

BENEDETTO CROCE

ON THE THEORY OF DISTINCTION AND OF THE FOUR SPIRITUAL CATEGORIES, 1946
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When fate has permitted a human being, a worker, to reach the latter years and to take in the expanse of his own work at a glance, allowing enough strength besides to keep working at it without feeling personally futile, it happens naturally that he finds himself in the condition of someone who has run a business for a long time and, while still being part of it, is drawn to give certain instructions and warnings to his next successors. Francesco Gaeta, in the *envoi* to **some of his poems**, asks sister Death to open to him ‘the **blind shutter** on the hard bulk of Nothing’:¹ this is a powerful and beautiful poetic image, but not moral truth because, at the close of life, a person who has worked without disgrace sees the world open to the future for which he has always lived, where the young, whom he always imagined better than him, take up again with fresh powers the work **alongside of** which he now rests, weary but content.

It is quite well known or acknowledged that the leading theme of the intellectual task to which I have always applied myself has been the dogged defense of the concept of ‘distinction.’ Considering that any philosopher – any person, in fact – thinks only inasmuch as he makes distinctions, this defense might seem superfluous or arrogant had it not been shown to be justified by the general character of the age in which I live and have lived. That character, in philosophy as in morality, battered about from romanticism to positivism to naturalism, activism, mysticism and other such tendencies, has enfeebled the force of the distinction and diminished or corrupted its value. Not that I have set myself, consciously or by design, against my time, having been saved (thank heaven) from the attitudes that they call ‘gladiatorial’ not, I will say, by modesty but by a rather lively sense of the ridiculous – Neapolitan that I am. And now that I can turn backwards and rethink the path that I have walked, if I accept the usual definition of my work, it is simply because it seems justified and provides the possibility of a profitable discussion.

The major polemics that emerged in the aforementioned defense were two: the one against the sensists, psychologists, associationists, naturalists and materialists who **certainly** adopted and indeed at every turn multiplied distinctions but held them all equally empirical and conventional, without absolute value; the other against the idealists of the leading speculative school of the nineteenth century – the Hegelian – which, having affirmed the principle of the dialectic, **quickly used it to treat** distinctions as insufficiencies or ascending grades of logical ripening, thus annulling and resolving them all in the completed ripeness of the Logos or the Idea.

The argument that I used against the first group was relatively easy because (without being unfair to them) they were, in general, even the most famous of them, very unreflective. I pointed out – if not to them, then to those who are reflective – that no

¹Francesco Gaeta, *Poesie*, ed. B. Croce (Bari: Laterza, 1928), p. 104: ‘Canzone, or vanne a nostra donna Morte, / perché m’apra il battente / finto su lo spessor duro del Niente.’

empirical and conventional distinction is posited unless, in the act itself, the absolute and real other **is required by it**, just as paper money assumes non-paper relations where things or services are really exchanged for one another, and the false money **requires** the good. This part of the case could quickly be considered a victory.

But of necessity the other rebuttal turned out to be much harder and more subtle because the dialectical principle truly was a great force of revival and actually of revolution. Its introduction and validation in modern thought was chiefly to Hegel's credit. One could no longer return to the old metaphysics of Being and escape the logic of Becoming, which, having entered the world of thought, would not let itself be driven out again. The error of the panlogical conception was manifest, to be sure, in the Hegelian system and its successors. Nonetheless, it was not right to infer from this error that the logic was erroneous, only to suspect a serious flaw in the concept or rather in the theory built upon it.

Here, in effect, the process of my rebuttal consisted in asking how one might ever explain the emergence of opposition in the unity of the spirit and with it the subsequent conciliation, overcoming and conservation, and so avoid Manichean dualism **as well as** a relapse into a unity immobilized by lack of opposition. My proof was that opposition, rather than being logically prior, implies distinction in spiritual unity, which demands a more concrete and philosophical concept of itself. It is not a more abstract mathematical unity but one that is organic and alive, hence a distinction-unity where one term of the two is defined by the other, identical with the other. Only the passage from one distinct to another, from one to another form or category of reality or of the spirit, kindles opposition, which is the labor of actualizing this passage by the contrast of the new with the old, the positive with the negative.

Particular distinctions, accordingly, are not steps reaching up to the One, which would overcome and resolve them all in itself. They are the force of unity which, with its perpetual passing from one form to another, unwearied and made ever younger, weaves the fabric of history. Only the historical is adequate to the process of the real, but this is the historical in its free movement, not as Hegel presented it, fettered by his system, and not as he proclaimed it to have reached its goal and come to an end in that system. Only the logic of historical knowledge is adequate to thinking, which consequently implies abandoning definitive systems and replacing them with the historical configurations that always grow and prosper along with the growth and prospering of life.

Over the centuries, and as if by consensus of the nations, the highest values, the forms or categories of reality and the spirit, were gathered into the triad of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, which to me seemed integral with a fourth term, the Useful or the Economic or the Vital or whatever else it should be called. But this last term, illogically, had been disdained, slandered and considered materialist by philosophers who would not dare rebel against the traditional triadic conception, dictated by a kind of unconscious educational pedagogy but not justifiable intellectually. At other times these same philosophers had taken a hostile view of the theory of the passions understood **in their** creative power.

Once the triad changed to a tetrad, the order and relations of the forms of the spirit were understood much differently but much more in keeping with reality. And the form of the tetrad served to prevent the repetition of the pseudodialectical game of triadism, employed to frustrate every distinction. But the introduction of the category mentioned above was also necessary to prepare and initiate the resolution of the dualism of spirit and nature, soul and body, internal reality and external reality, thereby uncovering this mystery that man manufactures for himself by letting imagination overwhelm thought and drive it into inaction or into the delirium of the transcendent. The mystery was one of those which, as Goethe said on a similar occasion, remains mysterious only because *niemand hört's gerne*, because no one bothers to grasp the simple explanation for it and to abandon the illusions involved in it and the unwise expectations.

For the same reason, one must watch and take care that a hierarchical division from high to low, from superior to inferior, does not creep in among the four forms of the spirit. Yet, if one forgets that it is one thing to 'speak the world' (in Bergson's words) and another to 'think it,' current usage leads easily to this division. The forms of the spirit, being all necessary, are all necessarily of equal rank. They permit no order of succession and implication except the non-hierarchical because none of them provides either the absolute beginning or the absolute end for the circularity or circulation of the life of the spirit.

To which form, in fact, does our ordinary thinking usually assign the lowest place? Without question, the form of vitality, utility, economy that suffuses its joy through the profusion of physiological forces and affirms its positivity. Though it quickly acquires the metaphorical label of materiality or animality, one should define it as what it truly is: the form of pure individuality that creates and maintains itself and, with the other forms, **enacts its law** in the dialectic and in the unity of the spirit. Indeed, it should suffice to recall what happened when, in the great age called the *Rinascimento*, this form was for a long time crushed, loathed and trampled **as soon as** it had roused itself and, headstrong and mighty, blazed again with new-ancient light against medieval asceticism.

There seems to have been no further challenge, if I recall, to this extension of the triad of values into a tetrad, which thus provides a new philosophy of the spirit and **refines** the famous ten categories on the Aristotelian list by simplifying and deepening them. Worth no particular mention are the foolish witticisms aimed at what some tastelessly called my 'four terms,' as if it were I who had haughtily invented them, as if they were not flags flying for everyone to see through all life and history. Likewise unremarkable is the funny story that the categories are not these four trifles but supremely rich and indeed infinite, coinciding with the infinite affective movements of the human mind – a richness and infinity where one would wallow and sink into the obscurity of mysticism and the indiscriminate 'pure act,' as it is called. No special attention, finally, goes to the objection (delivered with grave logical mien) that if the forms are four, one does not see why the enumeration cannot and should not continue, as if the *four* here were an arithmetical four and not indeed the symbol of a speculative relation, a thought that

should be familiar to minds already used to dealing logically with the celebrated ‘sacred numbers’ – first among them the triad, triunity or most holy Trinity.

On the other hand, even if someone still, to no avail, tries now and then to eliminate the fourth category of the tetrad and resolve it into one of the other three or redistribute it among them, no one has made any further attempt to go beyond the four. One exception is an effort, tried outside of Italy and quickly abandoned, to add ‘nature’ to them. Another is the guileless logic of pretending to integrate them with the category of ‘religion’ – of the religion which, if it does not flow *infusa per artus* in all four, cannot stand alongside or above them – tacked on from outside, in other words.

But if it appears that enlargements or abridgements of the tetrad have been renounced, at least temporarily, a different need to increase the categories has been expressed and other efforts presented to accomplish it, not by extending the tetrad but by particularizing it, not outside of it but within its own depths, by distinguishing in each category sub-forms or grades that mark off or light up the passage from one to another. In fact, it seemed that I too had recognized such sub-forms but had not given a full account of them, internally and spiritually, that I treated them instead as acting through extrinsic and mechanical combinations. As proof and example of this failing (among others) was cited the theory that I proposed of a ‘literature’ distinct from ‘poetry’ and regulating, along with poetic expression, the varieties of oratory or exposition or instruction. For this explanation of mine it was proposed to substitute another that makes literary expression a ‘pre-poetic’ phase of the spirit, ‘placed at the end [so it was said] of the cycle of affective or emotional expression, at the point that is not yet black and the white dies away, at the point, in other words, when the sentimental impulse has already attained its harmony, its germinal musicality, which prepares it and makes it ready to receive the divine melancholy of Poetry.’² By analogous treatment, the concept of ‘mythology’ has been removed from the Phenomenology of error, where I had located and discussed it, and converted into a degree of the poetic or aesthetic.

Here I do not wish to digress into the methodological objection that immediately arises against these imagined degrees of transition, these hues that fall between black and white. **For that very reason**, they cannot have the categorical nature on which judgments are based and stated; they serve at most for empirical usage, understood for what they are as psychological and empirical classes. True and proper judgments, the categorical, allow no more or less nor here and there, and they are stated clearly: an expression is poetry or not poetry, and act is moral or not moral. But here, preferring a shorter route, I will of course take up again my treatment of literary expression to show how, in the theory that I have offered, there is no mechanical combination, and how expression reveals itself fully as an inventive product of the practical spirit, of a practical ‘**touch**,’ working in given conditions and on given material.

How does one actually shape a page of literature to illuminate a philosophical proposition, for example? I have given myself much trouble – for hours, days, even years

²See the valuable book by A. **Attisani**, *Cosmicità ed eternità dell’arte* (Milan: Principato, 1946).

– to solve a philosophical problem, and finally I have solved it or believe that I have solved it. *Eureka!* I am satisfied as a thinker and my satisfaction resides in a sign which, according to what best suits my current mental state, will be a line of scholastic jargon, a graphic symbol, a verse of poetry or something else that I adopt as signifying my thought. The philosophical exchange between me and myself is closed.

But notice that another conversation opens, one that communicates the truth thought by me for the use of other people (and, in a certain sense, also for my use), that introduces it and preserves it in a more effective way and with greater consequence for the soul and mind. Here the expressive sign gives me no help, except in special cases of people who read my hieroglyphics as I do or of **rustics** who are as I am, at that moment. Here I need social or literary expression that is pleasing or not annoying to people who read poetry and novels, who are aesthetically educated, who have little liking for **rustics** and prefer a different way of conduct and of language. And as I unravel myself from the exclusive philosophical meditation in which I have been caught, and as I look to the world that I have around me and through which and to which I wish to speak, a swarm of emotions stirs in me, circling this philosophical truth. These are transports of enthusiasm for the true, to proclaim it and make it triumph; checks on it in contexts of life that I imagine or remember and that I take as my human concern; feelings of opposition and of anger or of scorn for the objections that I foresee colliding with it, and reproofs or satires or even ironies and jokes **that stand out in my mind to take the edge off the objections and get past them**; the desire to enlighten and persuade the well disposed, and labors of exemplification and pedagogic steps to apply; and so the conversation goes.

For these and other such feelings and desires, I want to find the aesthetic form, but it should also be ‘apt’ or suited to the case of a truth for expression and instruction. It is evident that if one of those feelings had inspired me poetically, calling me wholly to it, from my internal experience would be born a lyric, a novel, a comedy, a tragedy – and surely not a didactic one – as the occasion requires. I too require it for myself since I will be in firmer possession of my truth when I have thus embodied it in literary speech, not confusing or altering or misleading by partial or total forgetfulness and, in any case, recovering it precisely and stating it clearly if ever I have forgotten it.

So here I am again, no longer going over the logical problem that I have solved or thought solved but this new problem of expression. For this, as for all aesthetic work, all poetry, all painting or music, I need a unifying motive that is also productive because it embraces, orders, coordinates, arranges, gives measure and proportion to all the individual parts, to all the expressions that will go into composing a page of prose. Every writer knows the point at which this going-over reaches maturity and dictates to him the first words, the words of the beginning that would be no beginning unless accompanied by a vision of the whole, even a whole wound into a tight skein that offers its long thread to the hand that unwinds it. Obstacles arise, partial or total remakings, second thoughts and corrections, retouches to tune the page better or better decide the particular expressions. This is toil quite like the poet’s and the artist’s except that, in every part and at every stage, it is modified and guided by a didactic aim.

A pure poet, who does not shift into the logic of what the prose-writer does but needs to judge him without otherwise adjusting the eye and mind, will simply say that the writer is completely tainted and **infected** by the extrapoetic aim. But the prose-writer stakes his commitment and his honor on working in that mode. If he has wandered from that aim, he feels that he could certainly set aside the page that he began and, passing from one undertaking to another, compose a lyric. But, if one insists on his doing both at once, he would write an untuned page of prose containing something lyrical – something which, at best, would be found where one would not look for it, perhaps resulting in a pleasant surprise but perhaps also having the different result of annoyance aroused by things that seem out of place.

To understand well and in its whole scope this theory of difference between poetic work and literary work – which implies no disrespect for the latter and makes no less of it – and to be educated in telling the two apart, often a quite delicate and subtle matter, is necessary for the treatment of some important problems of criticism and history of art. Even I, for example, when I read the facile rejections of my judgment on the character of Manzoni's *Promessi sposi*, have a feeling not just that the point of the question was missed but that the preliminaries had not even been engaged. Otherwise, rather than contradicting it, one would have recognized in this judgment and the related theory the reason why this very beautiful book has been listened to and loved universally.

Now where, in all the process described, is the mechanical or eclectic combination, the juxtaposition of two forms and of two diverse principles, the arbitrary and capricious transition between them, the absence of unity in the work thus carried out? What holds the cards here is just one thing: the sense of expediency, the *sermo opportunus qui est optimus*, the practical need, the aim of attaining a beauty that stoops to serve truth and, in this function, renounces its independence and hence is no longer pure beauty but half a practical act even though it breathes aesthetically as a horse breathes physiologically when the driver leads it where he wants to go.³

³The relating of literature to 'taste' or better to 'touch' or 'tact,' in the careful and active sense of the *apt* (*prevpon*, a key concept in ancient rhetoric), and hence not to the aesthetic nor the logical but to the practical form of the spirit, does not entirely persuade Fubini (in a quite valuable piece on 'Arte, linguaggio, letteratura' in the Florentine journal *Belfagor*, 3.2 [July, 1948], 404). Fubini would prefer to see it as 'the same aesthetic act in the form allowed it by the dominance of another aim; and aptness, which is its law, as the aspect that the law of poetry assumes in this case, demands abstention from more openly poetic modes to conserve the inward harmony of speech.' But since 'the aim that dominates' is 'other' than the aesthetic one, and its law is 'aptness' and not beauty, Fubini ends up by confirming my conclusion that literature owes a debt to the protection that the practical form of the spirit offers to all the powers of the spirit, to preserve and harmonize them. Thus, in the same act, it prevents and suppresses both opposite types of imbalance: that of content (philosophical, scientific, impassioned and variously oratorical) which, needing to emerge from muteness and express itself, does not shrink from trampling or ignoring the aesthetic sense and the cult of beauty; and that of the aesthetic form, which wishes to suppress the extra-aesthetic content present and active in it and, contradicting itself in turn, ends up producing instead of good literature an impotent and ugly 'literary poetry' rejected by all poetic and by all literary taste. Perhaps the difficulties that one needs to overcome to accept the theory upheld by me arise above all from not conceiving in a speculative mode – in

The natural or 'positive' sciences offer a case analogous to that of literature in its relation to poetry and difference from it. To be understood, these sciences do not need a new category of the spirit alongside those of philosophical-historical truth and practical utility. They derive their cognitive material from historical-philosophical truth (from observing, describing and recording facts) and from the form that abstracts, generalizes, classifies and makes laws by the practical and economic procedure **exercised** over those cognitions so as to condense, preserve and hold them ready for the various uses made of them. **What happens** to the natural sciences also happens to the pages of literature because, if the spirit of 'pure knowing,' the uncontrollable need to philosophize analogous to the poet's frenzy, bursts forth among them, the work proper to them falls apart and perishes. And, save when the accidental discovery of a philosophical truth repays its dissolution, their work is annihilated in the hybridism of extravagant Philosophies of nature, so-called, being neither sciences nor philosophies, or it brings back to the world Aristotelians like Simplicius from whom Galileo in his day had freed the world of physics. Otherwise, what philosophers (and Hegel among them) have in mind for the sciences is, at first, to treat them as 'pre-philosophy' or preparation for philosophy. It takes great effort to restore to them the autonomy they need and deserve and, when fair restitution has been made, to guarantee its own autonomy to philosophy itself.

its purity, profundity and universality – the practical, economic and ethical form, freeing it from the empiricisms that remain attached to it in ordinary mental associations.