



Eminent Poseur

Review of Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy*

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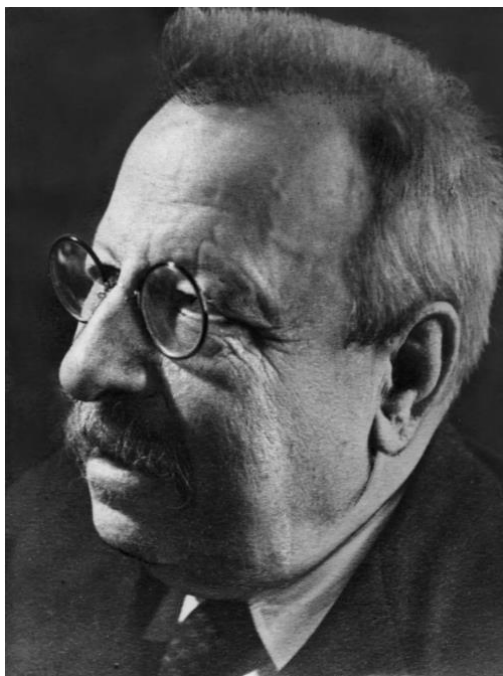
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Review of Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy: And Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time*, ed. R. Klibansky, trans. E. F. Carritt (London, [1949]: Allen & Unwin), *Mind* 61 no. 244 (October 1952), 574–8



THIS COLLECTION of essays, meditations and brief disquisitions will scarcely add to Signor Croce's worldwide reputation as savant and thinker. They are for the most part occasional pieces written during the last two decades, and while they reflect the civilised and often original thought of their eloquent author, they are, for the most part, no more than footnotes to his lifelong consideration of the nature of historical, aesthetic and political thinking. Those who are familiar with the systematic exposition of Signor Croce's philosophy, or even with his contribution to historical and literary

criticism, will find in this volume elaborations and, at times, specific applications of the author's views on these topics; those who are not, will obtain not more than intermittent glimpses of his general outlook during the last half century.

The pieces selected are arranged under five main headings: 'Discourses on Philosophy', 'Philosophy of Politics', 'The Problems of Ethics and Aesthetics', 'Philosophy of History' and 'Various Thoughts'. It is not clear what, or whether any, principle of selection has been followed by the editor. If, for example, this volume is intended to appeal to the common reader as well as the philosopher, one may reasonably object that most of the brief essays included are too slight in texture, too allusive and dependent for their meaning on the author's other writings, too incomplete (containing as they do but seldom even the condensed essence of a general argument) to be of interest to others than those already familiar with the Crocean philosophy; while for these last the selection seems at once too brief and too random. Mr Carritt's scrupulous scholarship is a guarantee of the accuracy of the translation, and in addition it is exceedingly agreeable to read and a model to all translators of philosophical prose into English, since he is conspicuously free from the besetting faults of most of them – clumsiness, inaccuracy and absence of adequate intellectual equipment. Despite the lightweight nature of much in this collection (it springs from too rich and too civilised a mind ever to become completely trivial), there is enough here to compel respect and interest on the part of serious philosophers.

No student of contemporary philosophy, however superficial, can fail to observe that it is divided by a chasm which divides the main portion of the continent of Europe, on the one hand, from the Anglo-American world with its Scandinavian, Austrian and Polish intellectual dependencies. This chasm is so deep that philosophers on the side of it can scarcely bring themselves to think of those on the other as being occupied with the same subject as themselves; of the continental thinkers Signor Croce is the oldest and most celebrated. Like the great majority of thinkers in the Latin countries, he has lived through the great logico-

philosophical revolution of the last half century, initiated by Frege and Russell – perhaps the most complete transformation of thought in this field since the seventeenth century – without being noticeably affected by it. He did, indeed, in his [575] day, himself revolt against the mythology created by the German Idealist metaphysicians, and in this volume makes pungent and effective attacks upon the imaginary world populated by the hypostatised abstractions and other imaginary entities invented and propagated by these philosophers. But his revolt is a strictly internal affair, a protest within the field of the Idealist establishment, at most an attempt at a Counter-Reformation which shares with its opponent the basic assumptions from which it denounces its positivist, empiricist and other contemporary enemies.

Signor Croce differs from his best known philosophical allies and adversaries in that his principal interests lie in the field of thought about art, history and social life; and since he tends to assimilate other provinces of critical thinking to these, he represents Idealism in the fields in which it has made its most interesting and imaginative contribution, and not those to which it has brought much fatal darkness and confusion. Consequently even Signor Croce's opponents have occasionally all but conceded that his ideas on history, and indeed on the concepts of politics and aesthetics, are not infrequently novel and arresting.

The aesthetic reflections republished in this volume add little to familiar Crocean doctrines; but on politics and history there are interesting observations. The principal thesis is, as always, that excessive abstraction spells ruin. The author illustrates the proposition that once a principle of explanation is frozen into a 'static' concept and removed from its historical context, it turns into a double obstacle to the progress of thought: firstly because it becomes a straitjacket which is liable to be applied indiscriminately to all situations and all contexts, with misleading or, at worst, totally absurd consequences; and secondly because it tends to generate entities which are then thought of as inhabiting the real world, with causal, or even more mysterious, powers of affecting the course of affairs, and in this way tends to breed ontologies which are

mythological enough themselves, and lead to other still more extravagant metaphysical fantasies.

Signor Croce maintains that the only way of avoiding such dangerous tendencies is by remaining ‘concrete’, i.e. careful about contexts in employing or criticising concepts and terms; by remembering the actual situations to describe or express which such concepts or words have been most effectively used; above all, by being careful not to identify the meaning of a term with some specific characteristic belonging to a set of historical conditions doomed to disappearance and possibly oblivion. Signor Croce employs these maxims with considerable effect when he exposes e.g. the spuriousness of the alleged connection between the concept of the liberty of thought with that of *laissez-faire*, adding illuminating observations about the former based on the arresting analysis of it by Sismondi; and thereby provides a timely antidote to much naive or tendentious discussion of political freedom in our day.

He follows this with a penetrating homily on the dangers of generalised intellectual systems. His views seem compounded partly of what amounts to a re-affirmation of the thesis (although he does not allude to it) – perhaps the most illuminating and important of all ever asserted by Aristotle – that only inspection of the individual case yields specific truths; and partly of the more familiar Hegelian belief – more elegant in its Italian than in its German form – that historical situations can be understood, and problems answered, only in terms of a particular pattern in which the situation or problem arises, and is made what it is by the unique relationships in which it occurs within the system of which it is a part; which tends to show that the doctrine of internal relations has always had a greater plausibility when applied to historical and aesthetic cases rather than to those of the natural [576] sciences or sense perception.

From this position Signor Croce develops his now familiar attack on both the worshippers and the enemies of abstract concepts – for concepts taken in isolation, by themselves, are, for him, but ‘reified’ figments, so that polemics against them are often

a mere tilting at windmills. He points out that such concepts as liberty or equality, as they occur in the polemical writings of e.g. Marxists or anti-Marxists, are, as a rule, quite wooden and without application. Any attempt to hold up such uninterpreted notions as ideals, or to continue to speak of them in accordance with some dogmatic formula, necessarily springs from, and leads to, a distortion both of thought and action. Once the 'concrete' situation is lost sight of and 'abstract' doctrine applied, the result is often the opposite of what was intended, since the method practised no longer responds to the needs or problems of the moment, but belongs to some other situation, and insistence on the infallibility of any one solution to any problem as if it were timeless and always applicable must lead to much confusion of thought and suffering in practice.

Signor Croce is at his best in attacking the emptiness of such still politically formidable abstractions as 'social equality' or 'economic equality', but fails to explain to those who still look on such principles as being sacred how there could ever have existed a context in which the defence of such ideas seemed plausible. Indeed, by a curious irony, this most celebrated defender of the 'concrete' meaning of history in all its rich variety totally fails to bring to life situations or states of mind in which ideas which he pronounced mistaken or dangerous can ever have seemed illuminating to so many, and led to actions of historical importance. Hence his attacks at times fail to find targets, and succeed in knocking down only some very unconvincing men of straw.

Similarly he delivers an admirable sermon against over-narrow concepts of right and wrong, but then says nothing very enlightening about the proper analysis of these terms or their proper use save for some noble but excessively familiar liberal platitudes about the fact that their denotation must always be sought in the richest and fullest development of the human 'spirit' – an activity carried on by the best minds of an age, necessarily conditioned by, but seeking to raise the level of, the majority of their sufficiently enlightened fellows. Apart from the obvious circularity (or, at least, obscurity) of saying that the best is what the

best do at their best, one now comes across the fatal word ‘spirit’, to which, as one reads on, one finds more and more responsibility for everything attributed by the author.

After all his acute and lively arguments against the absurdities caused by the adoption, to explain the movement of history, of such mythological entities as The Idea, or Matter or Spirit; after admirable pages against such reified abstractions, particularly in the last (and best) section (pp. 167–208),¹ which is worth all the rest of the book put together; after a discussion in which various metaphysical philosophies of history are examined, juxtaposed, turned into dust and blown away; after a fascinating disquisition on the psychological and historical causes which bring now this, now that, historical category into fashion, in response to the interests and character of individual historians and their society; after a devastating critique of the various ‘discoverers’ of historical laws as being inventors of mere collections of conceptual counters with which they play games according to rules of their own devising, whereby no light is cast upon the past, still less upon the future; after all this, with the reader surrounded by the debris of exploded fallacies, by now thoroughly keyed up and agog for the true solution, what does he find to be Signor Croce’s own notion of how ‘history’ ‘happens’?

Here it is: ‘what really evolves is [...] the [577] universal spirit which[,] by its spontaneous function, raises up and destroys individuals and nations for its own purpose’. Perhaps these words bear some meaning other than that which one hundred and fifty years of teleological Idealism appeared to find in them; but on the face of it they appear uncommonly like that vicious reification – an empty general term raised to the level of a transcendent or immanent entity – the very same fatal error against which Signor Croce has so persistently and successfully warned us.

At one time Signor Croce’s critics used to urge against him (whenever they managed to pin him down to anything at all definite) that he and the Idealists of his school explained historical

¹ [In fact the fourth of the five sections, ending on p. 213.]

movements too much in terms of the progress and influence of enlightened minorities, without due regard to the drearier, but not necessarily less causally efficacious, empirical factors to which economic, and the more pedestrian type of social, histories called our attention. But that was a relatively minor issue compared to the question whether Signor Croce succeeded in exploding the minor *Idola Theatri* (as he himself occasionally calls them), only to make room for the largest and most notorious delusion of all – the great Hegelian tautology whereby ‘everything’ is explained by the ‘self-development’ of the ‘universal Spirit’, which turns out to be no more than an immense disguise for the original ‘everything’ – so that everything is as it is, and occurs as it does, because that is what it is, and this is how it occurs.

It was Feuerbach who, more than a century ago, pointed out that Hegel’s interpretation of history either entailed the existence of a great many pseudo-entities to which all kinds of mysterious activities and properties were attributed, or else was merely a gigantic ‘identity’ which explained nothing. In other words, either ‘The Idea’ which was responsible for the behaviour of the universe was itself an entity (or ‘force’ or ‘tendency’), however transcendent, infinite and indescribable; or, if that was a mistaken interpretation (as the left-wing Hegelians maintained) then ‘The Idea’ was simply a grandiose name for all there was – the universe itself – in which case, to say that everything was as it was because it was the self-development of the Absolute Idea was to say nothing at all.

Signor Croce, who certainly looks on Feuerbach as a narrow and ignorant materialist – a species of honest but naive philosophical hack, blinded by all sorts of crude scientific formulae, with no insight into the history of his own or any other time – probably regards this argument on his part as but an added proof of his philosophical immaturity. Feuerbach was certainly a dull philosopher; yet his objection to Hegel remains both fundamental and valid; and it is difficult to see how, for all his richly imaginative mind, his remarkable gifts as historian and critic of ideas and of literature, his humane, fastidious and generous culture,

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the originality and freshness of his isolated aperçus, Signor Croce escapes this fatal dilemma.

One cannot avoid the conclusion that Signor Croce's entire system breaks to pieces under its impact. His way of avoiding it is akin to that practised at times by his gifted disciple, the late R. G. Collingwood: he ignores it with something akin to bland contempt as so much logomachy; and this refusal to descend into the dust of the crucial controversies of the last half century, and to argue upon specific issues, places him – as it does Collingwood, for all his remarkable gifts – outside the ranks of the intellectual innovators of our time. He remains, of course, a fascinating writer on many topics, an eminent poseur, a distinguished personality, a scholar and critic of the purest water, a penetrating and original historian, a great civilising influence in Italy; and in even these, his scattered reflections, particularly [578] in the section on the philosophy of history, he illuminates problems with which English-speaking philosophers have, on the whole, not occupied themselves sufficiently.

Misprints occur (none of them gravely misleading) on pages 24, 28, 29, 32, 64, 71, 79, 93, 113, 117, 153, 127, 129, 190 and 192.

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