. Pasolini did not even attempt to do so, because he understood that in the new Italy, culturally dominated by Marxism, he had nothing to gain by showing how he had been influenced by Croce; he thus concealed this influence in his life and falsely claimed that he was philosophically a disciple of Antonio Gramsci, rather than of Croce.²⁶ As for Bobbio, although throughout his life he made his intellectual and moral debt to Croce explicit, he did not make it a thematic banner for his political and cultural output, rather leaving this fact in the background. At the same time, the other leading Italian intellectuals preferred to highlight Bobbio's intellectual inheritance from Kelsen, Marx, Hegel, Cattaneo, the jusnaturalists, analytical philoso-

²⁵ F. Manni, "The Unfulfilled Promises of the Italian 1968 protest movement," in K. Bonello, Rutter Giappone, G. Collet, and I. McKenzie, eds., *Double Binds of Neoliberalism: Theory and Culture After 1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 89–101.

²⁶ Z. Baranski, "Pasolini: Culture, Croce and Gramsci," in Z. Baranski and R. Lumley eds., *Culture and Conflict in Post-War Italy* (London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 1990): 139–59.

phy, Hobbes, Gioele Solari, Max Weber, and Gaetano Mosca. Croce was conspicuous by his absence from a list of influences, the victim, in large part, of a conspiracy of silence that was both vast and long-lasting and continuing even to this day.

As for the UK, between the 1930s and the 1950s, Collingwood had died in the war, and the neo-idealism of T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, J. H. Muirhead, J. M. E. McTaggart, H. H. Joachim, and A. E. Taylor had been outflanked by the realism of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, which was later supplemented by the 'second' Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which in turn gave rise to that current of Anglophone philosophy called 'analytic philosophy,' which is only now, after eighty years of dominance, declining.

A remarkable and revealing—though hitherto little known—episode in this campaign against Croce's historicism is the British translation of an important book that Norberto Bobbio wrote in 1944, *La Filosofia del Decadentismo* (*The Philosophy of Decadentism*). With profound insight Bobbio identified in the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger the philosophy—in the technical sense—of decadentism, which was a phenomenon broader than existentialism, being above all psychological, artistic, and literary. Bobbio identified in this existentialist philosophy a great regression, brought about by totalitarianism and war, with respect to the traditional values of Western society. He deeply regretted that as a new fundamental philosophy to replace the rapidly declining Christian religion, existentialism rather than historicism was chosen. What is remarkable is that the passage in which Bobbio makes this point explicitly and emphatically was omitted from the English translation of 1948. (It was retained in the Spanish translation of 1949.) Given that the passage is ten lines long, its omission could not be a matter of mere accidental error on the part of the translator. Skipping a line might be explained in this way, but not the omission of an entire philosophically important passage. What was taken out was not 'window dressing' or information of secondary importance, but clearly an idea fundamental to the book. The translator does not include a note justifying the omission. The latter is simply censorship.²⁷

²⁷ The English translation of Bobbio's book is called *The Philosophy of Decadentism* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1948). In the Italian original, the omitted passage is on page 19; in the Spanish translation it is on page 20. See Norberto Bobbio, *El Existencialismo: Ensayo de Interpretación* (Mexico City, Mexico & Buenos Aires, Argentina: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1949). I have repeatedly contacted the publisher Basil Blackwell in Oxford, but they have been unable to give me any information about why the passage was removed. Perhaps an explanation to this intriguing question might be obtained by contacting the

As far as the United States is concerned, Roberts informs us that in Hayden White's 1973 watershed book on historiography—*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*—Croce is afforded an important place but reckoned by White to be the pinnacle of the 'sterile tradition' of nineteenth-century historiography, because his philosophy allegedly severed history from a 'general science of society.' In fact, Croce, in common with great Italian, French, German, and English historians of the nineteenth century, did not want to construct a 'general science of society' while recounting the events of the French Revolution, the Italian Renaissance, or the Unification of Germany. To their credit, those historians had no such desire because they were not influenced by positivist sociology à la Talcott Parsons, which is more than can be said for White and his many American followers today.

Contemporary Prospects for Historicism

For 80 years, the philosophy taught in university departments throughout the English-speaking world was chiefly so-called 'analytic philosophy,' which claimed to discover timeless truths about the errors of the human mind and the structures of language and, therefore, of human thought, by making very long and minute analyses of pronouns, syntactic connectives of co-ordination and subordination, of the differences between referent, signifier and signified, of the transferability of ordinary language into mathematical symbolic logic, etc.. This was a long-term trend that the English-speaking philosophical world semi-consciously adopted as a reaction to the totalitarian society and culture either in the 'Nazi-fascist West' or the 'Communist East,' a culture that they held to rest upon an abstruse and suspect 'continental philosophy,' sick with subjectivism and arrogance. Their 'analysis' was cast, by contrast, as clear, objective, and humble. Since, however, first the Nazi-fascist world and then the Communist world have been defeated and the European Union has shown its foundations in "liberalism" to be just as solid, if not more so, than those of the English-speaking world, there is no longer any need for such extreme overreaction, as in neglecting

heirs of Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves, the chief sponsor of the translation of Bobbio's book into English. d'Entrèves was a militant Catholic and perhaps did not wish to show that, for Bobbio, the alternative to Decadentism was historicism, not Christianity as d'Entrèves understood it. Or one could contact the heirs of the translator David Moore, who, if he was a Marxist (about which I could find no information), might have been influenced by Togliatti's 'anti-Croce' campaign. The heirs of Bobbio are another possible source.

for decades the study of the classics of the history of philosophy. Today we see the philosophy departments of the English-speaking world doing away with chairs of analytical philosophy and replacing them with chairs in ‘continental philosophy,’ ‘history of philosophy,’ and so-called ‘critical thought/theory.’

However, because of 1968 and its neo-Marxist legacy in the mainly American global academy, many professors and lecturers have opted to toe the line and conform to neo-Marxist ideology rather than offering a conflicting perspective. Doubtless the offer of tenured positions, which multiplied during the demographic and economic boom of the later twentieth century, has helped intellectuals to overcome any scruples that they may have had in this regard. Today, the ‘continental philosophy’ in which the English-speaking world is interested is of existentialist origin (e.g., Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, Karl Barth, Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty) or structuralist origin (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, René Girard, Félix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard).

These philosophers, who are often lumped together in a confusing category sometimes called ‘post-structuralism,’ sometimes ‘post-modernism,’ and sometimes ‘critical theory,’ can be considered the ‘reaction to the reaction,’ such as it is. Advocates of pushing back against the hegemony of analytic philosophy are offering a form of continental thought that is very different from that of the classics.

To the extent that the academy follows the current so-called ‘woke’ fashion of erasing the classics and teaching ‘minority,’ ‘alternative,’ and ‘rebel’ philosophies in a continuous subversion of the canon, this ‘critical theory’ will dominate and the English-speaking world will receive little real gain from dethroning analytic philosophy.

There is an alternative possibility. Should history of philosophy chairs, courses, dissertations, books, and conferences take hold, stimulating a study of the classics, there will be room to return to the philosophy of absolute historicism, which provides a powerful research method for the historian of the discipline. The only other school of philosophical thought that seems to have a similar chance of establishing itself more widely in Western culture—as the former Marxist, former Aristotelian, and, for decades, neo-Thomist philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has repeatedly argued—is ‘Neo-Thomism.’²⁸ Both absolute historicism and

²⁸ John Haldane, “MacIntyre’s Thomist Revival: What’s Next?,” in *Faithful Reason*, (London, UK & New York NY, Routledge, 2004), 15–30. On October 7–8, 2022, the University of Chicago organised a conference entitled “MacIntyre and Hegel,” the

Neo-Thomism value continuity with the past and sober consideration of the classics of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period; both hold that any true novelty can occur only in continuity with the past and that we, the thinkers of today, are nothing more than ‘dwarfs on the shoulders of giants.’

The chief benefit from a revival of historicism would be the correction of several widespread intellectual errors that I will summarize in conclusion. Firstly, historicism could censure the ‘erudite history’ that is content with piling up data, documents, and footnotes without any conceptual understanding of the data/events being narrated, because it lacks the insight provided by the second aspect of historicism described above and is without any ‘historical purpose,’ i.e., real usefulness for understanding a fact in the present, because it lacks the third aspect of historicism described above. Historicism could show this erudite history as being, in fact, only a type of chronicle.

A second error that historicism—owing to its fourth described aspect—could effectively address is the proliferation of more or less systematic, more or less conscious ‘popular philosophies of history’ that we see today. These claim to be able, based on our knowledge of past events, to predict the future, prophesying, for example, that ‘China will dominate the world,’ or that ‘technologies will replace human creativity,’ or that ‘occult financial powers will deplete nation-states,’ and so on.

A final serious mistake that historicism, thanks to the first and fifth aspects of the theory described above, could address is the idolization of supposedly ‘timeless’ ideas, structures of mind and society, political and cultural institutions. This is the perennial temptation of Platonism—the belief that there has always existed a static World of Ideas, which contains the full Truth, and which ‘good philosophers’ can understand, bring down to earth, and impose on the course of history, as, supposedly, did Rousseau, Robespierre, Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong on the left, and Joseph De Maistre, the Vienna Restoration, Carl Schmitt, fascism and the American neoconservatives, whom Ryn has criticized, on the right.²⁹

A general moral benefit that also would come from a revival of

promotional material for which says: “This conference aims to bring together the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and G. W. F. Hegel. Both philosophers are distinguished by their extensive integration of history, including the history of philosophy, within their own philosophical theorizing. As such, the conference aims to re-examine the relationship between reason and history.” See: <<https://hegelmacintyre.wordpress.com/>>.

²⁹ Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (Piscataway NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010 [1991]).

historicism is the understanding that the structure of our human existence—as a parabola of growth and then of ageing and loss—is not to be discovered by falling into nostalgia but by entering into new vision: that we human individuals are in strong solidarity with human society and its institutions, with language, law, technology, other living species, the geological and atmospheric environment, the stars, and matter itself.

A second, more particular moral benefit given to us by historicism is well expressed by Ryn:

Value-centered historicism unqualifiedly embraces the historicity of human existence. Everything we do, think, and imagine has a history and is affected by that history. Individuals are made unique by their histories. They view and approach life differently. There is an important sense in which no two persons can act in a practical situation, view a painting, or read a philosophical text in the same way. This insight has been available for many generations. It is a component of German and Italian historicism. It was expressed with special clarity and penetration in the twentieth century by Benedetto Croce.

Only persons unfamiliar with the historicist strain in modern Western philosophy could think that we are indebted for this idea to postmodernism. The latter has merely taken it to a frivolous extreme by assuming that historicity is incompatible with universality. Both ahistorical universalists of the Greek variety and postmodernist nihilists mistakenly assume that if we are restricted to history there can be no common human ground, no center of values. The classical abstractionists try to escape from history, which they say has no meaning, to a postulated sphere of disembodied universals. The postmodernists immerse themselves in history, from which they try to exclude what is in fact indistinguishable from it, a power that keeps particularity and diversity from shattering into meaninglessness.

Both groups are unable to grasp the idea that particularity and universality might actually coexist, cooperate as well as be in conflict. Value-centered historicism explains the good, the true, and the beautiful as a synthesis of universality and particularity. What seems to many philosophers to be theoretically inconceivable is a fact of human experience.³⁰

³⁰ Ryn, *A Common Human Ground*, 63.