

The Principles of History

R.G. Collingwood

and other writings in philosophy of history

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This is a recently edited selection from the Nachlaß of Collingwood. It had much overlap with 'the Idea of History' not only as to themes but also to large verbatim passages. This is not surprising as the latter was also the result of a posthumous selection from the same Nachlaß. Collingwood has an axe to grind, namely that history is significantly different from natural science, but that nevertheless it can be pursued with the same kind of rigor and creativity as traditional science. Natural science became modern in the early 17th century, while history as a science has been lagging behind until recently, and Collingwood is out to make history catch up. For that purpose he makes a passionate and cogent argument for what historical science should be, but as a reader one cannot but regret at times that the discussion is mostly on a rather abstract level with few actual examples from historical research. Maybe the author thought that this was unnecessary as he was addressing a professional audience of historians, and he actually discourages others from reading his work. His ultimate conclusion is that all of philosophy, and all of the humanities (Geisteswissenschaft) are essentially historical in nature and should all be subsumed under history. In this way he makes a clear division between the studies of nature and the studies of mind.

Formally Collingwood was a professor of metaphysics. No philosopher worth his salt can be indifferent to metaphysics, in fact, as Collingwood remarks, renouncing it, is by itself a metaphysical stand. His metaphysical foundation is that there is a clear distinction between nature and mind. Of course humans have a foot in each camp, individuals are inescapably biological creatures, and much of their concerns, including the mental, are of an animal nature, the proper confines of the science of Psychology, held in such ill-concealed contempt by Collingwood. The proper concern of minds are such that transcend humans as biological creatures, and to that Collingwood adds politics, ethics, science. Mind is about thought, autonomous thought, that can be discovered and rediscovered, and thus shared between individuals, as opposed to the purely private and subjective thoughts, which do not make sense beyond the psyche of an individual.

Now this distinction between mind and matter is now considered somewhat old-fashioned. If you are a scientist you believe that in principle mind is just another manifestation of matter, be it its most intricate one known to us; and that our minds, including our sense of consciousness, 'of being here', is amendable to rational explanations and a bottom-up approach, well aware that such explanations, at least at the present time, are not practically feasible.

Collingwood's attitude is a bit troubled, because in view of the evolutionary development of life, where to draw the line between mind and matter? The shocking and merciless conclusion of Darwin being that mind is matter, and man is fully animal, with no touch

of the divine, escapes this dilemma. But like most people Collingwood has no problem appreciating the beauty of Darwin's explanation of natural selection, yet being unable to stomach the ultimate conclusion. Thus Collingwood accepts a hierarchy of emergent properties, starting with the fact that the atom enjoys qualities, absent from its constituent parts, that process and configuration have independent properties, and that even life is nothing but matter peculiarly organized, but he stops at mind. Of course there are some very good and compelling logical arguments for that, having ultimately to do with the paradoxes of self-reference, but our instinctive rejection of the idea has less to do with our passion for rational thought and logical consistency than the affront it makes on our dignity and the deprivation of meaning and purpose it seems to imply. Thus Collingwood has a certain sympathy for the philosophy of Hegel, at least he does not reject him wholesale as many modern analytic philosophers do. In particular he grants that Hegel did get some things right, and that his ideas on history are worth pursuing. According to Hegel, mind creates nature, and indeed, with the right spin, Darwin's explanation of natural selection, as an abstract principle (an actual algorithm as it has sometimes been suggested) that creates order, if not out of nothing, at least out of chaos, can be seen as a concrete manifestation of Hegel's flight of fancy¹. But more importantly, a belief in the autonomy of mind, inevitably implies a conception of God, be it as a highly abstract entity. God as pure mind. Collingwood even indulges in a little fancy about parallel worlds, in which the velocity of light might not be the same, but where surely intelligence and ethics would converge to ours, and hence sharing the same God. To modern readers this might be felt as somewhat embarrassing, both in its open embrasure of the divinity and in its rather naive anthropomorphic musings. On the other hand, Collingwood has thought deeper and longer on such issues than most modern thinkers, who unwittingly voice many of his ideas, without drawing the ultimate conclusions. Dawkins, in his best-selling 'The Selfish Gene' ends his book with a plea of transcending the tyranny of the genes, thereby implicitly acknowledging that ethics transcends genetics. And more to the point, when it comes to discussing history as science, his metaphysical and religious beliefs have no bearing, being sufficiently abstract.

Collingwood rejects traditional historical scholarship as 'scissors and paste'. According to that old view, history is based on the authority of (predominantly) written sources. In particular the sources are finite, and what we can know about history is already known, if forgotten. Thus a historian is a compiler. He transmits from already extant sources and regurgitates it. The only way he can exhibit some creativity is to retell the testimonies in his own words, scrambling them together, thus cutting and pasting, not unlike making a collage. From an intellectual point of view this is clearly unsatisfactory, and an intellectually active historian craves something more. One avenue open to him is to become critical.

¹ Whether Darwin was influenced by Hegel is a moot question. Darwin was not of a philosophical temperament, even if his greatest contribution is of a philosophical nature, and it is unlikely that he ever gave Hegel any serious thought. On the other hand Hegel was very much in vogue throughout the 19th century, and his idealism must have exerted quite a soothing influence on many an earnest mind. If Darwin had any exposure to philosophy, it must have involved a fair dose of Hegel. As far as I know there are no explicit references to Hegel in the works of Darwin, the thinkers of the Enlightenment interested him much more.

Not to believe all sources, but on whatever grounds, make a selection of what to believe, what to consider as authority. Another approach is to create superstructures, such as periods, and thus pigeonhole authoritative facts. Still the basic limitation of the 'scissors and paste' approach is that history is finite, that we will know less and less, as sources will deteriorate, and each new work on history will tell us less than previous books. And more to the point a historian will never be able to compete with a scientist as to intellectual daring and creativity. In fact a historian is nothing but a compiler, an individual who cuts from previous works and paste them together in a slightly different order. Instead historian should be more active, instead of being a regurgitater, he should ask specific questions, and look for evidence. Unlike the cutting and pasting individual, a true historian cannot in advance limit his sources, he does not know what they will turn out to be, potentially anything is fair game; only while engaging in the process, new relevant sources will present themselves. Collingwood prefers not to talk about sources, but evidence. And evidence only become such after interpretation. Even a written source needs to be interpreted, it is interesting less for what it says, than for what it means. In particular Collingwood stresses the importance of unwritten sources, and thus it is hardly surprising that most of his activity as a historian was as an archeologist.

Thus history is defined by its methodology (and as such can only be criticized internally, never from the outside²). A historical fact is something that has been established by historical research. Thus knowledge of history obtained by other means, such as personal memory, is not historical knowledge. Historical knowledge is only obtained by a process of investigation. One may compare to mathematics, where mathematical knowledge is obtained by deductive reasoning, or at least documented in such a way. If there is no such logical underpinning, we are not talking about mathematical knowledge as opposed to conjecture or hypothesis. History differs from mathematics, that its logic is not so much deductive as inductive. Or, as Collingwood prefers to put it, mathematical logic involves compulsion, accepting the premises we are compelled to accept the conclusions. While inductive reasoning does not compel us, only permit us to draw certain conclusions. This ties in beautifully with Popper's approach of falsifiability. Our knowledge is provisional, as long as it does not involve downright contradiction, we are permitted to believe it. Facts can never be proved, only falsified³. And Collingwood also emphasizes the provisional nature of all historical knowledge. Future discoveries may unearth hitherto unsuspected evidence which may contradict what we so far have been allowed to believe.

History is thus a forensic science. It looks for traces of the past in the present. This alone does not make it different from other forensic sciences, such as paleontology and geology (with which particularly archeology obviously share many features), and in fact the historian becomes a detective looking for tell-tale clues. Collingwood, tongue in cheek, even makes up a small criminological fable to illustrate his point in some depth (a fable incidentally also reprinted in 'the Idea of History'). But a historians task differs

² No man is completely consistent, and Collingwood himself does not refrain from disparaging disciplines of which he does not approve. Besides. such strictures would soon lead to absurdities.

³ One vulgar objection to Popper is that there is a symmetry. Falsifying 'P' means proving 'not P' and vice versa. This is a form of the excluded middle, which does not necessarily hold in an inductive setting for practical reasons. Thus the constructive nature of scientific and historical reasoning is emphasized.

significantly from that of a criminal court. In both cases there is a presentation of evidence, and also a focused question ('whodunit'), everything else being considered irrelevant. But for practical reasons a court has to come to a conclusion before a strict deadline. Either a person is found guilty or not, if the latter he or she is to be immediately released. The possibility to keep a person in custody indefinitely out of suspicion is not an option. The convention is that no one should be condemned innocent, in fact everyone is to be considered innocent unless proven guilty, and that is the responsibility of the persecutor; thus better to free a guilty than commit an innocent. In history there is no such strictures, the agents of history can be kept under suspicion indefinitely. There is no practical need for closure and the definite case. Historical cases can always be re-opened. History does not deal with the present, it deals with the past. To find the truth of the past is, borrowing the words of Poppers autobiography, an unending quest.

History is a forensic science, concerned with the traces the past leaves in the present. But it is not a natural science, it is not concerned with the natural world, nor with the impact of the natural world on people, it is concerned with people, and more specifically, not their animal part, but their minds, their transcending thoughts. History is not a sequence of unrelated events, that is a mere chronology, it is a presentation of related events, related by human thought. Ultimately it is the thoughts of the actors of history which it is the task of the historian to reconstruct. Only by thinking the thoughts of the past, does a historian make sense of it. Just as a mathematician only understands a proof, by rethinking it, in fact by an act of rediscovery. And of course the thoughts of mathematics are prime example of autonomous thoughts that are not tied to individuals, but which are open to be rethought and rediscovered. In short history is about the history of the mind, the history of human thought. Climate and geography are in themselves not part of human history, only the thoughts they inspire in humans are. It is not geographical obstacles that hinder people, it is the thought about them that obstruct.

The past does not exist in itself, it is gone, it cannot be observed, it can only be inferred. In that sense it is not empirical, according to Collingwood. In that sense it can be compared to the Platonic abode of mathematical ideas. Their manifestations (i.e. their traces) can be studied, but not themselves as such. But the past influences us, knowledge of the past makes for self-knowledge. All knowledge of the mind is historical, it is only the past that explain the present. In this sense all philosophy, all inquiry into the mind, and into human institutions, is a part of history.

Not everything in the past is history, because not everything in the past is of interest to the historian. And what does not have the interest of the historian, is not history. What interests the historian? The question is somewhat circular. The best answer, according to Collingwood, is what the historian finds interesting to shed light on a particular problem. Anything can of course potentially shed light on the problem, but that does not mean that everything will. The historian makes a selection out of the past, because he is interested in answering a particular question, just as the detective is interested in finding the culprit, and anything that does not lead to the identification of that person is irrelevant. In the same way the historian is forced to ignore everything that is not relevant (but of course irrelevant facts may provoke new questions, questions that the historian otherwise may never have thought of). Ultimately the present is the arbitrator of what is interesting in

the past. As the present changes, future historians will always have occasion to reevaluate the history written by their predecessors. New kinds of questions will arise as new traces of the past will be realized and observed as the past will act differently on the present.

Collingwood emphasizes over and over again the central position of the historical question. And in this he does not differ from the natural scientist. He rejects as ridiculous and harmful, the idea of making a dig just to find out what there is to be discovered. You make no discoveries without looking for answers to specific questions, you can never properly observe, or observe at all, unless your observation is made to serve a definitive purpose. There is no such thing as a purposeless observation, Darwin claims, every observation is in response to a question, a hypothesis⁴.

Now the case for a historian is made very eloquently and very persuasively, yet there is actually precious little illustration of his principles. How many historical works are really the fruit of independent forensic research? And can a historian really evade authority? A mathematician may, and often does, take many results on authority, weaving them into his own investigations as so many axioms, although a good mathematician can usually prove anything he needs in principle, well aware that the value of a theorem lies less in its formulation and putative result, than in the ideas inherent in the proof, the latter being far more flexible and useful. But a historian cannot reinvent the wheel each time. Much of his expertise is based not on first hand research, but on results he has taken on trust. History may be an unended quest, an infinite subject, but the horizon of a historian is finite, and only so much can be accomplished during his brief tenure. And of course, most of the historical works the public is exposed to are of the surveying kind. A historian doing indeed a cutting and a pasting, reading the relevant literature and trying to make a readable and engaging synthesis. And most of the reading of history is done passively, treating the text as authority and allowing yourself to be amused. History as a refuge from reality and the pressing demands of the present, as Collingwood dismisses much of what passes as an interest for history⁵. The reader of a mathematical work can directly engage in the thought involved, checking arguments, or providing his own, and being provoked to new questions. A reader of a historical work is at a disadvantage, because the evidence that it is needed for the pursuit of historical thought is not, unlike the case of mathematics, readily available. Typically in mathematics, there is (apart from elementary instruction) no clear distinction between performer and audience, only a mathematician can really enjoy and appreciate a mathematical presentation. But in history, if not quite as pronounced as in the reading of literature, there is a sharper demarcation between those who write history, and those who merely read and enjoy. Also the latter is far more numerous than the former, and in particular a given individual, even if an historian, probably spends more time as a passive consumer than as an active researcher.

Only half of the volume is devoted to the principles of history. Most of the material

⁴ And this also goes for our everyday observation, everything we see and observe, is the result of a confirmation of a hypothesis. We see as much as we need. We see more when we need more.

⁵ Collingwood is in particular critical of the biography, which according to him is not history but entertainment; its critical concern being with gossip, allowing the reader the pleasure of vicariously leading the life of another, at a safe distance. Rejoicing in desires being met or thwarted, depending on his basic attitude to the subject.

consists in fragments, providing tantalizing glimpses of more ambitious ventures, which never came to fruition, partly because of the aborted life-span of the author. There is a lot of polemics against the idea of treating history as a natural science, something which was initiated during the Enlightenment. Mind is not matter, and as previously remarked, Collingwood had a special animus against psychology, which, if consistent, needed to treat mind as something mindless and primitive⁶. It is clear that Collingwood nourishes a certain fascination for physics mixed with envy and resentment. His mathematical and temperamental gifts and background not being up to par he was reduced to an impotent spectator, most of his insights refracted through the philosophical works of a Whitehead or an Alexander. Yet he was able to sense that the idea of matter had undergone a profound revolution in the early 20th century, that the idea of matter as being something permanent and solid bequeathed to us by the ancient Greeks, was being superseded by a far more abstract and vague notion. That in fact as physics progressed, physical reality became more and more idealistic and at least in some vulgar sense more and more dependent on the observer and the interpreter. Ideas, which must have delighted him, gratifying as they were to his philosophical outlook.

As with Popper one may ask whether Collingwood was a relativist, a post-modernist in contemporary usage. Their emphasis on the provisional nature of knowledge, that nothing is definitely settled, might indicate this. On the other hand there is after all a difference between epistemology and ontology, the latter being of a metaphysical nature. Both Popper and Collingwood embraced metaphysics as an inevitable context to all philosophical and scientific enquiry, without claiming that it could also be the subject of the same. There is truth, it might not be accessible to us humans, at least not fully only asymptotically. The past exists independently of us, Collingwood claims, and it is eternal as well, in the fact of having once occurred⁷. Our ideas of the past may change, but that does not mean that the past has changed, the past imposes bounds on our interpretations of it, but as with all inductive inquiry, there is always a large latitude as to the permissible. Each age, and each historian have their own prejudices, and in a slightly more frivolous piece, Collingwood argues that not only is prejudice unavoidable, it is also useful. Prejudice gives to the task an urgency and a passion, in addition to a specific perspective with its concomitant questions. It allows the historian to work hard and probe deeper than he would be able, had he been indifferent to the material. Because lack of prejudice implies, if anything, indifference and ignorance. History is about human thought, and it is impossible to treat thought without value judgement. Values is not just about good or evil, it is also about wisdom and stupidity, ardor and indifference, energy and lethargy. In fact to understand the thought and motivation of a historical actor, in order to recreate the thought, you need to engage in it and judge it. Judge whether it was wise or foolish, brave or cowardly, sincere or duplicitous, because this is what makes thoughts interesting. Thus in particular, to take a later example, not really available to Collingwood; it would

⁶ Incidentally this echoes my own instinctive aversion against the discipline in my early teens. The idea of reducing the 'soul' to something so prosaic. The guarding against having your secrets revealed and thus stolen.

⁷ This reminds us of the mathematical trick of making a function independent of time, by making time a variable.

not be possible to write a history of the Third Reich without taking a moral stand, be it for or against. A completely impartial account, such as one may make of the progress of an Atlantic hurricane, would not be history, but a piece of natural history, and as such missing the point altogether. At least as long as one is not able to reduce mind to matter, and hence subsume human history into natural history. A possibility of which fills most people with dread and foreboding, as it would seem to strip human life of ethics altogether, by making the latter meaningless. And history, according to Collingwood, being concerned with human thought, is also about conduct and hence ethics. Indeed if history teaches us anything, beyond the fact that it cannot, is to illuminate to us the nature of ethics; because after all history is about mans self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is ultimately about ethics.

April 4, 2010 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se