

## Essays in Political Philosophy

*R.G.Collingwood*

February 29- March 5, 2016

The essays in this volume have been collected not only posthumously but almost sixty years after the death of Collingwood himself, thus actually by the time they were published Collingwood had been dead longer than he had been alive. It is always a delicate business to publish material that the author has not explicitly given permission to. Any number of objections can be adduced. The author might never have intended it for publication, the manuscript being in the nature of a journal or an experiment to try out ideas and approaches he eventually may have abandoned. Or even, maybe even worse, it may have been intended for publication, but not yet developed to a stage he would have felt comfortable to send it to the publisher, so that any appearance will mean a distortion, liable to make the author turn in his grave. But most things are being trumped by the curiosity of the public, and to many an authorial temperament, neglect may be the worst thing after all, and thought of people prying into and looting of ones *Nachlaß* may be ultimately prove to be more gratifying than embarrassing.

As usual Collingwood writes with clarity reducing complex and confusing issues to their bare essentials, providing such a contrast to his commentators. He distinguished between three kinds of actions. Economical, political and moral. What characterizes economical action is the use of words like utility, expediency, usefulness, profitability. It is action as a means to an end. There is no intrinsic worth to an exchange as such, it is the mutual benefits that motivates it. Collingwood emphasizes the symmetry involved in each economic transaction. He insists that one cannot design one partner of the transaction as a purchase the other as the vendor. Both gives and gives up at the same time. You sell your money and buy the apples, or rather the eating or giving away of the apples; while the other partner, sells the apples and buys the money, whose desirability lies in its utility as a flexible means to be used in further exchanges. Money differs from other commodities as being the more abstract and having no ultimate worth only mediate. the prudent element in an economic transaction is to be able to actually identify and choosing you preference; and the fact that specific and concrete preferences are not universal is what drives economical activity. In economics moral issues like duty do not really intrude. You take economic decisions solely on issues relating to profitability. Perhaps not quite, Collingwood is careful not to fall into the trap of categorical thinking and maybe there are, he admits, traces of moral and political action in all economic activity, just as the other two partakes to some degree of the others. After all when pursuing the business of becoming rich you may abide by the rules. On the other hand this is just a matter of defining words, better maybe to think of it as three pure axi of political, economical and moral activity, while the activities of mortal men, should rather be thought of as an inevitable mixture of the three at one time one strain dominating, at another time, a different one. Such an approach would clearly clarify the philosophical discussion, and Collingwood is much for clarification and emphasizing the proper role of philosophy in such

contexts. An economical philosopher is not concerned about empirical economic theory, but in what economic theory is really about.

Thus Collingwood makes an important distinction between actions that are taken for their own sake, such he terms impulsive, and such with an ulterior motive in view. Moral action is subservient to duty, it is undertaken because you have to, it has been dictated to you. To do a duty impulsively is hard to imagine, in so doing it is not really a moral action. A moral action is something you do to an essential extent does in spite of yourself, as a result of an inner struggle, where impulses pulling in another direction have to be overcome. Moral and economic action are always conscious and the result of deliberation and will. An economic action splits into two, the immediate one to obtain the mediate one. The immediate act is concerned with the purchase and everything connected to it such as the price, while the mediate act is the result of it, not the purchase but the purchased, the thing in itself. The purchased has no utility only desirability. Of course you may think that what is purchased is just meant to be traded again, but this just means that there are levels of mediations, a goal cannot be useful, only the means to obtain it. Thus if the goal is simply to achieve an ulterior goal, its desirability was in its usefulness for that higher purpose. Can this go on for ever? Obviously not Collingwood assumes, so in the end there are things that have intrinsic, so to speak, ultimate worth, and he reminds us of Kant's dictum never to treat another human being as a mean to an end, human beings have ultimate worth<sup>1</sup>.

The author goes into a lengthy discussion of what is a price, concluding that this has only meaning in a bargaining situation. When a merchant set up prices for his goods, he is basically making a prediction of what he would get in a bargaining situation. He may have made a faulty prediction, in that case his wares will not be sold (or they would disappear prematurely from his shelves). He notes that money is like the middle term of a syllogism. I sell  $S$  to get  $X$  and I use  $X$  to buy  $B$  where  $X$  is money. It is important that  $X$  remains constant, in order to ask for  $X$  you need to have a good idea what to get for it. This seems to be a case of fairness, but perhaps more appropriately a case of knowing what is up. The notion of a fair price is pointless, there is no such thing as fair price. Morals do not enter economics he claims. True, if you are subjected to black-mail, you may be forced to pay much more than you are prepared to do, simply because a context has been created in which you have little choice. To bring about such a context may be considered illegal. In the same way a man may be forced to sell his labor for a pittance leading him to starve. It is not the wage as such which would be unfair, but the position in which he finds himself. People in such dire straits should not be given wages, which are part of a bargain, but be given a gift. He further dwells on the fact that money in addition to be a means of exchange also can be used as a commodity. A coin has a value as a piece of metal, and a bank note, can be used to light a pipe. Once money is used in this way it ceases to be money and becomes a commodity. There are actual laws against it. Now in the modern age with digital transactions, we have reached a state when the commodity

---

<sup>1</sup> There is much confused talk about the equal value of people, and if you do not believe it you are not really human. It is not clear how literally this should be taken, to assign values is something which is part of economic activity. In this conundrum Kant's criterion creates some well-needed clarification, doing away with this implicit and impossible comparison that the notion of equal values implies.

value (or opportunity) of money is more or less extinct.

Now on Goodness, Caprice and Utility, Collingwood has the following to remark. First one may claim that everything is good, as the world is good by itself, and anything in the world partakes of this goodness. If this is too much one may think of a standard of goodness, those that live up to it are good, those which come short are bad. He also claims that only acts are good, and if it applies to anything else but an action it is only of it is positively related to a good action, just as chocolate confers good eating. Now what is all this about? He is responding to the realist philosopher Moore and his championship of common sense. To Moore we do not give any reasons for choosing the good things, just as we do not give any reasons why a thing is yellow. It is just yellow, that is what common sense dictates. Collingwood thinks otherwise. Goodness is very much connected to being chosen, so we may put it that a thing is good if we chose it in preference to other options. But why do we choose it? In fact we are always conscious about choice, but not always about our reasons for it. If we do, Collingwood refers to it as rational choice, and if not capricious. In the latter case it could be that our impulsive non-deliberate choices are at cross-purpose with our overriding intentions, and thus are morbid and should be removed. The author is very suspicious of psychologists and psycho-analysis but concedes that at in a situation like this they may conceivably be useful, as long as they can go beyond mere diagnosis (putting a label) and actually effect a cure. What Collingwood objects to is when the psychologist ventures to decide on what is health or not, that is up to the discretion of the patient. In fact a psychologist can cause more damage than a surgeon that amputates a healthy leg or extracts a functioning stomach. But what really interests him are rational reasons, in particular what kind of rational reasons can be given to claim that something is good. There are two kinds of answers to a question. A real answer that furthers the inquiry, and a not so real, which is not an answer at all to the question, mostly in the form of a tautology. Sometimes the tautology is intentional, and then the intention is to convey to the one asking the question (often a child) that the question is stupid, that one is too busy to answer, or simply (and the most common) that one does not know, but want to hide that fact. But most tautological answers are not intentional but only reflect the confusion of the speaker, who may not even know that he or she is expressing a commonplace, maybe because they are too stupid or confused to realize that they do not know the answer (as in the case of Moore?). Tautologies are worthless, they convey no information whatsoever (just as with Moore?). Although not quite worthless, after all they serve a rhetorical function. And as in the case of love, maybe there is no logical reason but only women's reason, as in the 'Two Gentlemen of Verona'. In fact if one would be supplied, it would be a sign that love is not involved, only deliberation. But this is not the level at which you conduct philosophical investigations.

Now a real answer to a question of choice, is to say that you chose because of utility. As to utility there is an end, and a means to achieve that end. The utility of the means is wholly dependent on the end and derives from the fact that it brings it about. This of course reduces the question of utility to that of the end, which in its turn may be a means to another superior end. And so on. But somewhere the 'buck stops' and then we have an ultimate end, an end by itself, and it is indeed hard to give any rational reason why this should be good or useful. He then embarks on a discussion of what constitutes an act. An

act is something very complex involving a string of connected means all leading up to some ulterior end. To kill your wife is bad and liable to get you into jail. But what about buying poison to kill your wife, is that also criminal? In many countries an act is only considered culpable when it has been completed, thus buying poison is not criminal. At least not in a legal way but morally the act being so intimately connected with its intended conclusion it may be seen as more or less tantamount to the whole thing, because the whole thing is an integral act, and one should not really consider it as a separable component. In the philosophy of Collingwood continuity and contingency are fundamental, and an event is something that takes place in time, and should not be seen as pearls on a string but strands in a rope. In a temporal sense the mediate acts are done before the immediate, the purpose of the whole act. But logically it is the other way round, the end does not come after the means, the end comes first, and the means only come into existence because of the end. Of course an act which is not yet completed can be thwarted. But having an act thwarted does not mean that you are exonerated from the moral responsibility of having undertaken it. The decision to perform it comes first.

Now when it comes to politics Collingwood proposes a new angle to look at it. Rather than to concentrate on what is a state, that is a thing with different attributes, it might be better to formulate the question as to what is political action? Economic action he has considered above. That has to do with what is economically good and thus as to what constitutes the acquisition of wealth. Now, he reminds the reader, there is no intrinsic opposition between economic good and moral good. One may pursue wealth without being immoral, something which was not always clear. In the same way one may be a politician and still act morally, there is no obvious contradiction between the two aims, even if the vulgar press confuses the issue by claiming that there is. Thus in particular we see that the disparaging view of politicians is not a modern phenomenon, there has always been scope for populist politics. Now politics is about making laws. Those laws are not made out of moral considerations, nor to further wealth but for other reasons, which we may term political. So what is politically good? For what should political actions aim? Is improving housing for the poor by doing away with slums good? Not morally, according to the author, poor people, he claims, are often happier and definitely less worried than their middle-class counterparts living in garden suburbs. Will it improve wealth? That is not clear, but it will make society more ordered he explains, and that seems to be reason enough. Thus cleaning seems to be an example of a political act. Politics has to do with principles, such as obeying laws. It is not always moral to obey a law, one may easily concoct instances in which it would definitely be not. Thus it seems to be much easier to formulate political principles than moral principles. One may be tempted to claim that morality only pertains to particular situations, while politics pertain to general situations. Occasionally the political and the moral may come into conflict. He brings up another case in which somebody tries to shoot somebody and you interfere. Why do you interfere? There might be a very good reason that the person about to be shot really deserves it as a truly detestable being. The real reason is not moral, because you do not know enough of the particular situation to make a reasoned moral judgment. The real reason is that you think that it is unacceptable that such things should be going on, people trying to shoot each other. You act as if there was a rule against it, and rules should be followed, otherwise

there is no point to them. But there is nothing intrinsically moral about obeying laws and regulations, but it does make communal life run smoother. Collingwood brings up the tradition of queuing which he seems to think is particularly British as another example of mindless following of rules, which nevertheless is very convenient for the community at large, if not for the individual. Politics is essentially about imposing order. When a ruler rules he is imposing order, i.e. he is acting politically. If he rules only for his own benefit, his actions are no longer political. There may in fact be no distinction between a ruler and a subject, both may be the same, as a man exercising self-control by imposing on his behavior certain rules. In fact, Collingwood reminds us, that Plato maintained that a man is only entitled to rule over others if he can rule himself. Reason may rule desire, something most people would agree with, and clearly reason does not do so in order to benefit itself. You rule by commands, but there are different aims for different commands. As Collingwood points out if you command your children not to play tin trumpets, you do so for your own benefit so as to be spared the noise, and are in fact assuming that you are entitled to impose your will and desire on other people, i.e. your children. But if you command them to neatly fold their clothes in order that they get accustomed to orderly habits, you do not do so for your own benefit, and the command is a political one. The need for order is universal, and thus also present in primitive societies. What characterizes more advanced societies is that they have gone through a process in which they have thought up and considered alternative orders, and in this way achieving a simpler and more civilized order, just as a civilized grammar is simpler and less capricious than an undeveloped. Thus political development is not motivated by considerations of morality or wealth, but of order. The initiative does not come from above but from individuals of the community. Not everything is economical, Collingwood warns, peace and prosperity are not the same thing, although of course they are not opposed to each other. Laws are never perfect, but they are perfectible. This is what political strife is all about. It only works if people are free, free to obey. As Collingwood puts it. It is as pointless to give commands to one not free, as to make faces to a blind man.

Politics is about plans, because plans are characterized by rules. They involve a lot of different kinds of interlocking action for a definite end, but all bound by certain rules. You are not bound by them you may break them, but that amounts to abandoning the plan. To follow a plan involves a great freedom, namely that of making up rules and sticking to them. To do whatever catches your fancy at any given moment does not bespeak any real freedom. This is very analogous to the case of imagination I am so fond of pointing out. Imagination is not a case of making anything up on the spur of the moment, the imagination is only called upon when there are obstacles to be overcome, obstacles which are imposed by rules. Only then is the imagination properly provoked and stimulated. Now although a plan may consist of many acts it exhibits the unity of one. In fact any act can be arbitrarily subdivided into components so there is really no such thing as an atomic act, according to Collingwood, and here he differs from much of prevalent thinking in terms of analytic philosophy at the time. Now any act, including that of a plan, is set in motion by an exercise of will. This is so obvious to any reflective individual, the author contends, that any further arguments are superfluous.

Politics is intimately connected to plans, in fact it is all about organization of ac-

tivities. Planned organization one should emphasize. Economy in the sense explained by Adam Smith and his successors is not planned but spontaneous, a global effect due to local causes of gradients. A planned economy is not pure in this sense, but political. Now one could say that the issue of a planned economy is a political issue, thus in particular an unplanned one is as well, as it is due to a political decision. When it comes to politics the state is paramount in the tradition of Plato. But the state, being an empirical state of facts, is not exclusively concerned with politics, neither is politics the province only of the state but is conducted at all levels of organized societies be it churches, associations and family households, wherever a conscious and deliberate organization is called for. In fact the limits of the legitimacy of the state is a fundamental question. As a concrete example, Collingwood brings up the right of the state to suppress seditious or obscene literature. In doing so it does not meddle with literature *qua* literature, but merely maintaining order. This of course immediately enters upon the issue of free speech, one may, and what is constantly being done, claim that some of it threatens the order of the state, maybe even its legitimacy and existence. Which cannot be denied. Now Collingwood enters on the issue of political liberty. This has two aspects, a philosophical and hence transcendental in its nature, and an empirical. The failure to appreciate the distinction leads to confusion. No one can force anybody to obey a law which he chooses not to obey. This is simply the nature of free will. What political liberty means in the empirical sense is simple the existence of facilities which enable people to make their wishes known and thereby give them the means of influencing legislation. In this context the author reminds the reader that there is no real distinction between making laws and applying them. Laws are no fixed and rigid codes mechanically enforced but are reciprocally influenced by their very application. This process is what the judiciary is all about. Laws come to life by their interpretations in courts.

Now it is sometimes maintained that rules are bad as they tie your hands and are an impediment to freedom. As noted above this is a very naive idea. It is for one thing logically self-contradictory. To make the rule of making no rules is in fact a rule. In fact without rules, be they disguised as habits, the daily business of the day would be irksome indeed, the most trivial thing having to be carefully considered. The naive opposition against rules is based on a fallacy, namely that rules are fixed and determine the future. Rules always have to be interpreted and applied in new situations, and the freedom consists in the imaginative way you may apply a rule. For one thing deciding or not how relevant it is to the particular situation.

Is politics necessary? The above arguments should have convinced the reader that it is. Daily life is filled with various activities, one of them being economical. Those activities must be harmonized to the extent that they do not come into destructive conflict with each other. For that reason we have rules, rules that you obey because they are right, not because of their utility *per se*, that would be an economical consideration. Now you may easily come up with reasons to break a law, say by forging a check. But the reasons to do so are individual and cannot be universalized. If you forge a check you better not tell the cashier it is forged, because he would not approve. The reasons for the forgery do not apply to him. Of course this all ties in with Kant and his suggestion what would be right moral conduct. Leave the moral issue alone, because Collingwood would not argue that moral

behavior can be codified, but the influence is clear. When you get punished from breaking a law it is not for moral reasons, but for having broken a law as a law, as having opposed the orderliness of society by making self-contradictory laws of your own. Consistent laws which should be obeyed ties very much in with the conception of mathematics as given by (in principle) consistent axioms. You play the game by complying with the laws.

Should we punish or forgive? Can we do both at the same time? And if not what should we do if neither is a rule to be dutifully held. This is a classical theological dilemma. But it is also a political one. Now the problem is that while forgiveness has been identified with softness and sentimentality and in effect a condoning of a crime, punishment has been identified with personal revenge. But this is wrong, the author points out. Punishment is a duty, but revenge is another crime that does not undo the first only adding to it. To punish as a deterrence is not to punish out of duty but to preserve us from danger. This renders punishment into a combination of cruelty and selfishness. Logically if the punishment does not deter, we should increase it further until the crime itself is stamped out. This is not the way it works. Even if we would impose the death penalty on petty theft, it would not eradicate it. In fact the aim that the worse the crime the more severe the punishment does not hold in practice. It is hard to work out how much a criminal really deserve. In the end Collingwood makes punishment and forgiveness into one and the same thing, thus solving the apparent contradiction. It is all about communicating to the criminal the condemnation of society of his act and thereby hopefully make him repent and mend his ways. Although of course it seldom works out so beautifully. Reading one is reminded of the view upheld at some time, that a prison sentence is a kind of therapy. Prisoners are under treatment to become better citizens. In practice it works the other way. This line of thought is followed by a further essay on the three aspects of punishment retributive, deterrent and reformatory, but this will not be further pursued in this essay, which by now may have revealed the tenor of those essays. Further topics include modern politics, with a chapter on Fascism and Nazism (he disapproves), an expose of utilitarian civilizations (he disapproves as well, although with a certain resignation) as well as one the Prussian philosophy. Finally there is a lecture on the three laws of politics. The first that there is a distinction between the rulers and those who are ruled. Note though that neither denote fixed individuals, they may vary over time. This leads to the second law, that due to death the class of rulers has to be replenished by those who are ruled. What the third is, is not entirely clear, it has to do with the demeanor of the ruler, and one he does not delve into. His conclusions is the pessimistic one that the rise of a tyrant is as natural and normal as anything else that happens in political life. This was written after the fall of France, and Collingwood would not experience the end of the war.

March (6)9, April 30, May 1-3, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden*  
ulfp@chalmers.se