

## An Autobiography

*R.G.Collingwood*

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This is a slim volume containing almost no personal matter, save some childhood glimpses, and only a few tantalizing glimpses of gossip, with no names attached to boot. The account in particular certainly does not entail any sex, only once in passing do we learn that the author has a wife. It is a story entirely devoted to intellectual development and consequently not so much devoted to present a life as to present a personal philosophy, in fact what amounts to a reaction to the prevalent 'realist' philosophies dominant during his Oxford days, and foremost against an attitude towards philosophy, he claims, that spelled the decline of philosophy, by turning away from its moral responsibility of instructing the young and making it matter in the world at large, to a dry and esoteric purely academic concern.

Collingwood grew up as an intellectually precocious child, learning Latin and Greek at the ages of four and six respectively. Until his early teens he did not attend school, but was taught at home by his father, an artist (although progressively more and more concerned with archeology) as was incidentally his mother (an accomplished pianist). Most of all, save for a few hours in the morning, he was left to his own devices, reading voraciously, having access to an extensive library<sup>1</sup>. During his teens he went to Rugby, where he resented the lack of intellectual commitment of his teachers, and essentially prolonged his autodidactical career trying to be left alone as much as possible with his studies. He then was admitted to Oxford, which he experienced as a release from prison, and where he was able to fully indulge his passion for reading and thinking, unfettered by any social distractions and obligations.

As noted Collingwood reacted against the intuitive and unproblematic approach to knowledge that characterized the realist school, as indicated by their claims that the known is unaffected by the knower. On the other hand to assume otherwise, and in particular to stress that knowledge depends on the assumptions we bring to the matter, in particular that it depends on cultural circumstances, which change with time and space, is to place yourself disturbingly close to the post-modernist camp, in which truth is spelled with no capitals, and reduced to merely a social convention, and in particular where universal truths are banned as presumptuous (save the very characterization of truth as provisional.) The notion of post-modernism was not yet coined during his days, and the kind of scorn we may direct against those vulgar disciples, he reserved for the realists whom he accused of moral indifference and dismissed by him as being present day sophists.

Is Collingwood a post-modernist at heart? Is the man and philosopher, whom I have lately learned to cherish, nothing but an intellectual impostor, merely sophisticated in the

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<sup>1</sup> One defining incident of his life was as a small child accidentally chancing upon Kants treatise on morality, a book he could not understand at the tender age and hence reap no benefit except that of inducing in him an conviction, that its understanding was very important.

deragotary sense meant by Socrates and Plato? To follow the advice of Collingwood, there is only one way of finding out, namely to go to the source and to find out what he really tries to say and mean. Collingwood deplored the educational practice of his days, when students predominantly learned from secondary sources and commentaries of what they were supposed to think. A practice I suspect is as prevalent today as ever, stemming less from a corrigible educational error than from intellectual laziness and indifference. In his own teaching, which by the way delighted him, he always wanted to stress to his students, that a text should always be studied with an eye to discover its virtues, not primarily to be criticised and to be dismissed, because if so why waste your time on it?

What was Collingwoods attitude to truth really? For one he dismissed the prevalent propositional calculus in which language was reduced to atoms, each of which was assigned a truth value. A proposition carries no truth value, he claimed. The truth of a proposition depends on the question to which it is an answer. Thus a proposition can be both true and false, depending on the context, i.e. the reason for which it has been asserted. Instead Collingwood proposes the Socratic concept of a complex of questions and answers. The secret to all study and reflection is to ask the right questions and to ask them in the right order. Only in the context of such a complex are we able to talk about correctness and relevance, and ultimately about truth. The right answer to a question may turn out to be false, as exemplified in the mathematicians pursuit of proof by contradiction, in which, I am fond to say, an imaginary world. sometimes of great complexity, is constructed, only to be destroyed at the very last moment. Now Collingwood tried to publish his approach, but was told (ironically) that the time was not propitious for such musings. Does Collingwoods approach to truth amount to a revolution, something he was prone to assume, or does he only voice commo sense? I would say that he is doing the latter, keeping in mind that common sense is not necessarily common. Clearly Collingwoods approach to reasoning is to make no distinction between reasoning and the reasoning of reasoning, so called meta-reasoning, just as language, the ultimate tool of any reasoning, philosophical or otherwise, does not make any such distinction, and provides as supple a tool on itself as it does on the world around us, being unashamedly a part of the latter. Analytic philosophy, to which Collingwood would have taken exception, is characterized by its ambition of being objectively scientific, and thus reducing a part of our reasoning to, what Collingwood would have refered to as nature, i.e. something apart from man.

In fact intellectually the great revelation to Collingwood was that the distinction the 'realist' school made between philosophy and the history of philosophy in fact does not exist, because it presupposes that the questions asked by all philosophers are the same, and that we as philosophers, transcending its history, need to judge not only their merits but to what extent they are close to the ultimate truth. But this is not the case, the different philosophies are answers to different questions, and cannot thus be directly compared. The business of philosophy is not to judge right or wrong from some supposedly objective foundation, but to find out what the questions are<sup>2</sup>. In particular Collingwood reminds us that exact translations of words are never possible between languages, and that present-day philosophers often fall into the trap of assuming a special translation and then arguing

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<sup>2</sup> and as Collingwood remarks, questions are seldom explicitly stated, often being implicitly assumed as obvious at the time, and can only be reconstructed from the answers.

from there, not surprisingly deriving nonsense<sup>3</sup>. Platos word *πολις* is often translated as the 'State'. This is, however understandable, misleading according to Collingwood.

Collingwood is the archetypical humanist, an anti-realist and by default thus an 'idealist' taking a top-down approach to meta-physics, assuming as given such high-level phenomena as thought (of which Collingwood sensibly offers no precise definition, apart from the functional one that a thought might be true or false<sup>4</sup>. In a way this amounts to Cartesian dualism, although I suspect that Collingwood would have resented such a label as being too literal, but I claim that this is inevitable for any truly humanist approach to life, in which thoughts and moral concepts are central and cannot be reduced materialistically, i.e. as understandable consequences of nature<sup>5</sup>. Thus Collingwood reacts strongly against psychology<sup>6</sup>, which he finds perfectly appropriate when dealing with sensations, such as hunger, but ridiculously inadequate when turned to the matter of the soul<sup>7</sup>, thus in particular he resented William James work 'Varieties of Religious Experience' and symptomatically found some virtue in the psychotherapy of Freud but dismissed his forays into philosophy as so much nonsense, being brought to even further low-marks by the vulgarity of his disciples. Collingwood does not mince his words when he refers to psychology as an intellectual fraud. To him the scientific approach to the humanities lies elsewhere, namely to history. But in order for history to become a scientific discipline it has to shear its past of scissors-and-pasting and its reliance on authority, and tie in with the scientific method as explained by Bacon and Descartes and fully implemented in the study of Nature.

Essential to the philosophy of Collingwood is this division between Nature and Man, and in so maintaing this distinction, which in the 20th century has been progressively blurred, he asserts the core of his Humanism. To him the questions of history had been sadly neglected<sup>8</sup>. History is the process of which we out of its traces in the present reconstructs a past by putting the right questions. The subject of history is not mere

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<sup>3</sup> Collingwood takes as an example of assuming say a certain Greek word to mean 'steamship' and then deriding the Greeks for having such misinformed notions of what a 'steamship' really is.

<sup>4</sup> Thus in particular a thought cannot be reduced to a proposition, thought always assumes the complexity of question and answer.

<sup>5</sup> This ties in beautifully with the present discussion of the phenomenon of 'consciousness' in which everyone touchingly agree on the folly of Cartesian dualism, even those who argue that we will never be able to explain 'consciousness' bottom-up, and it will remain a mystery, truly impervious to scientific study.

<sup>6</sup> causing embarrassment to the introducer of the reissued autobiography, who ventures the unfounded supsicion that would have Collngwood been able to travel more and hence receive a more varied input, his attitude towards contemporary psychology would have softened by becoming more informed. I personally doubt it.

<sup>7</sup> a sentiment I instinctively formed when I first encountered psychology in my early teens, resenting its presumptuousness. A sentiment which has survived in my more reasoned arguments against didactics in my maturer years

<sup>8</sup> in fact in his book on the idea of nature, he discerns three stages in the history of its study, the organic of the ancients, the mechanical of the renaissance and the historical approach of the modern age, and suggests that only by putting even more emphasis on the history of change may we get a better understanding of nature

events, in the factual sense of Ranke, whom he subtly ridicules, but the re-enactment of thought. History only becomes meaningful so far as its events are seen to be answers to purposeful questions, the object of the historian it is to reconstruct. And by reconstruction the underlying thought is revived. Thought is of course a complex concept, and comes not only with its contents, which is objective as so far it comes under the scrutiny to determined truth or falsehood, but also with secondary emotions, peculiar to the time and circumstances at which it is being thought. The historian is only concerned with the objective part, this being the only one amendable to be re-thought, not with the secondary subjective aspects, which are for ever lost. Thus there is a profound difference between thinking a thought for the first time, and reconstructing it.

Collingwood emphasizes history as the living past. History is not dead, because what is dead cannot be revived. History lives on in the present, because history is not a question of enumerating events chronologically, history consists of processes, which change but do not terminate. Thus the past is incapsulated into the present, processes change, but their aspects survive, be it in modified form. Thus the purpose of history is not so much a matter of usefulness for an ulterior purpose (which Collingwood refers to as economical, as opposed to moral, accusing the utilitarianism of confusing the two) but to achieve extended self-knowledge, just as the individual achieves his very identity by integrating his past into his present. Indeed the essence of the individual selfhood is to appreciate the disparate parts as connected to each other through processes taking place in time. We all assume the essential continuity of our lives and selves, that the persons we were at say four are essentially the same as we are now, in the sense that the child in us remains, in fact in the terminology of Collingwood is incapsulated in our adult persona.

Thus the genuinely humanistic approach of Collingwood rejects a literal imposition of the methods of the study of nature into the study of man, the difference being that nature is outside man and thus its study is not self-referential (indeed in some sense the known is not affected by the knower as the realists claim) and it is concerned with rules. In human life there are no iron-clad rules of conduct, except in the most superficial of contexts, as any situation is new and guidance cannot be explicit (algorithmic as we may say now) but must be suggestive informed by historical knowledge<sup>9</sup>. But this does not mean as noted above that humanism, which he identifies with history, should be pursued unsystematically and intuitively, but can on the contrary, it can and should, be conducted rigorously. His own historical studies were not surprisingly mainly archeological, because such a study more than that of the study of written documents which is the traditional subject of historical inquiry, forces its practitioner to pose question and not to rely on authority. In fact Collingwoods point is that written documents should never be taken literally but be treated as archeological artefacts themselves, not read primarily for what they say, but for what they might mean. Archeology, Collingwood admits, shows many

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<sup>9</sup> Collingwood is scathing about the folly of the Versailles treaty, contrasting mans developing power of manipulating nature, in particular as manifested by the destructiveness of modern human warfare, with his ineptitude of dealing with human affairs. Indeed he seems to suggest that the incompetence displayed at Versailles, dwarfed previous incompetences in the past as to the handling of human relations. He also ventures to speculate that the discontinuation of the noble tradition of philosophical instruction, referred to above and effected by the 'realists' , has had some part to play in this sorry spectacle.

similiarties with geology, especially as to techniques of stratifications, but differs profoundly as being a historical discipline not a natural. Archeology is ultimately about reconstruction thought, i.e. that of discerning purposes, while in nature there are no purposes. Over and over again Collingwood emphasises the admonishment to pose question, regretting that so much of archeology is done haphazardly, digging for the sake of digging in order to find out whether anything of interest might appear. In this way you will find out nothing, or next to nothing, Collingwood laments, and in addition such purposeless diggings are expensive and when done they do not only add very little to our historical knowledge, but in fact destroys much of our ability to gain it, as a completed dig in fact nullifies the prospects of further inquiry. And indeed it is now generally recognised that much of classical diggings have destroyed sites, which had been better off left alone<sup>10</sup>. Thus in his historical approach, particular in its archeological manifestations, the attitude of Collingwood is one of a hard-nosed scientist, putting in the sense of Popper, falsifiable questions widely ranging<sup>11</sup> .

Collingwood finds himself a slow and tortured thinker only gradually coming to insight. His publications are sparse and condensed, as exemplified by the present autobiography written at the age of fifty, and assuming that he would only have a few more years left of useful high quality work. That this would be literally true and that he would indeed die four years later, he probably had no conscious inkling of at the time, this is something the reader is privy to, not the writer, thus ironically illustrating that the far greater intimacy the writer can boast as regards his life compared to that of the casual reader, does not extend to its objective extension, the knowledge of which would have profoundly have affected the knower.

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<sup>10</sup> Hindsight is of course very easy, mistakes are legion in any learning, archeology being no exception

<sup>11</sup> Collingwood is in particular interested in statistical questions such as sizes of populations and their relative percentages as to urban and rural, to which classical written documents give no reliable guidance, and which are only accessible after accumulated spade-work, so to speak, has been amassed.