

# The Idea of History

*R.G.Collingwood*

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## §1 Introduction

The present is, in the words of Hume, nothing but a bundle of perceptions, without a past there is no way we can make sense of them and form a personal identity. Memories are of two kinds of which the so called episodic is what we usually think of, namely the recollection of past events out of which we form our personal histories<sup>1</sup>. The second kind, need to concern us less, in fact not at all, although it is more fundamental, because it constitute our skills as an organism, from the higher levels of language use down to the very basics<sup>2</sup>. Although people can survive without their conscious episodic memory, they cannot do so without their unconscious ones. But personal history is not history, history should not be confused with memory (*pace* Francis Bacon). Every human being is through his own memories acquainted with the past, but the awareness of a deeper past stretching back far beyond his own brief span usually comes later, and is our first real intimation of mortality, as the void that preceeds us surely must have a counterpart ahead, linking our own unique fate to those who have preceeded us. In my case this realization of a historical past must have come around the age of six. I knew my age but I did not know the year I lived in, the calibration of my own personal history with that of universal through the convention of dating was a momentous one, and I still clearly remember being told the birth years of my grandparents, preserving that information as well as the occasion at which it was transmitted intact until the present day. The learning of historical dates is usually considered a chore in historical instruction, yet of course chronology is an inescapable aspect of history, and the dates are not just mere numbers, they are in fact loaded with associations, and the more extensive the knowledge of the student, the more loaded they are, and hence the more historical information do they carry. In my case it certainly linked history to counting, admittedly a very primitive and trivial connection between history and mathematics, and it will be one of the purposes of this essay to prove that there exists a far deeper one.

So what is history? This is the purpose of Collingwoods book to explain. It is a philosophical work and not a historical work, although the large middle part of it is devoted to a historical survey of how the notion of what is history has evolved historically, thereby illustrating, albeit in a rather trivial way, that the study of history is self-referential. As a philosophical work it is serious, isolating and focusing on a few central concepts, which are pursued relentlessly in a tightly arranged argument. Many so called philosophers digress and ramble, losing sight of what they intend to discuss, maybe never really knowing what they really intended. Such discourses can of course be quite charming, not unlike

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<sup>1</sup> An ongoing struggle indeed, as everyone realises who tries to order their scattered recollections chronologically

<sup>2</sup> To 'walk and talk' so to speak, skills we acquire without formal instruction

daydreams, in which the thoughts follow each other effortlessly, encountering no obstacles, having no ultimate purpose, and hence giving nothing for the reader to chew on. On Collingwood you need to chew as in a true argument everything is accumulative, and if you have missed A, B will make no sense.

## §2 What is History?

Our world of immediate sensation is subjective. But unless we are solipsists we assume instinctively that the subjective world of sensations, which by itself is incommunicable, is but the manifestation of an outside objective world that exists outside of ourselves, and is a world we want to know, not because it would be good for us to do so (which is the evolutionary perspective) but because this is what living means, and the outside world is its own justification, because what else could justify it? In the same way the past constitute an independent reality, although one to which we do not have the same immediate access as to the outside world in its present aspect. The fact that we cannot perceive the past directly, does not mean that it is not real; it is part of reality just as much, and as such as worthy of our attention. The past exists for itself and is interesting by itself, and needs no applications to justify its existence.

This philosophical prelude is no doubt familiar to most readers. It refers to thoughts that have been thought throughout the past, and which most reflective individuals no doubt have formulated for themselves without the benefit of a philosophical education during their coming of age, thus in their intellectual development re-enacting that of mankind<sup>3</sup>. Those thoughts are not very complicated, yet they are very basic and loaded with meaning, and the way we think of them can have momentous consequences to our lives and how we live them<sup>4</sup>. Yet thoughts like those are not enough to have been thought once, they have to be repeatedly revived, whenever new contexts arise in which they can get a footing. Thinking about what is history is such a context which is apt to give an occasion to do so, and each time they are revived the new contexts will endow them with additional meaning. And as will be seen, this kind of revival plays a pivotal role in the thinking of Collingwood.

The basic question after having convinced ourselves of the reality of the past and how it is inevitable and worthy of a study on its own merits is how do we get to know the past. The basic property of the past is its 'pastness' which by its very nature prevents us from perceiving of it directly. We may argue that memories are pieces of the past to which we have direct access. This can be discussed, as it presently will be, but a major aspect of Collingwood's idea of history will disqualify personal memory for being history for that very reason. Memory is fallible. We are well aware of that when we try to mentally perform complicated arithmetical computations, but such shortcomings seldom upset us, in fact they usually do not even frustrate us. More serious though than our inability to form and retrieve memory is our implicit faith in the accuracy of those we can clearly call forth. Nothing seems to us more authoritative than a clear memory. A memory of the past can be as tangible, not in its perceptual immediacy but in its conceptual message, as what

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<sup>3</sup> this allusion to the Haeckels well-known principle of ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny should of course not be taken too literally only rhetorically

<sup>4</sup> maybe even leading to suicide if 'solipsism' is felt as an inevitable conclusion

stands before our eyes right here and now. We certainly know what 'really happened'. It is a sobering idea to realize that we can be mistaken, that our inner eyes literally lie and deceive us. Such a realization can seldom be formed from within, and can only be brought to light through a more general sense of history. Part of this unreliability of memory can be due to the fact that memories are not really immediate experiences, they are only felt as such, and that memories are constantly being rewritten whenever they are revived. Memories are not dead but alive and as such subject to distortion and ultimate extinction. More seriously though there are no such thing as an original unsullied memory kept in the freezer of the unconscious and only recalled once when really needed. Yet memories are what makes up our identities as individuals, and as such the question of their truthfulness is moot; and provides for all their shortcomings the most natural access to the past. Hence the notion of testimony. Knowledge about the past is transmitted by testimonies, either your own, or those of other people.

The fallibility of memory is of course no modern discovery. The Greeks in fact were well aware of this, living in tumultuous times, and claimed that only about things which were eternal and unchanged could real knowledge be obtained, about other things we could only hold opinions<sup>5</sup>. This is indeed a haughty attitude and did indeed inhibit the pursuit of history as a science in antiquity and right into the modern age. This sceptical attitude towards history and its truth can of course like all sceptical objections never be refuted, because as Collingwood points out that the difference between a sceptic and a critic, is that the former simply refuses to travel with you and does not budge, while the latter is perfectly willing to do so, and his objections are formed not *a priori* but as you go along. Thus the study of history could only make progress when a sceptical attitude was replaced by a critical. The Greek attitude was reflected in the thinking of Descartes, who rejected history because of the untrustworthiness of testimony. The first modern historian - Vico, took him retroactively to task claiming that the problem that confronted Descartes did in fact not arise in the context of history, as there was no distinction between the perception of an object and the object itself as it is in the material world. Furthermore the instinctive scepticism of Descartes should have inspired him to develop criteria for historical truth (in other words evolving into a critic) rather than to close off thinking altogether. After Vico, the scepticism as relating to historical truth was demonstrated by Hume also to extend to the natural world, thus making the pursuit of history a more intellectually respectable undertaking.

Returning to the Greeks, their principal objection to the systematic study of history did not prevent the first historian - Herodotus, to emerge on the scene. Opinion or not, the pursuit of truth is in addition to an idealistic undertaking also a highly practical and pragmatic kind. In our everyday sublunar existence we simply have to make do with truths which in some higher sense may only be provisional. A particular and dramatic instance of this is illustrated by court proceedings, in its principles well developed already in ancient Greece. This provides an algorithm to get a conclusion as to truth in finite time based on incomplete evidence. There is no need to recall the basic features so familiar to most readers. It is based on providing arguments in order to persuade, and as such does not

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek term being  $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$ . As to Platos hostility towards historical knowledge, Collingwood concludes that he must have taken it seriously, as no man wastes his time attacking men of straw.

differ from any rational scientific inquiry back then as well as now. The crucial problem in any such procedure is the kind of arguments that are employed and the critical faculties that come to bear on those. (Leaving aside that already in the time of the Greeks the argumentation was distorted by sophist sophistication, and that the prevailing customs of jury duty, whether professional or lay, cast serious doubt on the critical assessment). One such technique, surviving to our days, is that of cross-examination, in which the moral fibre of the one giving the testimony as well as its intrinsic consistency is put to test. Herodotus applied those techniques not to investigate a crime, but to find out what 'really' happened in recent political and military history, a subject of great interest to his contemporaries. Herodotus being fuelled by curiosity also travelled widely with the same ambition of finding out what was true<sup>6</sup>. He relied on testimony, subjected to the criterion of cross-examination. In this way he invariably concentrated history on what is its proper domain - the thoughts and actions of men, as well as staying close to its spirit, to give a lively account of individual events. The great drawback of his method was that he limited the temporal scope of it to what was accessible by living memory (as well as putting geographical constraints). Given the circumstances his achievements were remarkable<sup>7</sup>, and Collingwood compares his contributions favourably to those of his almost contemporary Thucydides in which the modern disease of discarding the individual in history for the universal had already shown its first tentative manifestations<sup>8</sup>.

Thus so far we have established that history is the study of the past, but not of every kind of event in the past, but only that that pertains to the thoughts of men and the actions which derive from those. In particular Collingwood makes a distinction between natural history and history proper. A large motivation for making that distinction is a personal resentment felt by Collingwood against what he felt as the dominating paradigm of his times, namely that of natural science.

### §3 Natural versus Historical

In thinking about the world we can essentially take two different approaches, which in modern jargon may be referred to as the top-bottom approach versus the bottom-up, while traditionally they have been thought of as the idealist versus the materialist conception.

In the first we take as our fundamental data, very high-level entities as thoughts, personal identities and rational reasoning, concepts that really do not allow any reduction to simpler ones. There are dangers inherent to such an attitude. Extreme variants of it posit that the world is created by the mind, or maybe there is but one mind, which is hence to be identified with God, or maybe that this one mind is that of your own, and hence you are identified with God, an idea so repellent to most people that the idea seriously held may lead to a state of insanity, whose only issue is through death voluntarily sought out (and hopefully achieved). On a more mundane level, vulgarizations of the idealistic

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<sup>6</sup> The recently deceased Kapuscinsky sees Herodotus not so much as a historian but a journalist, having the supreme gift of the journalist profession, namely to get people to talk and then to listen

<sup>7</sup> And he remains an anomaly in Greek tradition as he had no successors

<sup>8</sup> Collingwood by naming Herodotus the father of history, tentatively bestows on Thucydides the paternity of psychological history, a subject of which he is suspicious as it is not history at all.

position, degenerate into the mere babble of so called post-modernists, in which objective reality is but a human construct part of a frivolous game without sense nor meaning.

In the second we try to build up reality from very simple building blocks, creating in the process new complexities, each of them associated with new and unpredicted emerging features. Of the two approaches, the second has proven to be the most fruitful, and to it the great triumph of natural science owes its debt<sup>9</sup>. Two outstanding examples are the mechanized world of Newton and the evolutionary world of Darwin each of them effecting a profound revolution both scientifically and as a consequence philosophically to which no modern thinker can stand aloof.

The most fundamental and radical is the first, as it in principle reduces the world to the positions and velocities of all the particles at a single instant, as envisioned by Laplace; in particular leading to a wholly deterministic universe. In this universe God reduces to the initial mover, determining the initial positions as well as setting up the physical law of gravitation that governs the unfolding. And maybe being in addition that 'mind', the infinite intelligence of Laplace, which performs the calculations (would it be bothered). The Darwinian vision is less radically materialistic, but on the other hand much more upsetting. Its basic building blocks are of a higher order, and it is not concerned with a deterministic calculation, but with a single principle, that of natural selection, which blindly without forethought brings order out of chaos. It is far more upsetting because it is far more intelligible than the Laplacian reduction to the mechanical dynamics of particles, where the gap between the basis of the explanation and what it purports to explain is too wide and too abstract to really affect peoples emotions, and thus the Newtonian revolution did not penetrate deeply into the minds of men as opposed to men of science. With Darwin, on the other hand, the principle is so simple and compelling that once it is grasped it is impossible to be denied, and it works on matters far closer to the concerns of man, reducing him not so much to a conglomeration of particles as to an animal, and alongside with that degrading the loftiest of his ambitions to the most mundane. God may still be present, but then disembodied as a principle of selection, and as this turns out to be so simple to understand, the mystery of God evaporates<sup>10</sup>.

To disregard the hardnosed materialistic point of view seem to most thinkers an act of sentimentalism. The pathetic protests of the feeble and the unarmed against an overwhelming army of numbers and equipment. Yet, the idealists seem always to have triumph on hand, in the last analysis theories of the universe are creations of the human mind. The further development of physics in the 20th century seems to bear the idealists out. The simplicitic paradigm of Newton has been replaced by modern Quantum Mechanics, a theory itself riddled with internal contradictions and thus according to many physicists a provisional interlude. As modern fundamental physics has progressed, it has become much more mysterious, involving higher and higher principles, and more and more approaching a state of spiritualism, where the basis of existence is to be found in the beauty of

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<sup>9</sup> The reason for its fruitfulness lies in the great profusion of thoughts and ideas it has generated

<sup>10</sup> The quasi-scientific notion of so called intelligent Design is the latest effort to put the mystery back in again. The effort is intellectually feeble, offensive to scientists and theologians alike, as for the latter, proving the existence of God through finite methods, must be the epitome of blasphemy, by making it contingent on the permission of human rationality.

mathematical constructions. However, this mystification of fundamental physics has in no way affected the Darwinian revolution, which wedded to the biochemical revolution of the 50's nowadays provides the materialistic dogma par excellence. Everything can ultimately be explained by genes and evolutionary optimization, which inevitably has led to vulgarization, the manifestations of which there is no need to digress<sup>11</sup>.

From an ontological point of view two such different perspectives of the universe is unsatisfactory. Descartes correctly divined the distinction, and rather than bridging it, he proposed the notion of two parallel universes. Cartesian dualism is now anathema to any serious student of the brain, yet for all practical intents and purposes, it provides the working rationale for any rational thinker. This is not the place to argue the pros and cons of the remote possibility of effecting a synthesis. Many philosophers argue that such a synthesis is impossible. That in fact our brains have not evolved for the task. Collingwood would no doubt have been incensed as the suggestion of a synthesis, and I figure that his scepticism would have cut deeper than that of a merely evolutionary mischance, but would have involved logical notions of contradictions of self-reference, and thus resistant to explanation in a purely evolutionary paradigm.

Collingwood has been classified as an idealist. Although simple dichotomies tend to be misleading, as they tend to make sharp divisions where there are none and provide ready-made packages unlikely to be congenial to those on whom they are foisted, the classification is actually helpful in regards to the specific issue at hand. Basic to his philosophy was a distinction between Nature and Mind. Nature being merely a spectacle to which the scientists stood apart, making observation of externia to be fitted into universal principles. Mind on the other hand was self-referential, and the historian was never to be allowed to stand outside his object of study and thus regard it as a mere spectacle. He was in fact inseparably part of what he was studying. Nature being dead, devoid of an inside, while humans and their actions, the proper study of the historian, most importantly have insides, which warrant their irreducible individualities and resist any attempts at uniformization and subjugation to universal laws. His resentment that the paradigms of natural science were the only legitimate ones of scientific knowledge clearly shines through and intermittently inspires his writing as if he was composing a pamphlete. Snow made the idea of a gap between the two cultures popular in the fifties, twenty years earlier Collingwood delineates the distinction with far greater lucidity and goes to its roots, rather than dwelling on its cultural manifestations. History is Mind, and as such the epitome of humanistic culture, and as such just as intellectually challenging and demanding as the study of nature could ever be. The disparagement of nature as dead and being apart from Man is essential to his philosophy, and in fact a synthesis of Cartesian Dualism would indeed spell the Death of Humanism<sup>12</sup>, although Collingwood does not come out to say anything like this, because in

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<sup>11</sup> Biology is far messier than the simplified version, which has filtered through to the public, would imply. There is no such thing as genetic determinism, and the embryological development involves far more than manifesting a DNA-blueprint.

<sup>12</sup> And with that have such deep-going consequences as to what it means to be human, that most people adamant to bring about such a reduction would no doubt balk at the consequences of a success, and wish the whole thing undone, it being a far more unsettling discovery than the invention of a thermonuclear bomb

the 30's no natural scientist had such grand ambitions. Collingwood of course acknowledges Darwin and the element of history he had introduced into natural science, but this makes him more adamant to restrict the proper object of history to that of humans and their thoughts and actions, claiming that nature cannot really have a history<sup>13</sup>. I think that most modern philosophers would disagree with Collingwood on this issue, claiming that not only does the biological world have a history in the sense of something non-predetermined and consequently unpredictable and fortuitous, but also the chemical world of pre-biology, a notion that would have been utterly reprehensible to him.

True to his idealistic point of view he resents what he calls the positivistic element in modern history. This is based on a false analogy with natural science, as well as a crude misunderstanding of it to boot. The positivist historians are set to determine historical facts, and with those as empirical data, try to conceive of universal laws. Thus in fact treating history as if it was dead nature, a mere spectacle. There is no such a thing as an isolated well-defined fact in history, the pre-requisite for any natural scientific analysis, because historical facts interact with each other, have insides, and come into existence only by critical effort. A positivistic history with the ambition of establishing universal laws implicitly implies a prediction of the future, and if there is one thing history is not about it is the future. A strong statement which can be highlighted as one of the central Dogmas of Collingwood. He also makes the valid point against them, that in their much exalted rejection of metaphysics they are making what is in effect a metaphysical statement. Once again an example of the triumphs available to the idealist<sup>14</sup>.

#### §4 The Methodology of History

Any serious effort of organizing knowledge to be known as science in the extended sense, needs to have a methodology, and in this respect Collingwood as a philosopher and a historian is his most original and interesting. He goes to great length to make explicit such a methodology and in this he touches on many issues brought about by Popper at around the same time. Popper is never referred to, and it is doubtful whether he was aware of him, but even if so, he would probably have been prejudiced against him as a possible positivist<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless their attitudes towards science are remarkably similar, partly, no doubt, of being similarly influenced, and partly from convergence caused by both being

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, Collingwood notes, only if there was an intelligent designer of the same, could the notion make sense. This is not meant to suggest the idea of an intelligent designer, only to highlight the absurdity of what it would mean for nature to have a history.

<sup>14</sup> The resentment of the idealistic Collingwood against positivism is almost inexhaustible. If there exists a world whose reality is that of freedom and spontaneity, not chaotic but governed by laws are freely made by the same spirit that obeys them, the metaphysics of positivism must be fallacious, Collingwood remarks. Furthermore that the discoveries of natural scientists are indeed only possible through their spiritual activities. In short Collingwood assumes that there is no need to attack the upper stories of natural science, as so many colleagues of his were doing, when you could undercut their very foundations. As we have admitted the objections of idealism are unanswerable, and their points are well taken. But in the end, how much does it really matter?

<sup>15</sup> Popper maintained uneasy contacts with the *Wienerkreis* in the twenties and thirties, but diverged from them crucially, although proponents like Carnap never really understood the nature of the rift, joking

serious about their business.

As we noted initially our most immediate access to the past is that of memory, and hence by extension that of testimony. The truth of history is thus reducible to authority. This is, however, a serious problem as we know, as our own memories deceive us frequently<sup>16</sup>, and with the testimonies of others there is the additional problem of wilful deception. People lie all the time, this is something we learn at our our peril in any social interaction; on the other hand if we did not regularly take people for their words, life would be very complicated indeed.

The reliance on testimony as the only information about the past leads to the prevalent method of historical study, namely that of 'scissors-and-paste' in the terminology of Collingwood. A historical account is patched like a quilt from testimonies of the past. The problem of the compiler is basically to decide what testimonies to trust and which ones to reject. With time the critical attitude towards the veracity of testimonies became more sophisticated, and the testimonies of the past, by nature always written documents (hence the common conception that without written sources no history can be written), were thought of more as sources than edicts, and subjected to critical analysis, both as to their contents and their provenence. The latter was a development of the 19th century and the outcome of German scholarship<sup>17</sup>. But scholarship is not science, and particular not science of history. The compiler does nothing more than transmit information from the past, and in the process of editing it invariably degrading it. The task of a compiler may be formidable, but it is in principle finite. A typical compiler starts by collecting his sources. From previous books and journals he selects those parts which may have relevance to his proposed study. This is of course a time-consuming effort, and one which often is referred to as research. The next step is to decide which of those sources should be included. The compiler who is not completely blind will discover that sources do contradict each other, and a historical account needs at least to be logically consistent. The actual choice is up to the discretion of the compiler, and different compilers will of course come to different conclusions. What comes out adds nothing new to historical knowledge but is just a partial regurgiation of what already exists. Traditionally much of historical writing was of this kind, and Collingwood is aghast that it is still going on, but he probably would not be surprised to learn that sixty years after his death the great majority of historical writing is of this kind. In fact most biographies<sup>18</sup> which are being written are written by cutting and pasting, testimonies are collected, letters and diaries are read, and out of this mess some kind of story is being concocted. Now one should not entirely disparage such work, often it could perform a very useful service, collecting obscure material and bringing it into light. And often the mindless compilations of past testimonies have secured their survival, just as the patient copying of old manuscripts in the medieval age preserved for posterity

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that the distance between him and Popper was small, but between Popper and him gigantic.

<sup>16</sup> Amply illustrated by the problems of witness reports, especially those that have been forced and hence subjected to editing and enhancement

<sup>17</sup> One thinks in particular of the critical assessment of the Bible, which inspired much of the activity.

<sup>18</sup> Collingwood, for some strange reason do not consider biographies history. Of course it can be used for creating history, as everything in principle is potential evidence, but it is not history, as little as diaries and letters provide history.



works that otherwise would have disappeared. Compilation is useful, it can be dignified as scholarship but it is not science<sup>19</sup>.

In fact an active mind invariably gets bored with the task. It needs to apply itself creatively, and hence the temptation to use the facts of history as empirical feed for the building of superstructures, such as periods or the formulation of universal laws. Such structures have no real existence outside the imaginations of those who conceive them, but are diversions from the real path of history. History is about unique and hence transitory events, the thoughts and actions of people long dead. It is a river into which you never step twice. It is not about invariant or universal things, that is not history, it is not about the substance of things, which is supposed to be eternal, it is about individuals who change with time. Collingwood refers in particular to two historians who have fallen into the trap, both of them incidentally displaying great erudition, namely Toynbee and Spengler. Of those he is rather indulgent with the former, noting only that his notions of civilizations, as well-defined entities developing purely out of internal laws (like organisms) is historically flawed. Civilizations consists of individuals, and they grow both as a result of the actions of those individuals as well as the outside influences. In another passage he takes exception to Montesquieus theory that climate determines history. To Collingwood this is an unwarranted intrusion of nature into the affairs of men. It is not nature that sets the constraints, it is the human reaction to nature that is important. Nature may set the scene, but there is still plenty of latitude for human action. As to Spengler he has only scorn. Spengler brings the incipient ideas of Toynbee to a perverse conclusion with his cyclical theory of civilizations. His history of mankind is a pure spectacle out of which he as a natural scientist stands apart. In addition to this he commits the cardinal sin of distorting historical evidence in order to suit his purposes<sup>20</sup>. The crucial problem is how we can discover genuinely new knowledge about the past. It is only by facing this question

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<sup>19</sup> It has probably escaped no reader that that much of what is naively referred to as scientific activity is of this type, the most egregious examples being the projects doled out to school-children. Projects when not issuing out of the childrens own initiative must be considered to have very dubious pedagogical value. Yet it takes some maturity to realise this. I recall my father once being aghast at a colleague he had visited. This colleague was ostensibly writing a text-book on physics, and his desk was littered with other text-books. At the time I was a child and did not understand the acidity of my fathers remarks

<sup>20</sup> Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) caused quite a stir when he published the *Decline of the West* in 1918. The times was precipitous, the First World War having dealt a severe blow to the previous prevailing optimism of progress, and in particular in Germany its national humiliation was placed in a wider historical context, which hence provided a certain consolation. Still its impact extended beyond its German borders, and the book became one of those more widely discussed than actually read. Among the professional historians he was resented, partly, one suspects, from his status as an amateur. Philosophers such as Popper found him pointless, and Postivists took exception to his mysticism. Wittgenstein, however, resonated with his pessimism, and Thomas Mann likened reading him to his first encounter with Schopenhauer. In the thirties Spengler joined the Nazi Party, something that clearly has not endeared him to posterity, in spite of the fact that he was too 'eigensinnig' to conform to their dogmas, especially the idea of racial superiority, and as a consequence he was ostracized. This footnote is an obvious case of scissors and paste, I having extracted its factual contents from Wikipedia. Yet it is to some extent refracted through my own critical temperament, not only in terms of selection, but also in presentation and extrapolation. As to the

and resolving it, that history can be turned into a science, and thus to become a truly exciting and intellectually challenging pursuit.

Science starts with stating a problem, formulating what we want to know and then asking questions. This was clear to Francis Bacon that proposed that nature be brought to the question stand and be tortured into admitting her secrets. In natural science this is usually done by controlled experiments, but what about history? In history we need sources, we need testimonies, but the crucial point is how we use those sources. Sources should be thought of as evidence and treated as such. A testimony is interesting and valuable only to the extent it shows light on our particular problem. In this way everything there is is potential evidence for us. And as archeology has shown, the historian is not limited to just written sources, anything is grist to his mill. Thus a testimony is not treated as a testimony, what is interesting is not what story it pertains per se, it is not going to be incorporated wholesale into our account. The issue is not so much whether it is true or not, the issue is *what it really means*.

In order to make his point Collingwood digresses on detective work, and even deigns to produce a fable in the form of a short fictional detective story, the kind of which was very popular at his time, and with which he certainly would have had no truck in a different context. The crime investigator faces a problem which in principle is historical. A murder has been committed and the task is to find him<sup>21</sup>. Available testimony is not going to help us, and testimonies which are prompted and produced are unlikely to reveal the exact state of affairs<sup>22</sup>. There will of course be testimonies, but they will usually have no direct bearing on the case, but nevertheless they will be valuable. A testimony could be a complete lie, but that only means that a lie has been committed and this by itself can be very useful. A testimony may contain an invalid statement, but the truth of it is not as important as what it says and pertains to. In short we are looking not for truth but for meaning. The liar may reveal herself without intending to. In addition to oral and written statements there are so called technical evidence, and finally, a good detective must need to know more, he must be able to reconstruct thoughts, because thoughts are motivations and the sources of actions. Only by reconstructing the mental landscape are we able to fit the evidence into a purposeful pattern. A forensic investigation cannot be planned in advance. There is no check list of questions we can ask, what is important is that each answer to a question will lead to other questions we could not have foreseen in advance. One is not able to formulate a blueprint for a forensic investigation, it is a question more of attitude than rules.

Of course this sounds very much like science in general, be it historical or natural. It is an account that could as well been written by Popper. What is noteworthy is the explicit reference to detective stories and the subsequent failure in popular science writing to use this approach, in spite of the fact that most people seem to enjoy and appreciate the kind

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uncritical transmission of information any historian faces a dilemma. Would I be forced to check the birth and death certificates of Spengler before being authorized to write the corresponding dates down? Clearly not. Any historian has to trust straightforward testimony, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. The true role of testimony will transpire later in the essay.

<sup>21</sup> This is of course sexist, why assume that the murder is a he?

<sup>22</sup> This is of course very frustrating. Hence the widely prevalent practice of torture

of deductions that goes into them. Thus instead of giving a plain descriptive account say of the vegetation and fauna of a distant geological epoch, information that no doubt is going to wash through the readers mind without sticking, how much more engaging would it not be to present the reader with the evidence at hand and indicate how the reconstruction is brought about. This would give him a fairer appreciation of what is known and what can be concluded and instead of feeding him facts of uniform certitude indicate a graduation thereof. More importantly though it would convey more of the excitement of discovery inherent in any scientific enterprise and more actively engage his mind. Once again the mere fact of the enduring popularity of detective fiction, along with that of cross-words and such mental diversions, would indicate that the public would be prepared for it<sup>23</sup>.

This brings us up to the key conception of history according to Collingwood, namely the re-enactment of the past in the living present. Thus simply remembering is not enacting history, not even your personal history, because any kind of re-enactment invariably involves inference. Only if you use your memories as evidence, reasoning out of their testimonies to draw conclusions, are you engaged in re-enacting your life historically. The past exists in terms of the traces it has left in the present, and the task of the historian is to bring those traces to life. History takes place in the present, only in the present can it be alive. History makes no statements of the future, because there is no evidence for the future in the present. A historian may worry that he will not be able to give a true picture of the past because all the sources and all the evidence are not available to him. This is no cause for worry, because history lives in the present, and we can only do the best we can with what we have. Future discoveries of new evidence may very well undermine the conclusions we are able to draw now, but this will be a problem of the future, at present we can only do our best with what we have. Thus it is a true anachronism to berate people of the past for not transcending their times. By definition no one can transcend the limitations of the times in which they find themselves. Would they be able to do so, means that the times were different from what we assumed they were.

It might be appropriate to make a slight digression here on a crucial point which Collingwood does not confront explicitly. Why is it so much harder to predict the future than to reconstruct the past? In both cases we are presented with the present and the problems of reconstruction should be symmetrical. In some important contexts this is indeed so, and I am here thinking of mechanics. Mechanics is time-invariant, there is no arrow at all. Thus the problems of predicting on purely physical principles the climate in the future is equivalent with reconstructing it in the past. The same goes for the weather, although no one, for obvious reasons tries to reconstruct the weather of yesterday given the meteorological circumstances of today. The reason for why there is an asymmetry is profoundly interesting, as it seems to indicate that determinism works far better going backwards than forwards. Could it be that we have more information about the past? Puddles in the street reveals that it has just rained, are there similar tell-tale signs to indicate that it is going to rain? When Collingwood touches on the issue he refers to predictability as being an aspect of nature, which hence is not part of history. The Mind

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<sup>23</sup> In my 'Att uppleva och mäta tiden' NFR årsbok 2000, I bring up the forensic element in all historic research. The idea of the detective story approach to popular writing has been with me for at least ten years and hence I was delighted to find the same explicitly expounded in Collingwood

cannot predict itself, because if it did, it would lead to self-contradictions because of free will, just as time-travel is impossible for anything with a free will. Thus the fundamental difference between the past and the future is due to the 'spiritual aspect' of human history. Thus Collingwood's insistence that history does not concern the future (and hence has no real applications), the future Mind (as opposed to future nature) is profoundly unknowable.

Finally what are the criteria a historian should use to critically evaluate the evidence of the past and draw the right conclusions? For obvious reasons Collingwood cannot be too explicit here, because this would imply that there is a science of doing history, some universal rules to be applied. The important thing though is that the historian should be self-sufficient when it comes to devising criteria. He should not employ the results of natural science, this would be an improper intrusion of the latter, and also a case of circular reasoning. As an example he brings up the historical question of Jesus. Should we reject the story of Jesus' resurrection out of hand because science tells us that it is impossible? No, Collingwood seems to answer, part of knowing that resurrection is impossible in principle comes from historical evidence, thus to employ its conclusions would be to beg the question. Maybe the resurrection of Jesus is indeed a miracle, one which actually took place. As historians our first loyalty should be to what really happened in the past, not to comply with current scientific opinion. If we would like to reject the event of the resurrection of Jesus we should do this entirely on historical grounds.

Now this might seem to the modern reader somewhat hard to stomach. Archeology does in fact employ scientific methods, and would be much the poorer for its absence. Take the recent example of radiocarbon dating? Should the historian (or archeologist) simply ignore it? There is a morale to that story. Initial carbon-dating was based on the simplifying assumption of constant  $C^{14}$  in the atmosphere. Through the alternative dating of dendrochronology<sup>24</sup> which gives a much more direct way of dating, it was established that the underlying assumption of uniformity was not true, and earlier datings had to be revised.

Still rejection of scientific methods in the evaluation of evidence is unnecessary, after all as Collingwood admitted, in searching for the answer to a question, everything is potential evidence. Also the independent study of the past through other means than those traditionally historical reinforces the solidity of the past.

So what are the criteria a historian brings to his critical assessments? Basically historical competence. History knows of no universal laws, but this does not mean that at given time periods everything can have occurred, on the contrary, the core of the historian's competence lies in the avoidance of anachronisms. This is of course a skill that comes through long practice, which by itself would presuppose what it is meant to convey. In particular one would suspect that initial errors will by becoming norms establish themselves permanently. But this is in the nature of his quest, his competence grows, meaning in particular that earlier works may have to be revised, but this is the lot of all science. An historical account need to be internally consistent. The same thing can also be said for a novel. But history is not fiction, although such a criteria, which appears to be one

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<sup>24</sup> Reading tree-rings, establishing patterns (relating to annual variations of growth) and making correlations. The dendrochronological documentation is very akin to writing, and as such a rather primitive technology compared to carbon dating, and correspondingly simple to understand.

of historical convention, initiated by Vico, seems to run the danger of post-modernistic degeneration, as all idealistic approaches. The point of a historical account is that it need not only be internally consistent, but it also has to be consistent with all other historical accounts. This gives to the pursuit of history an exacting standard, the single-minded adherence to which, is about the best commitment to historical truth that we can envision, and as such does not differ significantly from that of science, with the tacit understanding that initial errors will eventually be ironed out.

History is alike natural empirical science in the sense that its conclusions rest on induction. There is a crucial distinction between induction and the kind of deduction that goes on in mathematics, necessitating a new kind of logic. Traditional logic is compulsive, once you accept the premisses you have no choice but to accept the conclusions, or stop thinking altogether. But in induction there is no compulsion, only permission. Induction gives you the right to accept the conclusion, but you do not have to. But if induction does not give you permission, you are compelled to accept it. This certainly mirrors the falsification criteria of Popper. Induction cannot prove anything, because a finite number of confirmations cannot exhaust the infinite, somehow around the corner surprises may be in store for us. On the other hand a single counterexample can destroy a grand theory. To Popper, just as to Collingwood, truth is provisional, the future may change it. But this is not a kind of vulgar post-modernistic relativity, because underlying the quest is a faith in an ultimate truth, which we may only approach asymptotically.

## §5 Thought

Collingwood limits history to that of humans, their actions and the thoughts that cause them. Thus the essence of history consists in re-enacting the thoughts of its actors. Only through the knowledge of their thoughts will their actions make sense, and only then are we able to out of the schematic traces left by history reconstruct a full-bodied tapestry.

But can we read the thoughts of other people? Are thoughts communicable? Difficult as it is to make yourself understood face to face, is it not an egregious conceit to believe that we may enter into the thoughts of a Caesar? Thought is an idealistic concept, i.e. it is of very high level, impossible to describe from a materialistic point of view, and known only through our immediate perception and intuition, and the undeniable medium through which we conduct philosophy, reason both scientifically and in everyday life. In fact thought as such is the ultimate triumph of the idealist besieged by materialists.

Thoughts are formed in the minds of people, as such they are anchored in time and space. But thought to Collingwood is something more specific than it is to William James. Thoughts may be embedded in the stream of consciousness and thus have a subjective immediacy, but the immediacy of a thought is just its context, the essence of the thought itself is objective, and as such outside time and space, not only its object<sup>25</sup>. A thought is something of which we may inquire whether it is true or false, thus it is no mere sensation. The sensations, the qualia of an individual experience, are by their nature incommunicable,

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<sup>25</sup> This is why, Collingwood notes, that in our recollections, it is notoriously difficult to place our thoughts. Thus autobiographers make serious mistakes in their dating, because being independent of time, they can so easily be retroactively be moved around

thoughts are not<sup>26</sup>. Thus thoughts can travel from brain to brain and get a footing, provided there will be a congenial context<sup>27</sup>. Thoughts can be isolated from their contexts, in fact be conceived (as opposed to perceived) without them, otherwise we would have to accept the whole universe as the inescapable context of a thought, and thus be unable to apprehend it. It is their independence and their self-sufficiency which make them portable. Still thoughts I believe need larger contexts of other thoughts to reveal themselves fully, a point that Collingwood seems to slur over. A simple thought, or fact, if you prefer, may by itself yield very little, it is only in encountering other thoughts that its true significance emerges. It is in this very re-enacting of past thoughts that they come alive again, and thus makes the past a living entity of the present. History is of the past, but it takes place in the present. Human history is the history of human thought, thus it is no mere spectacle, but an intrinsic part of our collective identity as humans. History needs no further justification. Thus history is the essence of the Humanistic project, and thus there can in addition to traditional history also exist a history of philosophy, of art and literature, and also of mathematics, as well as a history of scientific discovery.

But of course thoughts as experienced entities are not just copied, every thought is connected with the associated qualia of having consciously had it<sup>28</sup>. A thought that is experienced for the first time, a momentous discovery say, will have a special aura, a special excitement, which will not be present afterwards. Once again the qualia of a thought conceived is not part of history, only the objective part can claim such a participation. It is only the objective part of the past which can leave traces in the present, and thus the only part that in principle can be reconstructed. If everything that ever happened leaves a minute trace in the future, this means that everything that ever happened can in principle be reconstructed. In mathematical jargon, the past injects into the future. This somehow lies at the heart of Collingwoods vision, although he would never express it in such technical terms. The thought that the past is in this sense indestructible may be felt as a comfort, it is a guarantee of immortality, but in fact only if we have a totally materialistic worldview<sup>29</sup> If our subjective qualia leave no traces, they can in fact never be reconstructed, and without our personal qualia, we simply are not there.

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<sup>26</sup> Thus thoughts make up history, sensations do not. We will never know, Collingwood speculates, how it felt to Newton having his hair tussled by the wind

<sup>27</sup> This is why you can read a book and it will make no impression on you. You will read the words, but their meanings as thoughts will not register, unless you are prepared for them. Often preparation means being familiar with most of the contents already, and as a consequence there will be in your mind many loose threads, whose resolutions you are curious about

<sup>28</sup> This ties up with our initial discussion of memories, whether they change as they are being recalled. Proust claimed that memories can in fact be recalled in toto, especially if they are connected with olfactory experiences, and this total recall of a memory, with its associated qualia, allows a direct touch with the past, a veritable re-entry so to speak, be it of limited duration. Such thoughts (or rather memories), Proust reminds us, are not to be had voluntarily. The memory that is painfully sought out, is in fact recreated, and in the process changed. Only the memory that comes unbidden, intruding itself unsolicited, can be a true visitor of the past. All according to Proust.

<sup>29</sup> And this may be deep down the ultimate motivation for materialism, a somewhat ironic statement as materialism is usually connected with the unsentimental realization that with bodily death, that is it.

Any reflection on the Mind is self-referential, and by implication any humanistic enterprise. This essay in fact is a re-enactment of the thoughts of Collingwood, thoughts when buried in a book would be dead, but when revived by a reader are brought to life again. But thoughts cannot survive in isolation, unless they are ignored. The thinking individual is no mere copying compiler, he cannot help but transform thoughts, as thoughts inspire new ones, just as questions answered spawn further questions. Thus in an account like this it is very hard and quite tedious to make a clear distinction between the thoughts of Collingwoods and those of the (present) commentator, the latter drafted on the former seamlessly, and the former acquired as so much common property.

## §6 History and Mathematics

To most people (including Collingwood) the foregoing seems to have almost nothing to do with mathematics. But as a mathematician I find reading Collingwood a deeply sympathetic experience. The reasons are the following. Both mathematics and history take place in the present, but relate to something else. In the case of history to the past, and in the case of mathematics to a Platonic reality. Both the past and the underlying Platonic reality of mathematics are not tangible, only discernable through the shadows they cast on the present. Mathematics is a living subject only as far as it is understood. You do not accept mathematical statements as testimony, if you do you are not a mathematician, you only accept them by living through them, that is re-enacting the thoughts that underpin them. The thoughts may have been perceived in the past, but as thoughts they are timeless, and hence common property, to be claimed by one and everyone who can truly think them. A true historian internalizes the past, just as a true mathematician internalizes an argument. Once you have thoroughly digested something it is part of you<sup>30</sup>.

A crucial distinction between natural science and history is that the former concerns itself with the universal, while the latter only with the individual. The former being independant of time, the latter wedded to it. Mathematics concerns itself with the universal and timeless, thus being in contradistinction to history. This is true, and I never claimed that the two were indistinguishable, that would have been absurd. But yet the difference of categories is not so much one of classification, meaning one thing is either one or the other, as one of aspect. That the angular sum of a triangle adds up to  $\pi$ , to bring up a particular example referred to by Collingwood, may be seen as a universal statement valid for all possible triangles (in Euclidean space). But it could also be seen as a particular individual fact of triangles, one fact about them among other facts, and as such interesting by itself (as well as the countless ways it will interact with other facts, be they pertaining to plane Euclidean geometry or to a wider mathematical context.) Mathematics is in fact quite diverse, and unlike the natural sciences it cannot be subsumed under a unifying theme,

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But the classic AI-dream of so called 'downloading', of the possibility of transferring the contents of your brain to a computer allowing your mind to survive, reveals another aspect

<sup>30</sup> This may be the cause for the suspicion of plagiarism and thought in mathematics. If you have been told an argument by someone else or read it, and as a consequence thoroughly understood it, you are very likely to believe sometime in the future that you discovered it yourself. As noted above thoughts are timeless and truly belong to no one, thus it is so easy to misplace them in time and space.

in the way modern biology should be seen in the light of evolution, or modern geology viewed from the perspective of plate-tectonics<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore there is a sense of time to mathematics, namely that of logical casuality. Mathematical arguments must proceed in a certain order, in which what precedes is essential to what follows, just as in the course of history. True this sense of time and order in mathematics is epistemological and not ontological. True understanding of a mathematical concept has been achieved only when you can understand it from many different paths. Mathematics is not a linear landscape, it allows movements in many directions, it is only in its transmission it is linear, just as life is linear, but should be conceived in toto. This is why the difficulty of remembering your life chronologically (without documentary crutches) should not be seen as a defect, but as a success.

Thus the similarity between history and mathematics lies in the ambition of understanding, be it that the nature of understanding turns out very different in respective disciplines. Only through understanding is life breathed in the subject.

### §7 A cavalcade of historians

The idea of history concerns the idea of history, not history itself, yet as noted Collingwood supplies a historical survey of historians. Although this is rather interesting, especially when he considers the early historians, it is of secondary interest, when compared to the purely philosophical parts of the book, even if the point of the survey is to illustrate the growth of the philosophy of history. Thus I will be brief in my account.

After the initial mention of Herodotus and Thucydudes he goes on to discuss Hellenistic and Roman history, remarking of the latter that it was identified by Livy with the rise of Rome. Rome tacitly understood to be ready-made and undergoing no change as to its essence. Christianity had a profound influence on how history was practised. By it history became apocalyptic as well as eschatological. Above all there was a crucial event, in this particular case the birth of Christ, dividing history into the before and the after. By so doing it committed a cardinal sin, in the eyes of Collingwood, namely extending history beyond the present. Underlying it all was of course the idea of history working out some transcendental plan, in this case that of God. By so doing it devalued the efforts of individual, because who could resist the realization of a divine plan? Obvious echoes of this scholastic sense of history is of course to be found in Marx, something Collingwood cannot resist pointing out.

The Renaissance introduced Machiavelli, who when commenting on Levy, stressed that history is not about man controlling his destiny coolly and rationally, on the contrary man was driven by passion, and that was the proper engine of history. The sceptical view of Descartes we have already touched upon. But implicit in his rejection of historical testimony as unreliable there is the notion of reliability, and hence that of a criterion for it. Hence his scepticism did not worry historians of his age, on the contrary it inspired

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<sup>31</sup> There is an attempt of encoding mathematics through logical atoms. But those attempts resemble the way of representing a picture pixel by pixel. It may allow replication as well as duplication, and certain simple transformation, but it does in no sense convey the meaning of a picture



them. Later on Vico<sup>32</sup> criticised the Cartesian criterion of truth as being the clear and distinct idea as being a mere subjective criterion, failing to distinguish between belief and truth. According to Vico, knowing something in the sense of understanding it as opposed to merely perceiving it, is made possible by having made it up yourself. In this way mathematical knowledge is to be understood. This does not mean that its objects do not exist objectively, but in apprehending them the mind is active and controlling. This principle of so called *verum et factum convertuntur* is also particularly adapted to history, which is about the creation of human institutions. Through this principle of Vico we see the embryo of Collingwoods re-enactment of thoughts, and it does fit quite well with the discussion on history and mathematics in our previous section. In short history is made possible by the pre-established harmony between the historian and the objects of his studies, a harmony based not on miracle (*pace* Leibnitz) but on common human nature<sup>33</sup> History may appear to be cyclical, but it is not cyclical Vico points out, it is a spiral, it never truly repeats itself, because when it returns to an original position it has been changed in the process<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore he remarks that the most effective men in history have usually been the least academically minded. Historical greatness and reflective intellect are rarely combined. Those are the kinds of *obiter dicta* that are amusing to read about, but do not necessarily reflect any depth in thinking. More pertinent is his claim that it is not true that the knowledge of the past invariably declines due to forgetting. This would be the case if unbroken tradition was our only source of historical knowledge. Instead we are able to know more about the past than those more closely related to it were. This insight lies at the heart of making history a science, in short for us to be able to derive genuinely new knowledge about it. Vico was clearly ahead of his times, as the saying goes, and his influence became only pronounced during the 19th century. This illustrates, according to Collingwood, why 'thoughts' are not just commodities propagated by diffusion, but are in some sense independantly re-enacted, when times and circumstances are ripe for them. It is clear why Vico ought to be a heroic figure to Collingwood, defying the Cartesian triumphs of his days, just as Collingwood was to oppose the dominion of natural science in his.

After a prolonged discussion of Vico, all of whose virtues have not been relayed, I will for lack of space only mention that the British thinkers, Locke, Berkeley and Hume come up for discussion. As to the Enlightenment, Collingwood remarks, that in its apocalyptic vision of history, it had much in common with the scholastic middle-ages, with a hatred of the church having replaced a celebration of it. The enlightened project was to clean the

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<sup>32</sup> Giovanni Battista Vico, 1668-1744

<sup>33</sup> Collingwood makes a point of transience and abhors talk about essence and substance, yet implicitly he assumes a constancy of human nature, otherwise his methodology would not work. He berates Hume for assuming that mind is the mind of a Hume, a mere particular individual living in a particular time and particular place, yet any idealistic approach takes as its point of departure the rational mind, whose essence is tacitly assumed fixed. This is the dilemma of every serious philosopher, namely the need for a fixed point from which to perturb the universe.

<sup>34</sup> In mathematical jargong, it has undergone monodromy. Rereading a book is a different experience than reading it for the first time. This notion of monodromy is crucial to pedagogy, but seldom fully appreciated by its practioners

world of superstition and the concomitant oppression of man by religion and its purveyors, the battle cry of Voltaire being too well-known to be recalled. According to the author, the historical outlook of the Enlightenment was not genuine history, its main motive was polemical. Fuelled by mere polemics, it never rose higher than its source, the source being Voltaire. Collingwoods criticism of Montesquieu we have already touched upon thus I will limit myself to mention his approval of the latter's remark to the effect that Voltaire was a monastic historian writing for monks<sup>35</sup>. One thing, Collingwood can say for the Enlightenment, it did promote tolerance, and thus encourage the historians search for causes (*pace* Hume).

I have earlier criticized Collingwoods implicit assumption of the constancy of human nature. In fact he spends a section discussing it, noting that due to the self-referential nature of it, the more it knows itself, the better it becomes, in contradistinction to the understanding of external objects, where improvement of our understanding has no effect on the objects themselves. Thus Collingwood is committed to a history of human nature, sarcastically remarking that the philosophers of the Enlightenment assumed it to be constant and hence were able to envision an utopia in which the problems effecting humans would be solved. Collingwood remarks correctly that with changing circumstances, problems will only disappear by being replaced by other problems, and thus the ultimate fate is unpredictable. This is indeed a correct analysis, nevertheless when human nature changes into something unintelligible, that nature will no longer be the subject of historians of Collingwoods ilk. This does not need to concern us now as historians, because as have been pointed out so much, the future is never part of his domain.

The Enlightenment bequeathed to its succession a much wider concept of what is history, which excited the imagination of Romantic thinkers. Herder is an original example<sup>36</sup>, as is Kant, on whom the author not surprisingly devotes a lot of space. Kant was not a historian yet he was in 1784 provoked to write an influential essay (*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*) picking up threads left dangling by previous philosophers. In it he contrasted mans moral sense with amoral nature, the latter turning him into a phenomenon. Collingwood is highly critical of Kants image of the events of history passing in review in front of the historian. They have in fact finished happening by the time the historian enters the scene, he has instead to actively re-create them. This Collingwood regards as the main defect of historians of the 18th century, that they treated history as nature, being subjected to climate and biology. However, this is a view which would find much sympathy with many modern thinkers, who confuse history with evolution. Kants vision was that history was the stage upon which mans rational nature had to develop its potentials, hence giving an explanation of why there was something like history in the first place, and that it was progressive in the sense of exhibiting continual improvement. Whether improvement really is compatible with happiness is quite another matter, made topical with the environmental concerns of our age. A truly sustainable culture would be a non-historical kind, in which nothing happens, man just living out is biological destiny just as other fellow creatures.

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<sup>35</sup> Many readers may be reminded of a modern counterpart in Dawkins, who like a prophet of the Old Testament inveighs against the follies of his age

<sup>36</sup> Whose exalted views on race naturally embarrassed Collingwood

Kant had many followers, Schiller among others, who like Tolstoy is grossly underestimated as a thinker. With Fichte the notion of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis was introduced, later to be developed further by Schelling and brought to its culmination by Hegel. Collingwood remarks that anyone reading the former's 'Philosophy of History' must be struck by its profound originality and revolutionary nature. Yet, as it is the point of historical study to reveal, its debts to its predecessors is much greater than one would at first suspect. To Hegel the philosophy of history was not the same as the one being displayed by Collingwood in the book under review, but one in which history itself transcended its empiricism and became philosophical and its events not merely to be ascertained but to be understood in the general scheme of things. He makes a clear distinction between history and nature, the latter having no history, being but cyclical<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore he insisted that history was about thought. Collingwood naturally approves 'it is not knowing what people did but understanding what they thought that is the proper definition of a historians task'. Hegel follows Kant in thinking of history as the triumph of reason, and hence being an intrinsically logical process, in which reason has to trick passion. Hegel has of course attracted a hoist of critics, but Collingwood holds that many of them has missed the point. There is a logic to history, not on the level of mere events empirically ascertained, but once you realise that events are but the manifestation of human thought, then and only then are you permitted to draw connections between events. Another thing that Hegel has been criticised for is that history ends in the present, but here of course, Collingwood is in perfect agreement. In the end Collingwood rejects Hegels conception of history, magnificent as it may be, as being inconsistent and in opposition to the main of Hegels other work. The great defect of Hegel is to treat like Kant only political history. Kant had a reason for such a restriction, Hegel, according to Collingwood, had not.

As to Marx, as a philosopher and a historian, he is mainly to be seen as a Hegelian renegade, famously standing Hegels dialectic on its head, what in principle amounted to a regression in the view of Collingwood. Hegel had liberated history from nature, Marx wanted it once again become subjected to nature. Thus the dialectical materialism has had its greatest success in political and economic history, and its greatest failures in the history of philosophy, which ought in view of the fact that history is ultimately about human thought, be a very important component of history itself. From then on Collingwood attends to the positivists, whose project to turn history into natural science, he is so vehemently opposed to. Some useful things may nevertheless have come out of it, as exemplified by the new methods of handling sources, involving philological criticism.

It would be tedious to continue a systematic review of the major historians of the 19th century in Germany, England, France and Italy, making up some seventy not very exciting pages. Let me only point out the Italian historian Croce, who gets soocial attention from Collingwood. According to Croce, even natural science is part of history, as every scientific discovery is ultimately gained by a historical process (the results of experiments?). This I consider rather feeble and self-serving, although Collingwood will voice similar sentiments, but not so naively.

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<sup>37</sup> This clearly was before Darwin, and probably he was greatly influenced by the geologists of the time, who thought of deep time as cyclical. Especially Hutton with his 'No vestiges of a beginning, no prospects of an end' comes to mind.

## §8 The Meaning of It All

What is the ultimate purpose of studying history? In the present climate humanistic studies have to justify themselves, and nowadays justifications are ultimately reduced to economical ones. Humanists often feel hardpressed to come up with a good answer, and the answers they usually come up with are not so much good as contrived. The study of history does not make you a better human being (whatever is meant by that<sup>38</sup>) nor does it necessarily equip you with social skills or political know-how, although this is often claimed, going at least as far back as that of the Roman historian Polybius. Collingwood would have no truck with it. The experiences of the past are no reliable guide to the future, which many generals have learned to their peril. To Collingwood the purpose of studying history is knowledge, self-knowledge similar to the subjective kind which forms our personal identities. Out of self-knowledge all kinds of things may emerge, for better or for worse. In fact the above mentioned Polybius points out that you cannot hope to avoid mistakes by learning of the mistakes of the past (*pace* the usual cliché to the effect that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it), but it can make you endure those you make more stoically.

Is there progress in history? It depends on what you mean by progress. Progress in the sense that events necessarily follow certain orders, this is true. There is a crucial asymmetry, we know things that the past does not, and never had any chance of knowing. Ironically this includes things about the past itself, as we have already seen that Vico pointed out. True history is a struggle against oblivion, and we have of course forgotten many things the past knew but we do not. But there is a crucial difference between the two, as forgetting is to some extent a matter of choice. The past on the other hand may influence the future (this is what history really is about), but it has no choice as to what it will entail. As Collingwood reminds the reader, '[that most people] *do not know what they are doing until they have done it, if then.... Most human action is tentative and experimental directed not by knowledge of where it will lead but rather out of a desire to know what will come of it*'<sup>39</sup>.

History is accumulative, it has an arrow, and is the work of men of free will. Thus one thing leads to another, not compulsively as in a logical argument, but permissively. In that sense it is progress. History progresses from one point to another, but always ends at the present.

Then of course one may add the matter of value. This makes it far more difficult. Every change entails both a creation and a destruction. It is never easy to decide whether the gains outweigh the losses. In fact this is surely a matter of convention, conventions being apt to change with times.

History is self-knowledge and its virtues are those of reflection. Without self-knowledge no other kind of knowledge is possible.

Finally some comments should be adduced to the bitter hostility of Collingwood towards natural science. One part of it is, as noted earlier, personal. He feels slighted and wants to redress an imbalance. The picture he paints of natural science is a caricature, but

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<sup>38</sup> less likely to commit genocide?

<sup>39</sup> This reminds me of when I am trying to play chess!

unfortunately a caricature which is to a large extent applicable. If one considers much of the rather mindless medical research that is going on, finding correlations without looking for explanations, one is tempted to agree with Collingwoods intellectual indictment. It is indeed a mindless activity, how useful it may eventually turn out to be. To Collingwood any intrusion of nature, i.e. such mindless activity, into the study of Mind, i.e. of history in the wide sense, is anathema. The proper study of psychology cannot be the rational mind, because that would lead to a self-referential contradiction through historical prediction, which is impossible according to Collingwood. Only nature can be predicted, not human thought in all its ramifications<sup>40</sup>. On the other hand Collingwood does not shy away from self-reference as such, that is what the study of Mind by the Mind ultimately entails. Reflection. Not the reduction of mind to something alien and outside. This is the natural scientific fallacy.

February 5-8, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

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<sup>40</sup> This ties in with my own criticism of mathematical didactics, in as far as its vision is to explain the nature of mathematical thought