

## Religion and Philosophy

*R.G.Collingwood*

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Collingwood is a religious believer. This in many ways prejudices his philosophical thinking. It is in the nature of faith that it precedes rational analysis, the latter only being invoked after the fact. Nevertheless it is interesting to find out in what he really believes in, and the kind of arguments he marshals to buttress his convictions. It is in some ways an immature work, written when Collingwood was still in his twenties (it was published in 1916), and thus in many ways a bit tedious, as the reasoning at times seem to go on in circles without really getting down to the business of transportation.

The book is divided into three parts, with the headings of 'The General Nature of Religion', 'Religion and Metaphysics' and 'From Metaphysics to Theology' respectively. The first part deals with the relation of religion to philosophy, morality and history. Philosophy is special. It is about thinking and what exists, and as such it is intimately connected with religion. Religion cannot be divorced from its creed, what it teaches about the world and what exists is fundamental to its nature, in particular the existence of God. Let us briefly summarize the contents of the third and concluding part, which although it may be intended to build on the previous two, seems pretty self-contained. Collingwood is here concerned with specifically Christian theology, and thus concerned with the dual nature of Christ, as both divine and human. This is a classical stumble-block. Divinity, whatever creed and persuasion, is concerned with the infinite, while humans are merely finite, imperfect beings. I cannot say that the question really engages me, and hence, without really understanding the question I cannot follow the arguments. It merely seems to be a restating of the same thing over and over again, just as an ignorant attendant at a math-lecture will get the impression that the speaker says the same thing over and over again. The gist seems to be that God is Mind, just as humans, which is what unites them. Christ only seems to have been able to unite his mind with that of the divinity to perfection, somewhat along the line of Buddha having reached perfect understanding.

Another more easily grasped issue is that of Omnipotence. God cannot both be good and allow evil. This is often presented as the ultimate moral argument against the existence of a benign deity. If he is omnipotent he has the power to stop evil, and if he does not do it, it simply means that he condones it, and thus he cannot be benign. And if he is benign and allows evil, he obviously does not have the power to stop it. Collingwood has no truck with that kind of argument. Of course from a logical point of view he needs to qualify the notion of omnipotence. As he sees it, it simply means that good will win in the end triumph. I suspect this is very Hegelian, and like all philosophers born in the 19th century, he was profoundly influenced by Hegel. The Universe is not static but in a process of becoming. Perfection is death, imperfection is action. There is no evil God will not eventually overcome.

Now what is evil? Many associate pain with evil, and dream of a world in which there would be no pain, just pleasure. But to Collingwood pain is not evil, or at least not

necessarily so. Pain is something that is connected with effort, or at least effort always involves some pain. As an example he brings up the case of composing good music. It takes a real effort, and the pain associated with it, is very different from the pain associated with listening to bad music. The latter is, I guess, evil in the sense of being a torture, and as such pointless. A life without effort would not be a pleasurable life. The pain in the effort, however essential and inevitable, is of course not the point of the effort, only the price you have to pay, for a more profound pleasure. This leads us dangerously close to the idea that any pain becomes worthwhile if it paves the way for a greater pleasure. There is of course some logic to this, when the persons experiencing the pain and the pleasure respectively are the same, otherwise we are entering morally treacherous territory.

Another interesting issue is that of the supposed contradiction between punishment and forgiveness. To Collingwood they are the same, sprung out of the same impulse. To punish is to convey to the sinner that he or she has sinned and that she should repent, meaning replace his bad will with good will, and to understand the wickedness of his or her deeds. This process is of course painful, and the pain is the pain of punishment. By realizing the error, there is pain, and the pain is what we associate with punishment, but as such only incidental to it. Thus punishment is not the same thing as revenge, nor the same thing as deterrence, but a case of a person being forced to reevaluate himself and his acts. What is evil in an act, is not so much the consequences, as the underling motive. Thus all true punishment is self-punishment. While getting on terms with the past, is what is usually associated with punishment, having hope for the future is what is associated with forgiveness. Thus punishment and forgiveness are only two sides of the same coin. (One could compare it with discovering a mistake in mathematics. It is imperative that you become aware of your faulty thinking, it is not enough that you are merely corrected, you need to absorb the lesson, which like all efforts is painful. But when you have you are forgiven, just as we are all forgiven our wrong ideas. Life must go on.) Thus internment of criminals is meant as a way of facilitating the process of repentance, of giving time for and removing obstacles to, the gradual appreciation of wrong-doing. Of course in practice this is not what is going on in prisons, although there is still the fiction, very much aligned with the explanations of Collingwood, of prison being a kind of moral hospital where the inmates are treated for their moral misconceptions. One may wonder why there is in that case a distinction between criminals, according to whether they are supposed to be in need of psychiatric treatment or not. And why the latter are usually given sentences of specified time, This attitude towards Crime and Punishment is course something you can appreciate without necessarily having a religious temperament, let alone an active belief in God, because most of us have a definite sense of morality.

When it comes to man and God, Collingwood becomes more parochial in his thinking. While the former issue is public the latter takes place in his private home so to speak. When God makes us change our mind, what is really going on? If we have two minds, it is a case of one mind overruling the other, so we cannot say that we have been changed, we have only been run over. As Collingwood puts it. Only our wills can change our wills. The other interpretation is that indeed we can only change our minds for the good on our own volition, that we do not need God, our sense of right and wrong are personal, each man an island onto himself. Collingwood opposes this 'subjective' interpretation. No man is an

island onto himself, we all as humans share a common society, and we are partly identified by having common wills and motivations. When God influences a human, it is not the case of imposing his will, but man and god have their wills aligned. It is a common experience, both God and the human share in the punishment as well as the repentance. The latter may be paradoxical, how could a sinless being such as God repent. Collingwood argues that we do not really know the concept of repentance, led astray by our inability to define it. Our language has no means of conveying things such as smells, thus we instead tend to define a smell by the circumstances which give rise to it. We do not convey how something smells, only what it is that smells. The same thing as with repentance. We described it as the feeling we have when we realize that we have done something bad and are repenting it. But this is not a true definition of what it means to repent, only a description of the circumstances which may provoke it. Repentance we recognize when we encounter it, and in particular we can as well feel sorrow and indignation for the sins of others as we do for our own.

In the final chapter Collingwood discusses the nature of miracle. He says wisely that does not have anything to do with superstition, i.e. the temporary inhibition of the laws of nature. The laws of nature are not in the nature of commands that can be overruled on higher authority, but they are universal facts. If not universal, they would not be of interest. It would be like Newton claiming that: 'Everything has a natural property of falling to the earth. This is why the apple falls. Exceptions are smoke, kites and celestial bodies'. A universal law with exceptions is no universal law, only a particular manifestation of a more fundamental one. He denies that God and Nature are separate. To Collingwood, miracle is simply the sudden inrush of life to startle us enough to wake us up from the materialist slumber.

Collingwood resents abstractions. The world is filled with particulars. Yet his arguments are pretty abstract. But his God fairly personal, albeit in a rather aloof (abstract) manner. I found his lengthy discussion on the divinity versus the humanity of Christ a bit hard to follow and be engaged by. Words which are not infused by meaning are only formal. It is our meaning as to texts which imbue them with life, without them they are just strings of symbols (like the books in Borges library of Babel). In that sense in relation to texts we are ourselves gods. I guess a belief in divinity is more or less inevitable when you have a idealistic philosophy (as most of us have).

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