

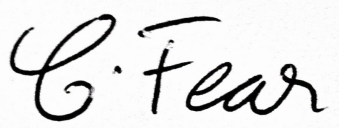
Old Problems Re-opened

R. G. Collingwood and the History of Ideas

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.



Signed

Dated

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Abbreviations

Works by R. G. Collingwood	Date of first publication
RP	<i>Religion and Philosophy</i> (1916)
SM	<i>Speculum Mentis</i> (1924)
EPM	<i>An Essay on Philosophical Method</i> (1933)
PA	<i>The Principles of Art</i> (1938)
A	<i>An Autobiography</i> (1939)
EM	<i>An Essay on Metaphysics</i> (1940)
NL	<i>The New Leviathan - or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism</i> (1942)
IH	<i>The Idea of History</i> (1946)
EPH	<i>Essays in the Philosophy of History</i> (1965)
EPP	<i>Essays in Political Philosophy</i> (1989)
PH	<i>The Principles of History and other writings in philosophy of history</i> (1999)
L26	'Lectures on the Philosophy of History' [1926] (1993)

All other works referred to by title. See bibliography for full publication details.

My title refers primarily to the following passage in Collingwood's *Autobiography*:

But of course it was no longer a 'closed' subject. It was no longer a body of facts which a very, very learned man might know, or a very, very big book enumerate, in their completeness. It was an 'open' subject, an inexhaustible fountain of problems, old problems re-opened and new problems formulated that had not been formulated until now. Above all, it was a constant warfare against the dogmas, often positively erroneous, and always vicious in so far as they were dogmatic, of that putrefying corpse of historical thought, the 'information' to be found in text-books.¹

It refers also to an earlier passage from Collingwood's essay 'Croce's Philosophy of History':

In the past the Oxford "Greats" school has stood for this ideal of the cross-fertilisation of history and philosophy, even when the coordination of the two sides has been worst, and the undergraduate has seemed to be merely reading two different schools at once, under tutors who regarded each other as rivals for his attention; but in the future the whole question will be reopened, and philosophy may either contract a new alliance with the natural sciences, or retire into single blessedness as an independent subject like Forestry or Geography, or force herself into the company of Modern History, disguised perhaps under the inoffensive name of Political Theory.²

It refers also to a passage in *An Essay on Metaphysics*: "It represented the typical nineteenth-century conviction that all questions about fundamentals had been settled and must on no account be reopened".³

¹ *A*, p. 75

² *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, William Debbins (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), p. 5

³ *EM*, p. 96

Conventions

It is greatly to the liberty of the author that doctoral theses may be written without the obligations and limitations of a house style guide. I have eschewed certain stylistic conventions of contemporary writing here for the sake of what I hope will be easy reading. The third person singular is given throughout as ‘he’, and the reader referred to as ‘he’, without any intended gender-political message. By using ‘he’ I do not intend to deny that women exist, that they read, or that they make equally wonderful academics; and I do not think that this traditional usage retards the legitimate causes of truly liberal feminism.

I have left contracted forms – can’t, couldn’t, shouldn’t, etc. – as they are in the spoken language of the world’s native English speakers, and as they are to be found in the written works of Thomas Hardy, Thomas Hobbes, and William Shakespeare. I have also not made a rule of it, but have allowed context, emphasis, and tone to inform the decision to use ‘have not’ rather than ‘haven’t, or *vice versa*.

I have eschewed as far as possible the jargon that is to be encountered at least somewhere in all of philosophy’s subfields. If ‘jargon’ is technical language disliked, ‘technical language’ is too often jargon legitimized by would-be technocratic experts. I hope that this means the reader will never have to ask himself ‘What does he mean?’, and that he will enjoy the benefit of seeing any errors of reasoning in the plain light of day, rather than suffer the need to decode my prose in order to discover them. There are, in Collingwood scholarship, debates over whether (and if so how) Collingwood should be referred to as an ‘idealist’, an ‘Hegelian’, a ‘Kantian’, or whether (and if so how) his philosophy is to be read as ‘historicist’, ‘dialectical’, and so on. I have not entered these debates here, and this is part of the reason why I have avoided these contested terms as far as I have been able to. For the philosophically-trained they can be misleading unless used with sometimes extensive qualification, and for the philosophically-untrained reader they are discouraging. Collingwood’s philosophy can be explicated without such terms – as his own writings demonstrate.

The full titles of most of Collingwood’s published books begin with the word ‘*The*’ or ‘*An*’: *The Idea of History*, *The Principles of History*, *An Autobiography*. Much of the time I have taken the liberty of dropping the article for the sake of normal English usage. So I have sometimes referred to ‘Collingwood’s *Autobiography*’, ‘his *Autobiography*’, ‘the *Autobiography*’, and so on. Likewise I have sometimes referred to ‘his *Essay on Philosophical Method*’, though the full title is *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. I have preferred this small modification to the awkward formulation ‘Collingwood’s *An Essay on Philosophical Method*’. The convention of other Collingwood commentators is to retain the full title with article, though there have also been some who, I think unwisely, crop *The Idea of History* at the wrong end, resulting in *The Idea*. (Compared with such usages I doubt the reader will find my omission of articles very confusing.)

Double quotation marks are reserved throughout for direct quotation, and single quotation marks for everything else including ‘scare quoting’.¹ In quotation I have left all punctuation marks as they appear in the original. I have silently changed upper-case letters into lower-case where the beginning of a sentence is being incorporated into a running sentence of my own, unless I’ve thought meaning to be affected, in which case I’ve simply retained original capitalization even in the middle of sentences. I’ve used scare quotes for ‘question and answer’ in order to hold it together as a kind of concept, and where I have omitted them it’s because I’ve used the term in full as ‘the logic of question and answer’ or ‘the theory of question and answer’. And I have hyphenated it (as question-and-answer, usually without quotation marks) according to the norms of compound adjectives.

¹ An example of this working nicely is A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* [1999] (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

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One cannot go through the process of writing a doctoral thesis without acquiring many friends, much good guidance, many valuable recommendations (and warnings), and – if one is lucky – some really inspiring enemies. One can never do them all full justice, either in acknowledgement or in the execution of what their advice envisaged. To my supervisors Prof. Iain Hampsher-Monk and Dr Edward Skidelsky are due thanks for their general guidance and advice on all my work including what appears here, and for checking that I have always said what I meant and meant what I've said. To Dr Robert Lamb I owe thanks for his comments on early thoughts and notes concerning the imaginary conversations between Collingwood, Skinner, and Mark Bevir, and for his encouragement to publish some of my work in the field. To Keith Sutherland I owe gratitude for helping me to get hold of otherwise hard-to-reach research materials. As well as to the teachings of these men, whatever traces of academic professionalism are to be found here are due to the examples of Dr Robin Douglass, Dr Christopher Nathan, and Stuart Ingham; while for comments and exchanges of various kinds that have significantly improved the content of this study compared to what it would otherwise have been I must also thank Prof. Dr Martin van Gelderen, Dr Dr h. c. Hans Erich Bödeker, and Miss Kate Berrisford. For the remaining mistakes and failures of the present work I embrace full responsibility.

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So it is necessary, as I have said, that men who live together in any sort of institution regularly take stock of themselves, either as a result of external shocks or of internal factors... and my claim is that those changes are healthy that bring them back to their founding principles.

– Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (ca. 1517)¹

So his exposition of this work not seldom betrays a tone of resentment against the persons who ought to be doing it: a resentment due to the fact that their neglect of their own work has forced him to do something for which he feels that he is not qualified and in which he accordingly fears that he is making a fool of himself.

– R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1939)²

¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses* Book III, ch. 1. David Wootton (ed. and trans.), *Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 190-1, 189

² *EM*, p. 87

Part I

Introductions

Each autumn, in universities from Cardiff to Sydney, young men and women in their late teens or early twenties find themselves in seminar rooms invited to discuss the writings of long-dead European males (mostly males) concerning events and situations that are no longer happening. But these young people are not history students. They are not literature students either, necessarily. They are politics undergraduates. Many of them are already political activists of some shade and some of them, when all this is over, will want to ‘go out’ into the world and make changes to it. They have come to get equipped for the dangers of real-life political action¹; to get a politics degree which might make them attractive candidates for civil service positions or for an assistantship at party HQ. They are equipping for the *future*, they want to know about the *future*, and they want to be prepared for the currents in which they will soon have to swim: the networks, hierarchies and channels of influence in conjunction with which they will have to operate – present networks, today’s hierarchies and perhaps even tomorrow’s. Yet here they are, engaging not only with today’s political problems, but with yesterday’s, or with those of several centuries past; with Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, and with a whole cast of authors whose works and words belong, as they soon realise, to the problems of their own time, and seem to offer very little for the solution of today’s. Even on the level of ideology, the challenges of Hobbes, of Rousseau, or of Burke to current thinking are weakened by attendant contexts that are no longer happening, by their ill-suitedness to popular revival, and by their undemocratic obsolescence.

This is not new, of course. We’ve been doing this to undergraduates for generations. And whether they realise it or not, they are being initiated into the outer circle of a very old society. It is called the ‘History of Political Thought’, or the ‘History of Political Theory’, or the ‘History of Ideas’, ‘Great Texts’, ‘Greats’, or some variant thereof. Its outer circle is a teaching space where familiarity with the canon is cultivated, some sense of ideological heritage insinuated, and where some of the rudimentary techniques of the brotherhood are tenderly bequeathed. But this is really only the surface.

¹ *NL*, 2.52-3; 28.1

Deeper within there are initiates who ‘stayed behind’, who continue to read, analyse and pursue understanding of the canon (eventually they even dispense with the idea of the canon), and they stay up late, arguing with each other across the centuries, crossing analyses and challenging the legitimacy of each other’s genealogies. There are also those who, as well as all this, discuss the very techniques they use in their vocation, attempt to sort out who is doing it well, and who is doing it badly; try to formulate clarifications of what it means to do it well, and why doing it that way rather than this way perverts the whole endeavour. It is inevitable that there should be this subgroup of meta-operators: as history produces questions about not only the past but also about itself, so this apparent sub-discipline, the history of ideas, does the same. Questions arise about not only past ways of thinking, but also about, (1) how we should or should not be carrying out our studies of those thinkers, and (2) why we should be doing so at all. These are two questions which seem to me to arise out of any engagement with this discipline inevitably, however qualified and however fleeting or otherwise that contact might be. Certainly those undergraduates ask themselves and each other why they are being led around this museum of curiosities, how they should navigate it, and why the museum exists at all – though the outer circle is not considered an appropriate place for that kind of discussion.

The present study is an attempt to make sense of some of what has been heard in these ‘inner-circle’ arguments in the history of political thought, carried out by one who has only relatively recently been able to progress from the outer circle, but who still regularly returns there on pedagogical duties.

Questions

The two questions we open with are, then:

1. *How* ought the history of ideas to be done? and
2. *Why* ought the history of ideas to be done?

Because the history of ideas concerns itself overwhelmingly with the study of the written word, recent decades have seen certain of these questions (but mostly the first one, concerning how exactly we should be doing it) answered by recruiting the sophisticated and often technical kind of philosophy of language that arose following the Second World War. What historians of political thought are doing, one might for instance answer, is actually revealing or illustrating linguistic paradigms and the story of them. They should be analysing changes in political ‘languages’.

But the second question, which concerns the purpose or value of the history of ideas, is just as important. Why should there be historians of political thought? And why should politics undergraduates, whose parents and society at large think of them as preparing for the future, be at all interested in old debates that no longer seem relevant, or be made to ‘engage’ with the past at all?

This seems to me to be at the present time quite a pressing question. Most parochially, patterns of resource distribution have changed quite noticeably in Western universities, particularly in the UK, as society thinks its needs are evolving, and there’s a common feeling that the humanities are not profiting from these developments. There is a general sense that, as university education becomes more vocational, a focus on ‘soft’ subjects like history, philosophy, and other ‘theoretical’ disciplines puts a graduate seeking immediate employment at a disadvantage beside candidates boasting a background in ‘hard’ sciences, or in engineering, or in mathematics – applied or otherwise. ‘Soft’ subjects don’t teach you how to make anything, or how to sell anything. They are, so popular thinking seems to assume, luxury subjects.

It is no longer much of a surprise that the value of certain academic subjects should suffer regular reassessment, or that the humanities disciplines in particular are never far from the very top of the reappraisal hit-list. Many of my colleagues consider this to be a regrettable inevitability in a philistine society where those who set the political

agenda are predominantly ‘practical people’, vocational people, and where people are in the unconscious utilitarian habit of asking what everything is ‘for’. Most of my colleagues, however delicately they might put it, think this practical thinking is out of place with regard to disciplines like the history of political thought. They think of it as a low-brow category error, and would rather there were certain disciplines that were respected and transferred unquestioned, while continuing to enjoy generous public funding wherever else it were reduced or cut, even if those practices do not fit comfortably with the language of ends, means, and purposive action.

I think my colleagues are wrong to think that there are some academic disciplines that shouldn’t have their value and purpose questioned, and I think their arguments for the protection of important disciplines can be more convincing than they usually are. The history of political thought has a great weapon in its versatility. We have already seen that it can change its name. It can also reposition itself among the quasi-systematic organisation of ‘fields’ that comprises academia. If philosophy falls, the history of political thought stays standing, not as philosophy, but as *history*. And if history comes under attack next, history of political thought can be repositioned as an essential part of *political* education, and politics is not really ‘soft’. (There is, after all, such a thing as political science.) But it is entirely healthy that a society reappraise the actions and behaviours that go on within it, and in its name. It is entirely normal for a community to prioritize its activities when the option of maintaining all is no longer available, and it is democratically healthy that discussions of this nature, within a community, be held openly, frankly, and responsibly. We don’t need democratic government to survive, or even to be happy; but if for whatever reason we are attached to it, we should realise that that difficult system depends on people thinking beyond their own interest group and discussing the public good properly, and acting according to good reason – rather than simply making pleas for their interest group and acting according to appetite.¹

This second question, ‘Why ought the history of ideas to be done?’, is, then, typically answered in different sorts of discussion from those in which historians and philosophers answer questions of historical method. Thus these ‘methodological debates’ in the history of ideas, asking what historians are (not) doing, and what they ought (not) to be doing, are in state of rude academic health. But the question of why the discipline should be maintained at all is mostly left aside for magazine articles and so on. And even

¹ See *NL*, 21.2-23

if a good answer to that question is given, it will not typically be clear how it relates to those ‘methodological’ discussions.

I have found during the present study that this disconnection of the ‘why’ question from the ‘how’ question is not a necessary one, and that ideas concerning ‘how’ history is done can be bound, and bound profitably, to ideas about why it is done in the first place. Indeed, it is common sense that you don’t know the right way to do something until you know what you’re doing it for. If the aims of an endeavour change, then the best means for achieving them should surely change as well.

I have started dozens of hares already, and a study of this length cannot hope to catch all of them for good by the close. It is anyway not my intention to do so. I want rather to direct the reader’s attention to one past contributor to this warren of questioning who is generally considered to be of some importance to the ways in which subsequent answers have been offered and arranged during the last sixty years.

ii

Why study Collingwood?

The Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy (1935-41) and historian (and archaeologist and amateur yachtsman), R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) is at once a late figure of ‘British idealism’, though he accepted the label only reluctantly,¹ and an early figure in these twentieth-century ‘methodological debates’ in the history of ideas.² His writings in the philosophy of history have a lasting appeal, not only because his thinking so obviously springs from the everyday experience of a working historian with earth under his fingernails, but also because, despite the air of straightforwardness and philosophical freedom with which he writes, Collingwood aspires to formulate a philosophy of history grounded ‘in its own past’.³ It is towards this end that he draws on

¹ *A*, pp. 56-7. The best response to debates over Collingwood’s ‘idealism’ is probably to be offered by quoting in full *NL*, 5.2-39

² Or at least, he is cited as an influence or inspiration by some later contributors. See for example Quentin Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action,’ *Political Theory*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Aug., 1974), pp. 283-4. See also Richard Tuck, ‘The Contribution of History’, in Robert E. Goodin & Philip Pettit (eds) *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1993) pp. 72-89

³ Fred Inglis describes Collingwood’s “exasperation” at the “routine professional error, which was to argue with past thinkers as though they all – Plato, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, and company – were there together in Oxford in 1912”. And adds that it became Collingwood’s life’s work “to archaeologise the foundations of belief, and to do so by excavating the strata of belief-formation as these were made visible in the morphology of differing, adjacent, and interpenetrating disciplines of the mind”. See Fred Inglis, *History Man: The Life of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 74, 91

his broad and detailed knowledge of the history of the philosophy of history. And if we cannot share his breadth and depth of knowledge, we can at least take inspiration from the approach.

It was because of the breadth of Collingwood's knowledge of other thinkers that I, unlike most Collingwood scholars, first came to him in his capacity as a secondary author. I was interested in what *The Idea of History*, which I had come across more or less by chance, had to tell me about German philosophy of history from Hegel onwards. But it was what I found in Part V of *The Idea of History* – the 'Epilegomena' containing Collingwood's own philosophy – that caught my attention and quickly superseded in my interest what I had until then been looking for. Surveying from the present the history of the philosophy of history, one's attention is held rather longer by what Collingwood offers: intriguing claims – sometimes bold, sometimes suggestive; a refreshingly direct, frank and personal style; and a backstory to these works which reveals an unceasingly active man digging with the local archaeology society, yachting on the Mediterranean, and working on his books in decidedly 'holiday' settings – under the plane trees on the terrace of a French country house; on the deck of a cruise ship bound for the Dutch East Indies; or in a sweltering hotel room in Surabaya. There is an undeniable romance about Collingwood's story to which even his most focused and analytic commentators find it hard to remain immune.¹

Past romances, of course, don't carry the urgency of present realities. But it is not on romantic grounds that I'm returning to Collingwood. It is because he is now generally recognised as a founding figure of the twentieth-century English-language tradition of the philosophical problems thrown up by historical interpretation. It is probably not surprising that his voice is echoed in today's debates about how history and historical interpretation are to be done. Today's contributors working in English are almost always familiar with Collingwood, many still cite him explicitly, and some even identify him as the author who ignited their interest in problems of this kind in the first place.² The common ground of today's 'intentionalists'³ with Collingwood, if not their debt to him, is probably the most obvious: understanding an action, for Collingwood, means

¹ See W. J. van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 61, 128. See also Inglis, *History Man*, p. 138, and Tomlin, *R. G. Collingwood* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953), p. 37

² Dussen provides a brief overview of Collingwood's reception between the publication of *The Idea of History* and his own time of writing (1981). See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 2

³ See for example (and for my understanding of the meaning of the term 'intentionalist') Mark Bevir, 'How to Be an Intentionalist', *History and Theory* vol. 41, no. 2 (May, 2002), pp. 209-17

understanding the agent's intention, what he was trying to do – or, for understanding a text, what he was trying to say. The common ground of the school known commonly as the 'Cambridge School' or, a little more technically, as 'linguistic contextualists' – such as J. G. A. Pocock, and especially Quentin Skinner – is perhaps less obvious, despite their own claims. Each of these schools has brought considerations to the study of historical texts that are not to be found in Collingwood. But from what follows I think it should be obvious to the reader that the big foundational claims of some of today's writers are (also) Collingwood's.

Among scholars of British Idealism Collingwood is today very extensively, very regularly and, I think, very skilfully discussed. It was once normal to describe Collingwood as a neglected thinker. It then became merely *possible* to say this. It would now be quite untrue. There is an ever-growing body of literature focused on Collingwood, and I think of an unusually high average standard for that focused on a single thinker.¹ So now Collingwood's exact meaning when he says such-and-such is the subject of innumerable articles; the precise nature of his relationship with, or influence by, whomsoever-you-please is the cause of much dispute, and his thinking on history specifically is the focus of a handful of brilliant works that could, or even should, be considered masterpieces of philosophy in their own right. (I have in mind particularly Alan Donagan's *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*.) But most Collingwood scholars are primarily interested in the ideas of the man himself, and not as much with what the implications might be of Collingwood's ideas for those still writing on recognisably continuous problems.² So another reason for selecting Collingwood for an extended study of this kind is that both of these fields – which are perhaps less well-acquainted than would be to their mutual benefit – might have something to gain, in however small a way, from their co-involvement in the same inquiry. That is, at least, the hope.

Some of the arguments Collingwood offers support positions that are now very much in retreat. The main one of interest to us here is that history is, or can be, a *science*. What is at stake in such a claim makes it worth revisiting. Jan van der Dussen has recently written that “in the present postmodern era a claim such as this is completely

¹ This is due largely to the research community of the Collingwood and British Idealism Centre based since 2000 at Cardiff University, which publishes the *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* journal (*Incorporating Bradley Studies*) and in 2004 produced a fine series of books on Collingwood by James Connelly, Marnie Hughes-Warrington, and Stein Helgeby. (See bibliography)

² There are of course plenty of exceptions to this rule. Gary Browning, for instance, devotes fifteen pages of his *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood* to comparing/applying Collingwood's arguments to those of Rawls, Lyotard, and MacIntyre. See Gary K. Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood: Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.154-69

disregarded and even ridiculed on the grounds that history is a branch of literature without any scientific pretensions. It is remarkable”, he adds, “that Collingwood scholars themselves have hardly paid attention to this claim”.¹ Here I have paid nearly exclusive attention to what Collingwood says about history as a science, a form of systematic inquiry – or what Dussen calls “historical reasoning”. In relation to present debates about the history of ideas, the importance of this is further underlined by Dussen – albeit a little dramatically:

It is conspicuous... that in the present theoretical studies on history the relevance of historical reasoning is hardly noticed. This has an obvious reason, of course. For because of the notorious ‘linguistic turn’ in historical theory, the interest in historical reasoning and inquiry has almost vanished, history being reduced to story-telling without any claim to truth or relevance.²

According to Collingwood, “a philosophy which ignores its own history is a philosophy which spends its labour only to rediscover errors long dead”.³ It is with this in mind that I’m returning us to the writings of this dead European male to ask, first, how he answered those questions and, secondly, once those answers have been disentangled, whether they were (and are) good and right answers.

We must establish first that those questions *are* the same. Collingwood’s ‘Lectures on the Philosophy of History’ of 1926 are set out explicitly with our present questions in mind.⁴ Collingwood outlines his questions as follows. (The present study is concerned with only the first two.) The reader will see instantly the correspondences and differences between what he wanted to answer in 1926 regarding history and what I want him to answer now regarding the history of ideas:

The fundamental question is, what are we doing when we study history? and this raises three allied questions: (1) What are we doing it *for*? in other words, how does this study fit into our general view of the aims and purposes of human life? (2) What is the best way of doing it? in other words, what are the principles of method by which historical study is or ought to be guided? (3)

¹ Jan van der Dussen, ‘Collingwood’s Claim that History is a Science’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 7-8

² Dussen, ‘Collingwood’s Claim’, p. 30

³ *EPH*, p. 4

⁴ In *IH*, pp. 359-425. The questions are, though, retained in the introduction to *The Idea of History*. See *IH*, pp. 9-10

What are we doing it *to*? in other words, what is the true nature of the thing which we call the past, which historical thought takes as its object?¹

Now, where Collingwood's questions concern history in general, our questions concern the history of ideas specifically. But Collingwood is especially useful to our inquiry because, for him, *all* history is the history of thought.² Historical knowledge of ideas is to be found not only in historical texts as expressions of theories and doctrines, but also in the ground, through artefacts, and in anything that was evidence of human action. The effect of this is that anything Collingwood says about history is to be taken as pertaining directly to the history of ideas, and therefore to our questions about it.

But I don't only want to know what Collingwood said. I want to know whether what he said was right. There is a certain disobedience to this, as there is to all Collingwood scholarship, because in his *Autobiography* Collingwood expressly instructed that "if there are any who think my work good, let them show their approval of it by attending to their own".³ All Collingwood scholars have, in one way or another, ignored their orders. Alan Donagan opens his classic study of 1962, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, by saying so quite explicitly, "because it seemed to me that I could not economically proceed with my own work until I had taken stock of his".⁴ I cannot pretend to have taken stock as comprehensively or as masterfully as Donagan has – or as W. J. (Jan) van der Dussen has, or as W. (William) H. Dray has, or as has been achieved by Louis O. Mink, or by any of a cast of Collingwood scholars whose works, even after my years spent referring to them repeatedly, remain impressive and intriguing to me, as well as to an embarrassing extent in places beyond my grasp. The ever-growing variety of books and articles written about Collingwood offer a further, albeit 'academic' reason,⁵ to revisit him. The field is rich, but not unmanageably saturated. It is also not free of error, and the present study contains explanations of what I think is the general character of some of those errors. Sometimes these explanations prove to be worth expanding on.

My priority however has been to focus in on those questions broached by Collingwood that already interested me, and which I think are important. I have then gone as far in my thinking on them and how Collingwood dealt with them as time, energy, and intellect would allow. The result, I think, breaks Collingwood's instruction in

¹ L26, published in *IH*, p. 359

² *A*, p. 110

³ *A*, pp. 118-19

⁴ Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. vii

⁵ See *NL*, 2.5-55, 26.22

subject matter, but aspires to obey it in the ethic of autonomous practice¹ – which is the usual method, I suppose, of apprenticeship.

As such, what follows here is an instance of the overlap of two categories of Collingwood scholarship that have been described as “pure” and “applied”.² The ‘pure’ parts concern what Collingwood means, and what sense of it has been made by other commentators. The ‘applied’ interrogates his conclusions and those of others.

My expectation was that the ‘pure’ part, understanding and describing Collingwood’s arguments, would be reasonably easy. His works, on first reading, give the impression of philosophical simplicity bordering on the simplistic. But on further investigation this impression evaporates. Louis Mink is right to say that “the essays collected as “Epilegomena” in *The Idea of History* are in fact very difficult to understand and elucidate, although the full extent of their difficulty is concealed by the grace of their style and the often compelling qualities of the *obiter dicta* so often quoted from them”.³ It probably demands very little supporting argument to say that it is inherently right to establish what an important thinker *really* meant by what he said. There will probably always be a need to do this with Collingwood, since his writings really invite different understandings among his readers. Those writings are lucid, inviting, and graceful – but, as William H. Dray observes, they are “not always careful. They do not exhibit that love of exact language which analytic philosophers have since made *de rigueur*.”⁴ Collingwood generally avoids technical language out of his preference for communicating meaning through context, (in accordance with the norms of literature⁵); and when he does use technical language it can be even more misleading.⁶ “It thus sometimes requires a certain amount of patience”, Dray writes, “and even of goodwill, to elicit a sensible and coherent doctrine from what Collingwood actually has to say”.⁷ A lot of what Collingwood says in answer to our opening questions, for example, and a lot of what is ‘methodological’

¹ This is also the approach taken by Donagan. According to Collingwood’s own principle (*IH*, p. 301), Donagan says, “in presenting what I believe to have been Collingwood’s thought, I have tried to be critical; and on all major questions to which I think his answer was wrong I give my reasons for thinking so”. Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 21-2

² See David Boucher’s editorial introduction to *EPP*, p. 1. Boucher’s description is neat: “Without wishing to be flippant, or to suggest the mutual exclusiveness of categories... the former [is] concerned to understand, in all its complexity, what Collingwood means... while the latter interrogates Collingwood’s conclusions, modifies and develops them, and applies them to concrete philosophical problems.” He adds in a footnote “The concerns are complementary, and neither is illegitimate, nor takes priority over the other.”

³ Louis O. Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 157

⁴ Dray, *History as Re-enactment* [1995] (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), p. 27

⁵ *EPM*, pp. 201-208

⁶ For examples see Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, p. 27

⁷ Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, p. 31

about it, is covered by his phrase ‘historical thinking’. It is a non-technical term which sometimes contains, is sometimes contained in, and is sometimes synonymous with, other terms including ‘scientific history’, ‘history as a science’, ‘thinking historically’, ‘historical thought’, ‘historical knowledge’, and ‘understanding’. I have offered in the present study an explanation of what Collingwood means by such terms and when he means *this* (whatever it is) rather than *that*.

The ‘applied’ part has obliged me to press some of Collingwood’s claims rather harder than would be normal in ‘pure’ scholarship. This is despite the temptation to extend more sympathy to an author’s arguments than that argument perhaps deserves, when one sympathises with other of his contentions.¹ There is an attendant temptation to assume that, if a great author seems to be wrong about something, one must have misunderstood him.² In such a case the endeavour to reach a point of understanding where full agreement is reached can turn out to be never-ending. There is also the more malignant temptation to accuse those who criticise one’s author of employing the wrong kind of thinking.³ This is partly what sustains the perceived rift between contemporary ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy. This study is not carried out with either an ‘analytic’ or a ‘continental’ approach in mind. The reader is being offered everyday reasoning⁴ with no special pleading for the exclusive appropriateness of any particular tradition.

I have made the decision not to arrange the ‘pure’ and the ‘applied’ separately. Instead I have described and assessed Collingwood’s arguments more or less simultaneously. By ‘arguments’ I mean his answers to the questions I’ve opened with and the reasoning he offers to support them. My initial plan was to describe those answers in the first part of the study, and then to return to them in the second with a fresh ‘evaluative’ attitude. The arguments about ‘what he thought’, which are essentially historical arguments, could then be tidily separated from the ‘was he right?’ arguments. I’ve decided, in the end, that this expects the reader to carry too much detail in his

¹ Marnie Hughes-Warrington is particularly sympathetic about Collingwood’s tenuous connexion of history to civilization via dutiful action. See Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *How Good an Historian Shall I Be?* R.G. Collingwood, the Historical Imagination and Education (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2003), pp. 168-69, 178

² W. H. Dray is to be commended as an example of a commentator who is not afraid to say when he thinks Collingwood is wrong about something. See for example Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, pp. 72-80

³ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, for example, writes that “Problematic too are the views of concepts that are commonly coupled with the analytic approach, which are not sufficiently expansive and dynamic to match Collingwood’s contribution to philosophical thought”. Hughes-Warrington, p. 8

⁴ By ‘reason’ I follow Collingwood in meaning plainly “thinking one thing, *x*, because you think another thing, *y*; where *y* is your ‘reason’ or, as it is sometimes called, your ‘ground’ for thinking *x*”. (NL, 14. 1) To Collingwood’s own basic definition of ‘reason’, a distinction between ‘continental’ and ‘analytic’ reasoning does not pertain. All that is important, in either ‘style’, is whether thinking *y* is a good reason for thinking *x*.

memory from one half of the study to the other, and thereby expects the reader to do much of the organizational work that really ought to have been mine. Dussen's *History as a Science* exhibits this division and, although it works perfectly well there, I found myself constantly flicking back to Dussen's descriptive sections when I was really trying to grasp his own arguments on the same point much later in the book. So the organizational principle here is to keep what is being discussed together in one place, rather than to disperse points across the study in order to unite the descriptive attitude in one place and the evaluative in another. It is anyway easy enough for the reader to realise that when I say something like 'Collingwood's mistake is presupposing x ', I am simultaneously claiming that he thinks x (the description), and that thinking x was a mistake (the evaluation).

iii

Conception and design of the study

It is quite common practice today to 'offer a reading' of an author, or of a particular school of thought or argument. If this were my intention then I would introduce my 'reading' here by claiming that 'question and answer' is the key concept, and that everything should be 'read through' the theory of question and answer. I might add that the study was an 'attempt' (they are often 'attempts') to take the theory of question and answer seriously.

I have avoided the language of 'offering a reading' here because of dissatisfactions with what often results from that kind of task. A 'reading' can be made very easily to operate as an academic smokescreen behind which things can be said without the usual requirements of evidence which would not have been permitted without the cover a 'reading' affords. A commentator can say that he is offering a 'reading', for example, when he really wants to suggest that this (whatever it is) is what his author meant. But because it is only a 'reading' of the author's texts, and not a full historical claim about his intentions, the commentator is not required to offer much in the way of evidence to demonstrate that this is what the author did in fact mean. Providing a 'reading', in short, can be used as cover for perpetuating what Mink has

called a ‘fictional’ version of a thinker.¹ Meanwhile the ‘reading’ being offered can function as a more substantive philosophical argument which demands that a certain set of conclusions be ‘taken seriously’. But, because it is only the commentator’s ‘reading’ of what an author is saying, or what ‘light’ he throws on the issue, and not necessarily that commentator’s own argument, he can offer it without any new reasons for thinking that conclusion sound. Of course the language of a ‘reading’ can be used, and has been used, to refer quite explicitly to an historical claim, or a philosophical claim that is the author’s own, and excellent scholarship can result. But it is because I am aware of these ambiguities permitted by offering ‘readings’ that I have chosen to avoid saying that that is what I’m doing.

I have instead tried to do the exact opposite. I have argued that Collingwood’s conclusions are philosophically strong, but that the arguments which, as a matter of historical assertion, he tried and succeeded in offering, are not as strong as they could have been in view of his own logic of question and answer. Collingwood is at the height of his philosophical powers when he argues by reference to ‘question and answer’, so where he failed to do so I have said so, and have then shown how arguing by recourse to the logic of question and answer can demonstrate the sense of Collingwood’s answer anyway.

‘Question and answer’ is, then, the central ‘thread’ from which the ensuing arguments and discussions presented here have been hung. Because ‘question and answer’ figures so centrally, I have devoted Part II to explaining what it is, what Collingwood says about it, and what is additionally valuable about it.

With Part II out of the way and the theory of question and answer explained and discussed, we return in Part III to Collingwood’s particular arguments about history. I have not sought to discuss every argument and every point made in Collingwood’s writings about history, since the attempt to do so in a work of this length would be suffocating for reader and author alike. I have instead selected those arguments which are important (a) because they have a significant presence in Collingwood scholarship and there are, or have been, debates about them which I think I can help to resolve; (b) because they offer something to contemporary debates about the history of ideas as they are still being carried out; or (c) because they are correct and valuable points, even

¹ Mink explains: “By ‘fictional’, of course, I mean the sense in which Shakespeare’s or Shaw’s Julius Caesar is fictional, not that in which Mr. Pickwick is fictional. The fictional Collingwood is not an invention but an interpretation”. Louis O. Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism: A Dialectic of Process’, in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 155

though nobody seems to be talking about them anymore. Of course some of Collingwood's arguments about history fall into more than one of these categories. I've also given a short summary of what some other Collingwood commentators have said about 'question and answer' in relation to Collingwood's philosophy of history. The priority of the present study is to understand and evaluate what Collingwood says, so my general rule has been to discuss other commentators only in so far as doing so helps to give the reader some sense of the significance in Collingwood scholarship of what is being said here.¹

The arguments of Collingwood's that I've selected for my own discussion divide into two classes. The first class, which forms the subject matter of Part III, comprises those arguments of Collingwood's about history 'generically';² while the second class, which forms the subject matter of Part V, comprises those arguments of Collingwood's about the history of ideas/history of philosophy/history of political thought specifically. I've already said that Collingwood considers all history to be the history of thought. The division between history 'generically' and the history of ideas specifically is therefore one I am imposing artificially for my own purposes, and if the reader doesn't like it he can at least take comfort from seeing that I have been quite explicit about the fact. I've mapped what today's historians of ideas mean by the subject-matter of their discipline onto what Collingwood means when he discusses the history of philosophy, or the history of political theory.³ It seems to me that, from the point of view of the history of political thought, Collingwood's arguments about history generically are interestingly also those that are *presupposed* by historians of ideas, rather than discussed by them. Conversely those arguments I have sorted into the second category, pertaining more specifically to the history of ideas, are those that are more contentious among professionals, and which they are mostly still arguing over in print.

The actual points dealt with in Part III are (i-xiii) history as a distinct science; (xv) the so-called 'what-why paradox'; and (xvi) the debate over Collingwood's 'constructionism'. In each case I have sought to show how the logic of question and answer rescues Collingwood's conclusions from his own sometimes-misleading arguments. In relation to the first I have shown the weaknesses of Collingwood's

¹ Explaining the 'significance' of a scholarly contribution sometimes involves pointing to another commentator's mistakes. When I do this I mean to do so, as Collingwood writes in his preface to his *Autobiography*, "*honoris causa*", as "a way of thanking him for what I owe to... his teaching, or [to] his example". *A*, p. vii

² See *NL*, ch. XXXIV

³ See *A*, p. 61

attempts to explain what is so distinct about history by recourse to history's distinct concepts, objects (or subject-matter) and methods. What follows from his own logic of question and answer, though he neglects it, is that sciences are of a distinct kind when the questions to which they pursue answers are of a distinct kind themselves. In relation to the second I have argued that Collingwood's claim – that in history knowing *what* happened means knowing *why* it happened – only makes sense in relation to historians posing properly 'historical' questions. The third point refers to an on-going debate in Collingwood scholarship, rather than to a question systematically answered by Collingwood; and that debate concerns whether or not Collingwood is an historical 'constructionist' or a 'realist'.¹ I have argued that the apparent dispute is actually dissolved by referring to what Collingwood says about how historical facts are established by working historians systematically constructing answers to particular questions.

In Part V I have discussed what Collingwood's logic of question and answer offers to today's philosophical debates about the history of ideas. I could have chosen any of a number of current debates for this, but I have thought it best to focus on one 'big debate' and one smaller debate where I think there is actually more at stake. The first is the debate around the role of historical context to understanding past texts (iv-vi). The second concerns whether historians of ideas ought to ask whether what their authors said was *true* (vii-x).

Despite what Collingwood seems to say about the irrelevance of knowing a person's context, the logic of question and answer actually lends support to the arguments being made in our own time by Quentin Skinner. I could have referred to other authors as well as Skinner, or instead of him, but I thought it best to focus on Skinner alone. This is not because I assume he is the most representative of the contemporary field, or because I think he is the best around at the moment, or simply because I have any dramatic vengeance against him or what he says. I have chosen him because, firstly, what he has said has produced much dispute. No-one in this field has given over as much of his time defending his own claims against attack as Skinner – and to his often obvious frustration. Secondly, I've picked out Skinner because I think it is

¹ The term 'realist' is used by Collingwood (always with single quotation marks) to indicate the self-identification of John Cook Wilson, H. A. Pritchard, H. W. B. Joseph, and Collingwood's own tutor E. F. Carr. See *A*, pp. 18-22. He also refers to "the parallel and more or less allied school at Cambridge" of G. E. Moore. See *A*, p. 22

mostly in the disputes provoked by him that Collingwood still has some valuable considerations to offer.

The second debate, concerning whether historians of ideas can ask whether their authors' arguments were true, is less widely discussed nowadays, though I think for obvious reasons it remains important – and not only because Collingwood thought of a *rapprochement* between history and philosophy as one of the main achievements of his philosophical career.¹ Again there has been some discussion of the 'was he right?' question between Skinner and his critics – though not of Collingwood's *rapprochement* itself. It seems to me that the real justification for Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy – that is, the reason why historians of philosophy should ask 'was he right?' – lies in a deeper *rapprochement* between theory and practice. That is to say that it is because of what history is *for* – socially and politically – that historians must ask 'was he right?'

Between Parts III and V I have devoted a whole chapter to Collingwood's so-called 'doctrine of re-enactment'. This has been a major point of discussion among those who have taken scholarly interest in Collingwood's writings during the last seventy years, and I found in time that I had rather a lot to say about both the doctrine, and what has been said about it. I have shown in Part IV that, even as Collingwood explains it, the doctrine is still vulnerable to certain criticisms. I've then explored some of the ways in which commentators sympathetic to it have tried to rescue it, before showing that some of the criticisms still stand – even when commentators have been able to demonstrate deep affinities and connexions with other areas of Collingwood's philosophy. I've then explained how I think the logic of question and answer makes more sense of the doctrine of re-enactment than Collingwood's philosophy of mind does, even though Collingwood does not argue in that way himself and probably never intended to.

In Part VI I turn to the question of what the history of ideas is for. Here I have reunited what I have distinguished earlier in the study. I take Collingwood's arguments about what history 'generically' is for to include what the history of political thought, the history of ideas, or the history of philosophy, are for – or *is* for, if you take them to be the same discipline. The two claims I've discussed are (iii-iv) that history is for self-knowledge; and (vi-xi) that history is necessary for freedom, duty, civilization, and progress. With regard to the first argument, Collingwood, I think, fails to deliver – at least by any normal sense of what 'self-knowledge' means. It is the second argument that

¹ *A*, p. 77

is much more suggestive. Collingwood's arguments concerning the relationship between history and freedom and history and duty, are, however, unsuccessful – though this has not stopped some commentators from celebrating them. It is rather in conjunction with civilization and progress that Collingwood makes better headway in explaining what history is for.

Finally I've collected some conclusions together in a 'Conclusions' section – partly to follow academic norms, and partly for the sake of what contemporary cognitive therapists call 'closure'.

iv

Warnings regarding method

In his introduction to *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (2004), Stein Helgeby gives the following concise overview of the trends in Collingwood scholarship over the last few decades:

Until at least the late 1950s, interest in Collingwood's thought tended to focus on specific or isolated doctrines within the philosophy of history. In the 1960s and early 1970s several writers attempted to provide broader and more systematic accounts of his philosophy. By the 1980s and 1990s there were renewed efforts to reinterpret Collingwood broadly, particularly utilising unpublished material not available to earlier commentators.¹

It is an effect of the questions in view of which I came to Collingwood in the first place that the present study is inadvertently, in the context of Collingwood scholarship, a return to the 1950s – in its conception, anyway. But although it is perhaps a little retro, it is not meant to be reactionary. The sort of approaches Helgeby says are typical of the '60s and '70s, '80s and '90s have produced, and continue to produce, scholarship of the highest order. But I want to know whether certain of Collingwood's claims are right. Those claims are made, usually along with their supporting arguments, not in unpublished material, but in Collingwood's best-known published works, above all in *The Idea of History* and *An Autobiography*. Indeed Collingwood's 'big claims' are

¹ Stein Helgeby, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R.G. Collingwood* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), pp. 18-19

notorious and long fought-over only because they *were* published.¹ I have also left my discussions of the philosophical background of Collingwood's arguments quite lean – or at least leaner than I have found to be common in Collingwood scholarship. One of the claims discussed here is that an historian must reconstruct, as far as evidence allows, the question to which an author offers his argument as a solution. Much has already been written to (re-)contextualize Collingwood's various claims. I could of course have pasted much of that work into the present study, having first assumed that the reader would find Collingwood's claims hard to understand properly without it. I have chosen instead to follow Collingwood's principle of avoiding scissors-and-paste history, because I have no good reason to break it. I have no new considerations to offer about the contexts of Collingwood's arguments, and there is no reason to assume that without further background knowledge the reader will misunderstand Collingwood's questions, reasoning, and solutions. Collingwood's questions and answers are (still) very accessible to the general reader. Where others' work has shown that in view of contextual considerations Collingwood's arguments are not what they seem, I have provided the reader with references to that other work and built my own discussion on others' interpretive advice.

The reader might be surprised that I mention so seldom what could be called Collingwood's 'intellectual inheritance', in particular what David Boucher has called 'the Italian connexion'.² Among what is to be understood by this is Collingwood's discovery of Giambattista Vico, his translation of Benedetto Croce, his shared interest with (and eventual loss of philosophical respect for) the 'philosopher of Fascism' Giovanni Gentile, and his fruitful exchanges with his friend Guido de Ruggiero. Much high-quality work has already been done to elucidate this network of influences, inspirations, and friendships, and in different aspects, so there is no need to divert the reader with hints of what he might find elsewhere in a better form.³ Again I would rather see those true

¹ It would be untrue to say that I have found unhelpful Collingwood's unpublished manuscripts, which are safely housed in the Bodleian Library, and it would be a downright lie to say that reading them hasn't been rewarding and occasionally frustrating. (The most fruitless episode of my study was to find evidence to clarify whether Collingwood's misrepresentation of Wilhelm Dilthey in *The Idea of History* was deliberate simplification, or accidental interpretive error. My conclusion, in view of lost material, is that we'll probably never know.) However I have chosen to discuss here contentions and arguments of Collingwood's that are available to the reader without his having to go to Oxford. Thus, although I have referred in passing to unpublished versions of arguments, and have very occasionally quoted from them, my policy has been to use unpublished material to make sure that I have not misunderstood or misrepresented what I've actually focused on, which are published arguments, and to discuss them in their published and best-known form.

² See David Boucher, *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 15-21. See also pp.43-45

³ See particularly James Connelly, 'Art Thou the Man: Croce, Gentile or de Ruggiero?'; H. S. Harris, 'Croce and Gentile in Collingwood's New Leviathan'; B. A. Haddock, 'Vico, Collingwood and the Character of a

works of history read than whatever summary I might have ‘scissor and paste’d into the present work.¹

Most studies of what an author said or thought on a given topic face the question of deciding ‘when’ the relevant point or period for analysis was. This is the case with Collingwood, who has been subjected to specific studies of his ‘early’, ‘middle’, and ‘late’ thought, and has been judged more favourably for one than for the other by some, and conversely by others. It is clear, as it is with any author who publishes his ideas prolifically over more than twenty years, that there is development and change in Collingwood’s thinking. There are also competing periodizations to negotiate, competing claims about what that ‘change’ consists in, and competing suggestions about what caused or drove that change.² Because I’m approaching Collingwood with particular questions already in mind, I’ve been able to deal with this a little more pragmatically. I have not tried to paint a portrait of our subject’s mind at a specific point in the development of his thinking – a portrait ostensibly free from the corrupting influences of hindsight. The present study *is* carried out in hindsight. For us this means that, although we want the strongest ideas and arguments of the man at the height of his powers, we are by no means obliged to disregard arguments that he did not himself follow up, or which are contradicted by other or later arguments – so long as that kind of contradiction is not exploited for criticism. My interest is in certain arguments that were made at the time they were made, and not only in those which their creator remained committed to during some personal golden age.

Historical Philosophy’; and Rik Peters, ‘Croce, Gentile and Collingwood on the Relation between History and Philosophy’; all in David Boucher, James Connelly, & Tariq Modood (eds), *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R. G. Collingwood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), totalling pp. 92-167. Beyond the Italian heritage there is also the German. Gary Browning and Giuseppina D’Oro continue to debate Collingwood’s allegiances with Hegelianism/Kantianism. See Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. vii, 26, 78-80, and Giuseppina D’Oro, *Collingwood and the Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002)

¹ Marnie Hughes-Warrington has criticised much Collingwood scholarship for being insufficiently ‘historical’ in its approach to Collingwood. “Few writers offer anything more than a brief survey of antecedent thinkers, variations in Collingwood’s view and or a history of the reception of Collingwood’s idea”. She picks out Nielsen and Saari for particular censure. Meanwhile her own work, *How Good an Historian Shall I Be?*, offers whole chapters of chronologically-arranged descriptive ‘conceptual history’, but nothing explicit about what of all this she thinks Collingwood assumes, what he knows, what he doesn’t, what he is responding to, or what he is ignoring. This ‘historical perspective’, it seems to me, turns out not to be a perspective on Collingwood at all. See Hughes-Warrington, pp. 99-127

² Dussen has provided a reliable overview of the development of Collingwood’s philosophy of history in his introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Idea of History* (see *IH*, pp. xxix-xlii). This is followed by an introduction to the Lectures of 1926 and 1928 which, in view of the starting point I’ve already discussed, the reader might find helpful (see *IH*, pp. xlii-xlviii). More recently Gary Browning has provided a really excellent account of competing interpretations and periodizations of Collingwood’s philosophy from Knox to Collingwood scholars of today like Giuseppina D’Oro and Rex Martin. See Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 4-12

For what it's worth, the period of Collingwood's writing that will happen to fall into focus here is that following the publication of *Speculum Mentis* in 1924 and continuing until and including the publication of *The New Leviathan* in 1942. This is not so much a 'period' as it is a career. It is not because my own interest excludes earlier works, and much less is it because I think *Speculum Mentis* a work that it is advisable to disregard. It is rather because after 1925, as Dussen has well documented, "Collingwood changed his views concerning the epistemology of history".¹ What Dussen seems to mean by this is, though, different from what I mean by it. What Dussen says is that "until that date Collingwood had a realist view of history, while after it he developed an explicitly idealist theory of the past".² It is my view that what is significant about Collingwood's work from approximately 1925 – at least given the focus of the present study – is that that is about the time Collingwood begins to think about history in terms of his own logic of question and answer. Before 1925 – in *Speculum Mentis*, for example – there might be talk of 'question and answer', but Collingwood does not discuss its place in the practice of historians. 'History', in *Speculum Mentis*, is "the assertion of fact".³ Similarly, in *Religion and Philosophy* there is some fascinating discussion of the relationship between history and philosophy in chapter three, 'Religion and History',⁴ but there is little about how to do history or about 'question and answer', and there is nothing that is neither said better nor superseded in later considerations of the relationship between history and philosophy. In short, these earlier works do not reflect Collingwood's best answers to our questions.

The policy regarding secondary material that I should warn the reader about from the outset is that I have tried to avoid replicating what other commentators have already said. Where I think what others have said is right I have said so, and provided references along with any information necessary about what is said there. This has had a significant effect on what I've included here and what I have excluded. In short, some of what I might have wanted to say at length myself has already been said, and usually said very well. There is a temptation with any extended project like this to treat other commentators' works as sources and to paste into your own writing anything that

¹ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 34

² Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 6. I don't wish to exaggerate my differences with Dussen because, as I've explained below, although I think the development around 1925/6 has nothing to do with 'realism' and 'idealism' as those terms are usually intended, what Dussen *means* by them allows us to mean the same thing: namely, that before that date history was the function of mind that asserted "fact as such", whereas after it Collingwood thought of the function of history as the construction of conclusions to certain kinds of questions by a systematic process of question and answer. If this is what Dussen means by 'idealism', and if by 'realism' he means history as "fact as such", then we mean the same thing.

³ *SM*, p. 201

⁴ *RP*, pp. 37-55

supports one of your own arguments, deals with the same area, or in other ways offers shortcuts to getting sophisticated scholarship into your own work. Although I've tried to build on the good work already done in the field, I've sought to do so non-parasitically. Sometimes this means discussing something more briefly than might have been expected. I hope to have spared the reader the feeling that he might have found that same discussion conducted more ably elsewhere or, worse, the suspicion that he already has.

Part II

The Logic of Question and Answer (Generically)

- i. The ‘questioning activity’
- ii. The question-and-answer theory of logic
- iii. The ‘second rule’: finding out what a man means
- iv. The transition from science to history

The key to unlocking the sense and coherence of almost everything Collingwood says about history is what he says about the ‘logic’ (or ‘theory’) of question and answer. This ‘theory’ appears right across Collingwood’s corpus, and in fact supports much more in his arguments than would be apparent to the average reader of his *Autobiography*, where the chapter ‘Question and Answer’ only really touches on the question-and-answer technique of understanding manifestations of human thought, and on Collingwood’s attack on ‘propositional logic’. It is my understanding that in fact almost everything Collingwood says about history as a mode of systematic thought – from the correct subject-matter of history and the importance of evidence, to re-enactment and the strange claim about the past existing ‘in’ the present – is connected through this logic of question and answer.

In itself this is not terribly earth-shattering, since really it is only to reiterate Collingwood’s claim that history is inductive and properly proceeds by the ‘Baconian method’ – posing specific questions and answering them as best we can. But in relation to some of Collingwood’s specific points about history, and especially in relation to what correctives he has for contemporary debates in the history of ideas, it has a certain effect. We will see later whether (and if so, to what extent) the question-and-answer logic of Collingwood’s arguments about history has been appreciated by his readers. As I’ll explain in Part III, it seems that although ‘question and answer’ in general is frequently remarked upon by Collingwood scholars, especially in relation to his metaphysics, the extent to which his arguments in the philosophy of history draw upon those basic points is not sufficiently emphasised or realised. Certainly other commentators sympathetic to Collingwood’s conclusions do not commonly appeal to the logic of question and answer to demonstrate to their own readers the correctness of those conclusions. Finally, as we’ll

see in Part V, the extent to which today's methodological debates in the history of ideas require, for their own health, a return to this 'founding principle' is difficult to overstate. Because I think this logic of question and answer is so important to Collingwood's arguments in philosophy of history, and because it features so heavily in how I will answer certain misreadings and criticisms of some of Collingwood's claims, I'll provide first an overview of Collingwood's theory of question and answer, in a sense 'generically'.¹

i

The 'questioning activity'

The essence of any science is what Collingwood calls 'systematic thinking'.² When Collingwood says 'science', or 'scientific history', this is in fact what he means: 'science' in the continental sense, an organised body of knowledge: *une science, una scienza, eine Wissenschaft*. (They're always feminine nouns, though this is probably not what Nietzsche meant when he supposed that "truth is a woman".³)

In his *Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood distinguishes the 'scientific thinking' on which an organised system of knowledge has to be based, from the 'desultory' and 'casual' thinking of our everyday "unscientific consciousness".⁴ Here is a colourful passage from that *Essay* which describes the relationship between these two ways in which we think, the systematic and the unsystematic:

¹ I have not provided a history of the development of 'question and answer' in Collingwood's thinking, partly because our questions do not demand it, and partly because Rex Martin has already done so. See Rex Martin, 'Collingwood's Logic of Question and Answer, its Relation to Absolute Presuppositions: a Brief History', *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* vol. 5 (1998), pp. 122-33

² *A*, pp. 25-6, 30-1; *IH*, pp. 269, 273; *EM*, p. 4. The statement in *EM* is probably the best: "The word 'science', in its original sense, which is still its proper sense not in the English language alone but in the international language of European civilization, means a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject-matter. This is the sense and the only sense in which I shall use it. There is also a slang sense of the word, unobjectionable (like all slang) on its lawful occasions, parallel to the slang use of the word 'hall' for a music-hall or the word 'drink' for alcoholic drink, in which it stands for natural science". In his last book, *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood also signs up to Hobbes's principle that language is a precondition and foundation where knowledge is not simply knowledge of 'facts', but of "the Consequence of one Affirmation to another". See *NL*, 6.47; 6.43; 6.59; 22.8. Collingwood cites Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 12-13 (original pagination), but see also p. 18.

³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface – Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [1886] Helen Zimmern (trans.) (Mineola: Dover, 1997), p. ix

⁴ *EM*, p. 22

In unscientific thinking our thoughts are coagulated into knots and tangles; we fish up a thought out of our minds like an anchor foul of its own cable, hanging upside-down and draped in seaweed with shellfish sticking to it, and dump the whole thing on deck quite pleased with ourselves for having got it up at all. Thinking scientifically means disentangling all this mess, and reducing a knot of thoughts in which everything sticks together anyhow to a system or series of thoughts in which thinking the thoughts is at the same time thinking the connexions between them.¹

This “high-grade thinking” we should be aiming at means “thinking energetically instead of idly: thinking hard instead of allowing your mind to drift”.² When one becomes aware of this energetic mental effort, he then says, “one becomes aware of a mental hunger that is no longer satisfied by what swims into one’s mouth. One wants what is not there and will not come of itself. One swims about hunting for it. This ranging of the mind in search of its prey is called *asking questions*”.³

So it is not ‘information’ or ‘data’ that are the starting point of systematic, scientific thinking. It is not the thing known. It is rather the *question*; the *hunger*; the “inherent restlessness of mind”.⁴ It is what I will call ‘the specific unknown’. The specific unknown is the thing that the scientist, whatever his precise discipline, wants to replace with a specific ‘known’. The answer is what he ‘desires’⁵; it is what replaces emptiness with repletion⁶; it is the thing that his investigative hunger presupposes to be the ‘good’⁷; it is what is pursued in what Collingwood calls the “hunt”.⁸ And desire, Collingwood writes in *The New Leviathan*, involves *propositional thinking*: “and a proposition is an answer to a question; and a question offers alternatives; so desire asks and answers the question ‘What do I want?’”⁹ So “science in general”, Collingwood writes in the introduction to *The Idea of History*...

¹ *EM*, pp. 22-3

² It is this that has given us, Collingwood says, “everything that we call specifically human”; it is by learning this power and how to execute it properly that man has transformed “the whole structure of his life by its means”. *EM*, p. 37

³ *EM*, p. 37. Emphasis added. Rex Martin has reported that the logic of question and answer is absent from a 1938 “sketch” (p. 122) of the *Essay on Metaphysics*, and claims accordingly that it was first worked out in the *Autobiography*. See Rex Martin, ‘Collingwood’s Logic of Question and Answer’. All the same, the reader will see here instances of ‘question and answer’ from *The Idea of History* and elsewhere which shows, if not that the ‘theory’ was worked out before 1939, it was at least used terminologically.

⁴ *NL*, 7.69

⁵ *NL*, 11.1-11

⁶ *NL*, 7.15

⁷ *NL*, 11.4-41

⁸ *NL*, 2.64

⁹ *NL*, 11.22

does not consist in collecting what we already know and arranging it in this or that pattern. It consists in fastening upon something we do not know, and trying to discover it... That is why all science begins from the knowledge of our own ignorance: not our ignorance of everything, but our ignorance of some definite thing – the origin of parliament, the cause of cancer, the chemical composition of the sun, the way to make a pump work... Science is finding things out: and in that sense history is a science.¹

‘Finding things out’ is the movement from the here-and-now of ignorance to the there-and-then of knowledge.² As well as in the normal sense of ‘logic’, ‘question and answer’ appears in chapter five of *An Autobiography* as a logic of inquiry – the logic of what Collingwood calls the “questioning activity”. He identifies it in several places with a basic Baconian/Cartesian principle of science which, he says, needs restating.³ He develops it further in *The Idea of History*,⁴ explaining how, again, “Francis Bacon laid it down in one of his memorable phrases that the natural scientist must ‘put Nature to the question?’” And he continues:

What he [Bacon] was asserting was two things at once: first, that the scientist must take the initiative, deciding for himself what he wants to know and formulating this in his own mind in the shape of a question; and secondly, that he must find means of compelling nature to answer, devising tortures under which she can no longer hold her tongue. Here, in a single brief epigram, Bacon laid down once for all the true theory of experimental science.⁵

The example here is ‘experimental’ natural science, but Collingwood has in mind all systematic, scientific thinking in general. And there are certain conditions that a scientific question must satisfy. “All modern science”, Collingwood writes in *The New Leviathan*, “recognizes what I will call *the principle of the limited objective*”, and he adds that

¹ *IH*, p. 9

² *NL*, 7.44-45; 7.69; 8.13

³ *A*, p. 30

⁴ Bacon and Descartes are named in the introduction. See *IH*, p. 6. Descartes is also repeatedly named, this time in the company of Kant and Socrates, in the introduction to *EPM*.

⁵ *IH*, p. 269. See also *NL*, 31.27

“this is the most fundamental difference between the modern sciences and the sciences of ancient Greece”.¹

Ancient sciences aimed at an unlimited objective. They defined their aims by asking questions like: ‘What is Nature?’ ‘What is Man?’ ‘What is Justice?’ ‘What is Virtue?’ A question of this sort was to be answered by a *definition* of the thing... The form of question: ‘What is x ?’ demands an answer telling you the essence of x ; telling you everything you need to know about x in order to work out a complete science of it. The idea of a science, for an ancient Greek, was not only the idea of a science of x but the idea of the complete science of x .²

The instruction that follows for all scientific practice – a ‘methodological’ instruction if you like – is, “Limit your objective. Take time seriously. Aim at interpreting not, as the Greeks did, any and every fact in the natural world, but only those which you think need be interpreted, or can be interpreted... NOW, choose where to begin your attack. Select the problems that call for immediate attention. Resolve to let the rest wait.”³

The questioning activity then advances with these limited problems being broken down into their logically necessitated parts, always increasingly particular questions offering increasingly particular alternatives:⁴

For example, if my car will not go, I may spend an hour searching for the cause of its failure. If, during this hour, I take out number one plug, lay it on the engine, turn the starting-handle, and watch for a spark, my observation ‘number one plug is all right’ is an answer not to the question, ‘Why won’t my car go?’ but to the question, ‘Is it because number one plug is not sparking that my car won’t go?’⁵

The process, then, contains moments of ‘supposing’ that some particular option might be the case rather than an alternative: in this example the ‘supposal’ moment is an implicit, supposed affirmation of the answer, ‘The car won’t go because number one plug

¹ *NL*, 31.61. See also 8.58

² *NL*, 31.62-4

³ *NL*, 31.68. For a further qualification, which we have no need to go into, see *NL*, 34.58.

⁴ *NL*, 13.1

⁵ *A*, pp. 32

is broken'. The supposition turns out, on being tested, to be false of course. But it is only because the question is preliminarily answered with a suppositional 'yes' that it is subjected to testing at all. This is what Collingwood means in *Speculum Mentis* when he says that "supposal and questioning are at bottom the same thing".¹²

The theory of question and answer as the essence of inquiry is not limited to Collingwood's work of the 1930s. Here is a passage from *Speculum Mentis* (1924) in which Collingwood explains rather elegantly how the product of a systematic inquiry – knowledge – is asserted only at the close of a process of question and answer:

Supposal and assertion are not two independent chapters in the history of mind; they are two opposite and correlative activities which form as it were the systole and diastole of knowledge itself. A crude empiricism imagines that knowledge is composed wholly of assertion: that to know and to assert are identical. But it is only when the knower looks back over his shoulder at the road he has travelled, that he identifies knowledge with assertion. Knowledge as a past fact, as something dead and done with – knowledge by the time it gets into encyclopaedias and text-books – does consist of assertion, and those who treat it as an affair of encyclopaedias and text-books may be forgiven for thinking that it is assertion and nothing else. But those who look upon it as an affair of discovery and exploration have never fallen into that error. People who are acquainted with knowledge at first hand have always known that assertions are only answers to questions.³

The same point is made – characteristically, more concisely – near the end of Collingwood's life, in *The New Leviathan* (1942), where "Knowing a thing is more than merely being conscious of it. Knowing involves asking questions and answering them"⁴; and "Knowledge is the conviction or assurance with which a man reaffirms a proposition he has already made after reflecting on the process of making it and satisfying himself that it is well and truly made."⁵

¹ *SM*, p. 78

² This answers, I think, James Somerville's question concerning whether Collingwood's later work retains the identification of questioning with supposal. It does, but Collingwood stops calling it 'supposal'. See James Somerville, 'Collingwood's Logic of Question and Answer', *The Monist* vol. 72, no. 4: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood, pp. 526-41

³ *SM*, p. 77

⁴ *NL*, 11.11

⁵ *NL*, 14.22

The questioning activity, then, is the correct method for proceeding not only in the natural sciences, but in any form of inquiry that aims at going from the unknown to the known; from here-and-now emptiness to there-and-then repletion¹; from confusion to conclusion. Everything, from building our knowledge of black holes and the monsters of the deep, to something as mundane and unconsciously investigative as finding the reason my car won't start, every step on the path to knowledge *per se* depends on asking and answering questions.

But what does Collingwood mean in *Speculum Mentis* when he says that “supposal and assertion” are “opposite and correlative activities”, the “systole and diastole of knowledge itself”?² Part of what he means by this “principle of correlativity”,³ as he calls it in *An Autobiography*, is that different kinds of questions can only be ‘satisfied’ with different kinds of answers. This is part of what his car example⁴ (above) is meant to demonstrate. I’ll use the idea of ‘satisfying’ a question here almost as if it were a technical term: Collingwood uses it in his *Essay on Metaphysics* and in *The New Leviathan*.⁵ He also speaks of what a question “expects” in the same way.⁶ Questions, he means, are not satisfied by answers that are of a kind different to what they “expect”. This does not mean, of course, that questions are only satisfied by the *content* of the answer they expected. Correlativity concerns form, not content. An answer ‘satisfies’ a question when it is the right *kind* of answer, not because it is necessarily the right answer. Thus the question, ‘How many sugars would Tom like in his tea?’ is not ‘satisfied’ by the answer ‘Tom loves sugar’. It may well be true that Tom loves sugar, but the question is not satisfied by that form of answer. Conversely the answer ‘one spoonful’ satisfies the question, even though it might be the wrong answer and leave the tea insufficiently sugary for the satisfaction of Tom’s sweet tooth.

It follows that finding appropriate answers to different types of question will require different kinds of investigation. This is why many – or even most – of our questions cannot be answered solely by natural science, even though they are perfectly legitimate questions, and answerable by recourse to ‘systematic thinking’. At time of writing, investigators in The Hague are trying to establish whether Radovan Karadžić

¹ *NL*, 7.15

² *SM*, p. 77

³ *A*, p. 32. Collingwood means by the “principle of correlativity” the principle that an answer must correlate to a question as specific as itself. We’ll revisit this. The way I’m using it here is to refer to a second principle of correlativity: certain kinds of questions can only be satisfied by certain *kinds* of answers.

⁴ *A*, p. 32

⁵ *EM*, p. 74; *NL*, 7.45

⁶ *EM*, pp. 73-4

ordered, or even knew about, the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. Now, even the readers of *New Scientist* already know enough about problem-solving to know that questions such as these cannot simply be handed over to natural scientists to investigate. It is still ‘knowledge’ that is being pursued, of course, and pursued by way of a systematic investigation – in this case system institutionally settled as a legal process.

As with a legal process, investigations of all kinds employ ‘evidence’. “Anything is evidence which can be used as evidence”, Collingwood writes, “and no one can tell what is going to serve him as evidence for answering a certain question until he has formulated the question”.¹ In its potential the world is infinitely evidentiary. But it does not radiate knowledge. It does not tell us about itself. We have to interrogate it. This is to say that it is what is demanded by the question that gives us our principle of navigation, or principle of selection. And without a question there is no principle of navigation, and thus no evidence.

All this provides some background to Collingwood’s description, in his *Autobiography*, of how he understood the Oxford ‘realist’ position concerning knowledge, and how he came to see that it was wrong:

The Oxford ‘realists’ talked as if knowing were a simple ‘intuiting’ or a simple ‘apprehending’ of some ‘reality’... so did Alexander, at Manchester, when he described knowing as the simple ‘compresence’ of two things, one of which was a mind... They granted that a man who wanted to know something might have to work, in ways that might be very complicated, in order to ‘put himself in a position’ from which it could be ‘apprehended’; but once the position had been attained there was nothing for him to do but ‘apprehend’ it, or perhaps fail to ‘apprehend’ it.

This doctrine... was quite incompatible with what I had learned in my ‘laboratory’ of historical thought. The questioning activity, as I called it, was not an activity of achieving compresence with, or apprehension of, something; it was not preliminary to the act of knowing; it was one half (the other half being answering the question) of an act which in its totality was knowing.²

¹ *PH*, p. 38

² *A*, pp. 25-6

The question-and-answer theory of logic

This account of inductive scientific knowledge, how we discover and then know something to be true, carries obvious consequences for logic, the field Collingwood identifies as the scene of his revolt.¹ (He says that he first developed his logic of question and answer in 1917 in a book called *Truth and Contradiction*.²) The message of Collingwood's 'revolt' is this: The 'units of thought' we think of in a given discipline – 'propositions', 'judgements', statements of 'fact' – all of these, Collingwood thinks, are actually "something more complex in which the proposition serve[s] as an answer to a question".³ But this habit of stating propositions as if they are 'units', as if they are not composed of these two parts, has led to the assumption that truth and falsehood belong to propositions as such and the "indicative sentences"⁴ that express them, and that that truth or falsehood depends on whether the propositions 'corresponds', matches, reflects, or in some way conforms to a real something that is not a proposition. "Hence", Collingwood comments, "that numerous and frightful offspring of propositional logic out of illiteracy, the various attempts at a 'logical language', beginning with the pedantry of the text-books about 'reducing a proposition to logical form', and ending, for the present, in the typographical jargon of [Whitehead and Russell's] *Principia Mathematica*".⁵ Actually, Collingwood writes...

If the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it answers, its truth must be relative to the same thing. Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself.⁶

¹ See *IH*, p. 274, and *A*, p. 33

² *A*, p. 42. Only chapter two of *Truth and Contradiction* survives, unpublished. (Bodleian Library, Dep. 16) Unfortunately for our purposes here the surviving fragment deals not with 'question and answer', but with the coherence theory of truth. Certainly the two are related, but for the purposes of the present study there is nothing in that fragment that is not put better in other work. It is also less accessible to most readers.

³ *A*, pp. 34-5. See also the preceding discussion on the "early partnership between logic and grammar" (*ibid.*).

⁴ *A*, p. 35

⁵ *A*, pp. 35-6 (footnote)

⁶ *A*, p. 33

‘Question and answer’ is therefore also a theory of truth. Truth does not belong to propositions either as a result of corresponding to some state of affairs that is not a proposition, or of ‘cohering’ with other propositions. Collingwood challenges such theories of truth because “they all presupposed what I have called the principle of propositional logic; and this principle I denied altogether”.¹ Instead, he continues...

It seemed to me that truth... was something that belonged... to a complex consisting of questions and answers... Each question and each answer in a given complex had to be relevant or appropriate, had to ‘belong’ both to the whole and to the place it occupied in the whole. Each question had to ‘arise’... Each answer must be ‘the right’ answer to the question it professes to answer... the answer which enables us to get ahead with the process of questioning and answering... it is ‘right’ because it constitutes a link, and a sound one, in the chain of questions and answers by which the falseness of that presupposition is made manifest.²

There are, though, certain limits to what we can ask. All questions contain presuppositions. ‘Have you left off beating your wife?’ is a question which presupposes both that the man in question has a wife, and also that he has been in the habit of beating her.³ If either of these presuppositions is not being made, then the question is a “nonsense” question. Nonsense questions involve a presupposition which is not in fact being made – which, for Collingwood, means that such a question “does not arise”.⁴

iii

The ‘second rule’: finding out what a man means

Finally, Collingwood’s theory of question and answer also applies to understanding or finding out what another man meant – what was meant by something ‘done’. In chapter five of *An Autobiography* Collingwood explains that, during the First World War, he walked every day to the Admiralty past the Albert Memorial. Because the Memorial was “visibly mis-shapen, corrupt, crawling, verminous”, it “began to obsess

¹ *A*, p. 36

² *A*, pp. 37-8

³ See *EM*, p. 38

⁴ *EM*, pp. 26-7

me”, he says.¹ Later he adds that this “meditation on the Albert Memorial had taught me a second [rule], namely, ‘reconstruct the problem’; or, ‘never think you understand any statement made by a philosopher until you have decided, with the utmost possible accuracy, what the question is to which he means it for an answer.’”² Here is how Collingwood explains how his theory of question and answer impacts upon understanding what a man means – and this is, as the reader has probably already begun to suspect, what is of particular relevance to the history of ideas. I’m afraid I’ve had to provide Collingwood’s explanation at length, albeit abridged. (All of my attempts to improve or shorten it through paraphrase failed):

The Albert Memorial began by degrees to obsess me... a thing so obviously, so incontrovertibly, so indefensibly bad, why had Scott done it?... What relation was there, I began to ask myself, between what he had done and what he had tried to do?...

My work in archaeology, as I have said, impressed upon me the importance of the ‘questioning activity’ in knowledge... I began by observing that you cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer...

Now, the question ‘To what question did So-and-so intend this proposition for an answer?’ is an historical question, and therefore cannot be settled except by historical methods. When So-and-so wrote in a distant past, it is generally a very difficult one, because writers (at any rate good writers) always write for their contemporaries, and in particular for those who are ‘likely to be interested’, which means those who are already asking the question to which an answer is being offered; and consequently a writer very seldom explains what the question is that he is trying to answer. Later on, when he has become a ‘classic’ and his contemporaries are all long dead, the question has been forgotten; especially if the answer he gave was generally acknowledged to be the

¹ *A*, p. 29. Peter Johnson has offered a rather fun article about the various sources of the ideas Collingwood attributes to the Albert Memorial which, of course, deals with the logic of question and answer. See Peter Johnson, ‘R. G. Collingwood and the Albert Memorial’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2009), pp. 7-40

² *A*, p. 74. The same point is also made in *EM*, pp. 23-5, 35-6. The notion goes right back to Collingwood’s first published book, *Religion and Philosophy* (1916). See *RP*, pp. 42-3

right answer; for in that case people stopped asking the question, and began asking the question that next arose. So the question asked by the original writer can only be reconstructed historically, often not without the exercise of considerable skill.¹

This requires little exegesis, I think. In order to know what someone ‘means’ you have to know what the question is that he is ‘answering’.² As this is of great importance to Collingwood’s theory of how interpretive historical assertions are to be rightly made, we’ll return to it in the right place. What we’ve heard here is what Collingwood says about ‘question and answer’, as I’ve put it, ‘generically’. ‘Question and answer’ is the logic of all scientific inquiry; it is present in the ‘logic’ of truth claims; and it is a precondition of understanding what someone meant by doing or saying something.

iv

*The transition from science to history*³

It seems to me that the logic of question and answer is not only defensible: it is ingenious. By the means of the single compound concept ‘question and answer’ Collingwood unites all disciplines of inquiry, all ‘sciences’, in a question-and-answer method, and in their quest to fill out knowledge of the one true reality. But by means of that same concept Collingwood also shows why the investigative processes of different disciplines are properly autonomous of one another, and why they cannot be imposed upon one another. And the way he does this is by putting the *question* at the foundation of everything. Thus the respective methods of different disciplines are determined not by the objects that they investigate, but by what kind of question it is that the investigator asks about it.⁴ *Method is a consequence of question*. So-called ‘methodological’ questions, such as ‘What is the correct method of investigation in International Relations?’, or even worse (and commoner), ‘What is the correct unit of analysis?’, cannot be answered on

¹ *A*, pp. 29-39

² Dussen has noted that, surprisingly, there is a correspondence with this idea in Popper, though Popper doesn’t know it. Popper, Dussen says, “emphasizes as well that an historian should reconstruct the problem situations of the past.” See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 345-6

³ Here I am trying to lead the reader to consider, in preparation for the next chapter, what this means for the ‘methodology’ of history. My subtitle is another reference to Collingwood’s own terminology. See the ‘Transition’ chapter titles of *SM*, and the conclusion of *IN*: “We go from the idea of nature to the idea of history”. (*IN*, p. 177)

⁴ This point is explained below.

their own terms, without knowing what question is driving the investigation or analysis they refer to.

I certainly don't claim to be the first to notice the potential of Collingwood's theory of question and answer. Indeed, despite a couple of minor mistakes in what he takes Collingwood to be saying, I think the ingeniousness of question and answer is also noticed by Hans-Georg Gadamer – though he seems mostly excited by what it allows him to say about his 'fusing' of 'horizons'.¹ Our concern now is to assess what this logic of question and answer means first for history in general, and then, like Gadamer, to concern ourselves with what it means for the history of ideas. Gadamer, as I'll explain, does not understand the significance of Collingwood's theory of question and answer. If it is already obvious to the reader what that significance is likely to be, all the better, for it means that he will, like me, think of himself as being in some position to see what is so wrong with the way some writers are conducting their 'methodological' disputes at present, and therefore why it is within those walls especially necessary that, as Machiavelli said, "men who live together in any sort of institution regularly take stock of themselves", and make themselves receptive to those "healthy" changes "that bring them back to their founding principles".²

¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* [1960] (Continuum, 2004), pp. 363-71

² Machiavelli, *Discourses* Book III, ch. 1 (pp. 190-1, 189)

Part III

The Question-and-Answer Logic of History

- i. History as a science
- ii. History as a science: typology against chronology
- iii. Three forms of 'history'
- iv. The forms of history in an overlapping scale
- v. Three forms of history on a philosophical menu
- vi. Question-and-answer history in Collingwood scholarship
- vii. The special character of inference in history: a problem
- viii. The solution: the special character of historical questions
- ix. What makes historical questions 'historical'?
- x. 'What he meant'
- xi. Universals and particulars
- xii. Processes
- xiii. Science and method
- xiv. The transition from general solutions to specific points
- xv. The 'what-why' paradox
- xvi. 'Ideality' and 'constructionism'

i

History as a science

In the last chapter we saw some instances of Collingwood discussing 'question and answer' as a form of inquiry in general. I held back examples in which he discusses history specifically in conjunction with 'question and answer' in order to keep our examination of 'question and answer' in history in one place. The idea of history – “the idea of an imaginary picture of the past”, Collingwood says, is “in Cartesian language, innate; in Kantian language, *a priori*”.¹ 'Question and answer' is one of the ways – and the only 'systematic' way – in which we fill in this innate idea. The best examples in Collingwood's writings of 'question and answer' happening in historical investigation are probably those in chapter eleven of *An Autobiography*, 'Roman Britain'. Here is quite a famous one:

For example, long practice in excavation had taught me that one condition – indeed the most important condition – of success was that the person

¹ *IH*, p. 248

responsible for any piece of digging, however small and however large, should know exactly why he was doing it. He must first of all decide what he wants to find out, and then decide what kind of digging will show it to him. This was the central principle of my 'logic of question and answer' as applied to archaeology.¹

The conjunction of history with 'question and answer' in Collingwood's writings is by no means consistent. It does not occur, for example, in *Speculum Mentis* (1924). There is a very elegantly-written section called 'Knowledge as Question and Answer' in chapter three, 'Art', where Collingwood's intention is simply to clarify the transition from art to religion.² A direct, if brief, discussion of 'question and answer' is also given in chapter five, 'Science', where Collingwood explains what he means when he says that science is 'supposal'.³ But in chapter six, 'History', 'question and answer' all but disappears. "The object of history is the assertion of fact", Collingwood says there, and then: "To determine facts far distant in space and time is not the essence of history but its climax, the very heroism and bravado of the historical spirit in its defiance of empirical limitations."⁴ – The climax of *what* exactly? Defying empirical limitations *how*? What is this "spirit"? Such questions are only answerable, I think, in light of later work. Meanwhile, in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood describes how history 'breaks down' in the face of its failure to achieve knowledge of its object, and mind then passes on to philosophy.⁵ This is because (or why) the chapter 'History' neglects the principle of question and answer when it is most needed. It is, as Collingwood only later shows, history *as a science* that enables history to achieve knowledge of its object – knowledge, that is, of its own characteristic kind – which, in *Speculum Mentis*, it does not.

In the later work 'question and answer' becomes the fundamental feature of scientific history. This is why the opening chapter of *The Principles of History* contains an extended analogy of history with a criminal investigation, 'Who killed John Doe?'. (The analogy was also published in §3 of *The Idea of History*'s 'Epilegomena',⁶ though there it is, of course, nearer the end than the beginning.)

¹ *A*, p. 122. See, however, Alan Donagan's discussion of the criticisms Collingwood received in an obituary by I. A. Richmond concerning Collingwood's archaeological practice this point precisely. See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 196-8

² *SM*, pp. 76-80. See particularly p. 76 for the immediate context of that discussion.

³ By 'supposal', though, Collingwood means that it proceeds by question and answer. See *SM*, pp. 78, 186. It is, for this reason, also here that Collingwood explains how science is based on history – or, "Science is the question whose answer is history" – a claim he would repeat at the close of *The Idea of Nature*. See *IN*, pp. 174-7. See also *SM*, p. 202

⁴ *SM*, p. 211

⁵ *SM*, pp. 231-247

⁶ *PH*, pp. 21-9; *IH*, pp. 266-73

For Collingwood, if history is to be a science – that is, an organized body of knowledge – then it must disentangle its knots of casual thinking, and understand why it can be, and is to be, based on systematic thinking. This is why ‘scissors and paste’ history is not scientific – and that is, essentially, what is wrong with it. The narratives produced by ‘scissors and paste’ will be compilations of other narratives, compiled with the aim of providing information about some given (past) subject. Of course the material used by the scissors-and-paste historian will help him to “provide this innate idea [the past] with detailed content”,¹ but only by being treated as a ‘source’ of already-prepared information ripe for incorporation into the new narrative. The scientific historian, by contrast, uses *evidence*. I think little needs to be said to convince today’s academic historians that Collingwood is right about this.² The “rubric” of scientific history, in the narratives produced by historians, is generally accepted to be what Collingwood says it is in his *Essay on Metaphysics: i.e.* “the evidence at our disposal obliges us to conclude that...”³ This “rubric” is missing from instances of ‘scissors and paste’. *Scientific* historical thinking will, Collingwood writes, “be exhibited in the clear-cut and orderly manner in which it states problems and marshals and interprets evidence for their solution”.⁴ So where the ‘scissors-and-paste’ historian reads his books “in a receptive spirit, to find out what they said”, the “scientific historian reads them with a question in his mind, having taken the initiative by deciding for himself what he wants to find out from them... puts them to the torture, twisting a passage ostensibly about something quite different into an answer to the question he has decided to ask”.⁵

What Collingwood means by ‘systematic thinking’ is again a process of question and answer.⁶ Scissors-and-paste history is not scientific for the simple reason that it is not investigative – at least not fully. It answers not questions, but tasks of another kind. It is what we might call ‘composite’.⁷ In terms of subject-matter, scissors-and-paste history might be perfectly consistent with what Collingwood argues – which is why A. F. Wilson

¹ *IH*, p. 247. See also *IH*, p. 248, where Collingwood writes that “the idea of history itself” is “in Cartesian language, innate; in Kantian language, *a priori*”. Alan Donagan has claimed that, in light of his theory of presuppositions, Collingwood revised this notion that the idea of history itself is *a priori*, and replaced it with the doctrine that historians presuppose that idea. See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 210-11 (Donagan cites *EM*, pp. 63-4)

² ‘Evidence’ is the title of Part I: chapter 1 of *The Principles of History*. See *PH*, pp. 7-38. Dussen has provided an interesting discussion of ‘evidence’ in Collingwood’s thinking in *History as a Science*. He draws particularly on some of Collingwood’s lesser-known works, such as ‘The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History’ and ‘The Limits of Historical Knowledge’. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 287-95

³ *EM*, p. 56

⁴ *EM*, p. 65

⁵ *IH*, pp. 269-70

⁶ *EM*, p. 36

⁷ See *NL*, 9.32-34

is right to suggest that scientific history and scissors-and-paste history overlap.¹ But the narratives produced by scissors-and-paste will not therefore be answers which, in a schoolish phrase, ‘show their working’. Real, scientific history, on the other hand...

has this in common with every other science: that the historian is not allowed to claim any single piece of knowledge, except where he can justify his claim by exhibiting to himself in the first place, and secondly to anyone else who is both able and willing to follow his demonstration, the grounds upon which it is based. This is what is meant, above, by describing history as inferential.²

The introduction and opening chapter of *The Principles of History* are dedicated to explaining the idea that history is “inferential”, and to explicating the particular kind of inference that pertains to history. It is also here that ‘Who killed John Doe?’ appears. In that statement (‘history is inferential’) is contained the essence of what Collingwood is saying about the processes of scientific historical thinking, the methods of historians, and the objects of historical knowledge in relation to ‘question and answer’, albeit obliquely. *The Principles of History* was meant to proceed from general fundamentals to specific points. ‘Question and answer’, as the meaning of ‘inference’, is that fundament.

In his 2005 article, ‘Collingwood’s Claim that History is a Science’, Dussen has provided a fascinating comparison of what Collingwood says about history being a science with the theory of the logic of ‘abduction’ of the American philosopher, C. S. Peirce. Dussen shows that what Collingwood says about inference in history coheres rather neatly with Peirce’s theory of this ‘third’ type of inference, different from both deduction and induction. Collingwood did not, Dussen says, manage to work it out in the same detail as Peirce, but nevertheless by comparing the two philosophers one can see that the methods of history described by Collingwood are such that can still be considered ‘scientific’.³ Dussen’s article is meant to show that Collingwood’s philosophy of historical method really is scientific, and in order to demonstrate this he remains perfectly faithful to what Collingwood both says and means. Dussen’s strategy is, though, quite unnecessary. As long as one recognises that science is organised inquiry, and that organised inquiry proceeds by a systematic series of question and answer, one can see the sense in Collingwood’s claim already.

¹ A. F. Wilson, ‘Collingwood’s Forgotten Historiographic Revolution’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 8 (2001), pp. 57-8

² *IH*, p. 252

³ Dussen, ‘Collingwood’s Claim’, p. 25

History as a science: typology against chronology

After the publication of *Speculum Mentis* – as Dussen has meticulously discovered and admirably documented in his classic study of 1981, *History as a Science*¹ – Collingwood turns his interest to history as a form of inquiry, and begins to treat the philosophy of history as the sorting-out of the methods of that inquiry. Dussen’s term for this is ‘history as a science’, and he has already provided as detailed an account as could be needed of the early development in Collingwood’s thinking of history as a science – which, considering our purposes here, there is no need to reproduce.² Dussen even quotes a passage from one of Collingwood’s letters to Croce in which he looks forward to the leisure he’ll soon have “to pursue the work on the philosophy of historical method which I regard as my chief task in philosophy”.³ Here I have varyingly used the terms ‘scientific history’, ‘investigative history’, ‘historical inquiry’, and ‘what historians [properly] do’ as equivalents for what Dussen fairly consistently calls ‘history as a science’. In each case the “philosophy of historical method”, which Collingwood refers to in that letter to Croce, concerns sorting out how scientific history should be done.

Dussen says, absolutely correctly, that what distinguishes from earlier work Collingwood’s 1925 essay, ‘The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History’, is that Collingwood strikingly begins by mentioning “actual historians”.⁴ There is, Dussen argues, a “dividing line” between the writings before 1925/26 and those after.⁵ This dividing line, for Dussen, is between an earlier ‘realist’ view of history, and a later ‘idealist’ one (which he also calls by the name ‘anti-realist’). Dussen uses ‘realism’ as a shorthand term for the view of history in *Speculum Mentis*: that history is “the assertion of fact”, and that the object of historical consciousness is “fact as such” – individual facts, unique situations, and so on. This is part of the reason why, for Collingwood, it is history

¹ Particularly interesting is Dussen’s discussion of Collingwood’s intermediate position in his 1925 article ‘The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History’. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 27-31

² Indeed Dussen has provided more recently an article-length version of his reading of Collingwood’s claim that history is a science for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*. See vol. 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 5-30

³ See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 31-2

⁴ See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 28

⁵ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 6. Dussen thinks the Lectures of 1926 and 1928 (the ‘Die manuscript’) give some insight into the origin of the themes of question and answer, evidence, and ‘the Baconian approach’, and I have no reason to think he’s wrong. See Dussen’s introduction to *IH*, p. xlvi

that classificatory science relies upon for the abstractions with which it deals. After 1926, Dussen says, Collingwood's 'idealist' philosophy of history emerges.¹

Dussen's terminology is, I think, confusing, not least because by calling Collingwood's earlier position 'realist' he invites the reader to think that Collingwood uses his *Autobiography* to attack a position he previously defended.² Treating as indicative of 'realism' Collingwood's proposition, that the object of history is "fact as such" also injects into *Speculum Mentis* a contradiction which shouldn't really be there. Dussen writes:

In concluding our survey of *Speculum Mentis* it is important to note that Collingwood explicitly renounces realism; his discussion of historical philosophy makes this clear (SM, 281-287). It is also clear, however, that at the same time his conception of history is a plainly realistic one.³

There is no such contradiction. There is an important difference between what Collingwood means by 'realism' and what Dussen means by it. For Collingwood history in *Speculum Mentis* is "the assertion of fact" – the assertion of unique, individual facts; whereas 'realism' means the claim that facts that are supposed to be independent of the knowing mind. This latter is never Collingwood's position.

There is a complication to Dussen's account beyond his terminology, which concerns his story about the first conception of history, "the assertion of fact", being replaced. In *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, David Boucher has provided a fascinating discussion concerning the relation between Collingwood's conception of history and his moral philosophy – specifically in the concept of duty. We'll have cause to return to this argument about history and duty later, when reviewing the social purpose of history. I mention it here merely to point out that Collingwood considers the theoretical counterpart to duty (the highest form of practical reason) to be *history* because "the agent is prepared for action in unique circumstances by identifying himself, or herself, with the world of fact in its entirety". What Boucher has discovered, though he has no need to say so, is that the conception of history as "the assertion of fact" – individual, unique, concrete fact – actually survives into Collingwood's later moral

¹ This, Dussen thinks, shows what is wrong with Debbins' contention ("that from the earlier essays to the later works there is no significant change"), and with a similar claim of Errol E. Harris. Dussen explains that Lionel Rubinoff misses it; that Rotenstreich observes it but fails to locate it properly; and he shows that Leon Goldstein's view, though close to his own, misses the 'watershed' that he thinks he's found. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 34-5

² Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 20-1

³ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 27

philosophy and, in fact, into *The New Leviathan*. If this is the conception that Dussen intends to indicate when he says ‘realism’, and I think it is, then he is perhaps a little inaccurate to think that that conception was ever replaced by history as a science around 1925/26. Actually, as we’ll now see, the earlier form was not ‘replaced’ by a later one, but survives as part of that later form.

iii

Three forms of ‘history’

My interest is not in establishing chronologies of thought-development, though I’m satisfied that Dussen’s evidence substantiates his claim concerning the time at which Collingwood’s philosophy of history as a science emerged. My interest is only in the difference between the way of thinking about history as something concerned with the individual “fact as such” (which Dussen identifies in Collingwood’s early philosophy of history, and which he calls ‘realism’), and the later ‘scientific’ way of thinking about history as an investigation, which is supposed by Dussen to replace it. Because Dussen’s question is chronological, his answer is that that difference is ‘around 1926’. Because mine is typological, that difference is a distinct sense of ‘history’ – as a word and concept.

By looking at what Collingwood says about history through the lens of ‘question and answer’ something becomes clear. By ‘history’ Collingwood means, in his later philosophy, ‘scientific history’ – but by no means all the time. In fact he sometimes doesn’t intend the word ‘history’ to indicate an activity at all. The concept of ‘history’ which Collingwood appeals to in his argument about duty is not an activity, for example. I also think Dussen is a little inaccurate to refer to only two meanings of history in Collingwood’s work on the subject. There are, from what I have seen, at least three¹ distinct meanings, senses – or what I will call, in accordance with Collingwood’s own terminology, ‘forms’. These three forms of history are (and this is how I will number them):

¹ See *NL*, 14.64

1. history as “the assertion of fact”;
2. history as becoming (history as a process); and
3. history as a type of investigation (history as a science).¹

Although the three are distinct senses of the word ‘history’, the meanings of them overlap – conceptually and, I think, chronologically. We’ll deal with the overlap next. First let’s establish the distinctness.

Before 1925/26 Collingwood does not discuss history as a science. Instead ‘history’ stands for that which is concerned with individual particular facts, rather than with classes of facts or universals. In *Speculum Mentis* history is the “assertion of fact”, but the reasoning by which the facts asserted are decided upon are not discussed at all. The facts asserted by the historical consciousness are individual and unique. ‘Charles was born at Dunfermline Palace’, and ‘the wound became infected’ are historical facts in this sense of the word ‘history’. Such facts are not classes, categories, or laws. They are not abstractions from concrete instances: they *are* the concrete instances. In Collingwood’s early thinking, the question of the right and the wrong ways to assert facts does not arise, which is why there is, in *Speculum Mentis*, no discussion of scientific history, no explanation of ‘question and answer’ in historical thinking, and no attack on ‘scissors and paste’.

The second conception, history as a process, is probably the most familiar to anyone. It means, plainly, a succession of events or actions. It is the sense according to which “all history consists of changes”,² and it is the sense in which we say ‘the history of Rome’, or ‘the history of literature’. It is also what Collingwood means by ‘history’ when he refers to “Historical Theology” in *Religion and Philosophy*.³ Most, if not all, historical narratives reflect this sense of ‘history’: stories that trace the changes within a given object of focus, such as the city of Rome, the concept of liberty in European political rhetoric, or, as in *Religion and Philosophy*, the nature of God.

A philosophy of history in this sense would take as its subject something like what Collingwood says, in his *Autobiography*, was dealt with in his essay *Libellus de Generatione*: “It was primarily a study of the nature and implications of process or becoming... it was an attack on ‘realism’, showing how the *non possumus* of ‘realists’

¹ I do not intend to challenge the “three forms of historical thinking which have been practised since the Renaissance” identified by Donagan as being described in ‘Historical Evidence’. See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 177-82

² *NL*, 26.76

³ *RP*, pp. 37-8

towards a theory of history arose from their refusal to admit the reality of becoming”.¹ This sense of ‘history’ is also never replaced in Collingwood’s philosophy: it survives into *The New Leviathan*, his last book, where he says that ‘facts’ are really only abstractions from processes² and, in a later chapter, that “in the life of mind there are no states, there are only processes”.³ Collingwood’s interest in Bergson and Whitehead pertains to this form of ‘history’: history as becoming, reality as becoming, reality as history. Everything in history and ‘from the point of view’ of history is in a state of becoming, or flux. The object of study does not remain the same as circumstances change around it: the object itself changes. ‘The history of England’ does not mean a narrative of all the things that have happened in England. It means the concept of ‘England’ as a specific becoming.⁴ This is the sense in which, after only a moment’s reflection, we can agree that history is ‘still happening’, because the process of things changing their form while remaining recognisably the same is never-ending.⁵ The ‘becoming’ of concepts is explained in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, and also in an unpublished essay, ‘Sketch of a Logic of Becoming’.⁶ And this is the meaning of ‘history’ which Collingwood equates with ‘reality’ in the essay ‘Reality as History’ (1935).⁷

Now, Dussen knows perfectly well that Collingwood sometimes engages in philosophy of this form of history – philosophy of ‘becoming’. But it doesn’t fit into the chronological scheme he is trying to express concerning Collingwood’s transition from ‘realism’ to ‘idealism’ in his thinking about history. ‘History as process’, as Dussen calls it, therefore gets a brief mention in a subsection at the tail end of his chapter on the development of Collingwood’s thought on history. His chapter looks like this:

- 2.1. From *Religion and Philosophy* to *Speculum Mentis*
- 2.2. Collingwood and realism
- 2.3. History: from realism to idealism
- 2.4. History and science
- 2.5. History as process

¹ *A*, p. 99

² *NL*, 30.75-76

³ *NL*, 34.62

⁴ See R. G. Collingwood, *Roman Britain* [1923] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), p. 11

⁵ For Collingwood natural processes and historical processes are distinct because, in a natural processes, the earlier form is replaced by the later. In an historical process the earlier form survives into the later.

⁶ Bodleian Library, Collingwood manuscripts, Dep. 16/3

⁷ It is this form of history that Stein Helgeby analyses in *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R. G. Collingwood*. See particularly ch. 2, ‘The World as Process’.

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 discuss the view of history according to which history is “the assertion of fact”. Section 2.4 is about scientific history. 2.3 is about the period during which Collingwood developed his view of scientific history out of his earlier view. And 2.5 is about history as a process.

I lay Dussen’s chapter plan out like this not in order to admonish him for failing to do something he never intended to do anyway, but to make something extremely plain to my own reader. By privileging the ‘activity’ sense of history – the sense in which history is *done* and, ideally, done properly – I have already placed in the foreground of the present study what is dealt with by Dussen in section 2.4, ‘history as a science’. The contents of 2.1, 2.2, and even 2.3 are of only overlapping interest. I am not attempting to furnish the reader with a proportionally representative overview of everything Collingwood says about history. Dussen has tried to do this already; the product of his labour is a fine piece of scholarship, and I don’t wish to make my own advances by reproducing his work here more than is necessary given the question to which the present study is offered as an answer.

Dussen presents his illustration of Collingwood’s thinking with a chronological schema, and the order in which ‘realist’ history and ‘scientific’ history appear in Collingwood’s writings presents Dussen with little difficulty, because ‘history as a science’ clearly emerges when Dussen says it does. But ‘history as process’ does give Dussen some trouble.¹ Although it is logically distinguishable, it occurs in Collingwood’s writings *contemporarily* with discussions of scientific history – in ‘Reality as History’, for instance. The problem for Dussen, then, is that Collingwood’s conception of history as a science is developed after 1926 and is never supplanted. But he also continues to write about history as a process in a way which does not seem to be about the same thing, but must somehow complement it.

Furthermore, because Dussen is answering a chronological question, he misses what is actually quite an important reconciliation of the two main forms of history he is dealing with: the assertion of fact, and history as a science. The truth is, I think, that the relationship between them is not that of one form of history replacing another. It is a

¹ One section in Dussen’s *History as a Science* is meant to provide the reader with as much background as he could need concerning *The Idea of History* for the discussions that follow of certain points from it. The section, though, is disrupted by Dussen’s conflation of what Collingwood says about history *a parte objecti* with what he says occasionally about history being a ‘process’ – which I have called ‘history as becoming’ in order to make a clearer distinction between this and the historian’s ‘process’ of question and answer. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp.63-79. In a later section called ‘Historical process’ Dussen tries to complete his documentation of what Collingwood thinks is history’s ‘object’. He says, on p. 276, that he would be “prepared to defend it”.

complementary relationship in which the first continues to exist somehow ‘within’ the second as an instance of what Collingwood calls ‘primitive survival’.¹ As I’ve said, it is better to speak of three forms of history in Collingwood’s writings than two. And I think it is not only the two forms of history dealt with by Dussen that are logically distinguishable but also reconcilable. It is all three.

Before I describe more fully the overlap of these three forms of ‘history’ as a philosophical concept, there is a terminological ambiguity to clarify. The activities of historians – the *doing* of history – are also processes. Scientific history, when it is done, takes the form of processes in real time – time spent wrestling with the confusions that are eventually turned into proper questions, time spent reviewing existing work, time spent in archives, time spent writing, and so on. It is a process that is (at least partly) investigative. Now, if by ‘process’ Collingwood always meant a process of answering historical questions, the second form of history, history *as* process, would be the same as the third, history as a science, and Dussen would be justified in saying that ‘history as process’ is just another way of saying ‘history as a science’.

But conspicuously Collingwood does not mean this. In scientific history the process is a process of inquiry. In ‘history as process’, ‘process’ means becoming *as such* – or, at least, the kinds of processes and becomings with which history as a science deals. (I’ve tried to remove this ambiguity by substituting the word ‘becoming’ for ‘process’ where I mean to refer to the second form of history.)

Dussen only has two forms of history to work with, divided by a line at 1925/26, so he has to fit ‘history as becoming’ into one of these two forms. He knows not to equate history as a process with history as a science. If he did, he would be claiming that, for Collingwood, the correct way to do history is the same as the correct way to take part in it. Dussen attempts instead to incorporate history as a process into history as the assertion of fact. This is much easier to do, and – apart from the fact that it implicitly spoils his claim about Collingwood’s ‘realism’ being replaced by 1926 – it seems perfectly reasonable, because we have a readily-available concept that allows the two forms to be treated together, and that concept is ‘the subject-matter of history’. The subject-matter of history, as Collingwood discusses it, is a combination of certain types of fact and certain types of process. Thus, for Dussen, certain kinds of process are the ‘objects’ of history, and history as a science complements it because is the ‘subjective’ counterpart. This reduces the two first forms of history in Collingwood’s thought to one: a form we could

¹ *NL*, 9.5

call ‘history as the subject-matter of history’. The complete conception of history would then be the complete conception of the subject-matter of history; and the only philosophy of history that should be done would be the philosophy that sorts out what history should deal with.

The fact that history as a science (on the ‘subjective’ side) does not displace its own ‘object’ (on the ‘objective’ side), either in practice or in theory, should suggest to Dussen that there is no need for the hallmarks of the ‘realism’ he identifies to be negated by the ‘idealism’ he identifies in Collingwood’s work from 1925/26. But as he’s identified a dividing line, he needs to state what it consists in. His answer is, essentially, that Collingwood becomes more ‘sceptical’ about the facts he previously believed (in the manner of a ‘realist’) history to be about. Throughout 2.3 (‘History: from realism to idealism’) Dussen treats the distinguishing mark of ‘realist’ history as the belief in facts, and that of ‘idealism’ (history as a science) as expressions of scepticism about those facts. This is why he concentrates on instances of Collingwood discussing the reality of the historical practice containing things that are partly known and partly unknown – which he treats, in Collingwood’s writings, as if it is the expression of a new, healthy, sophisticated scepticism. The story Dussen tells is that, from 1925, this scepticism began to creep into Collingwood’s thinking about history.

My objections to this rearrangement are really the most minor criticisms of Dussen’s otherwise admirable summary. His is a mighty study, and the fraction of it that I am discussing here is a small one. My first criticism is especially minor, because the question of the correct subject-matter of history is indeed a far greater focus for Collingwood than either the question of the correct conception of facts or processes *per se*. But it is an objection all the same, because Dussen’s equation of the first and second forms of history cancels the being/becoming distinction between “fact as such” and process as such. The relationship between the facts of history and the processes of history are indeed complex, as I’ll explain next, but that relationship in Collingwood’s thinking is not one of plain equation. It is better to think of the subject-matter of history in Collingwood’s thought as something that invokes and combines two necessary but nevertheless distinct concepts: facts in their concrete individuality, and the processes from which they are abstracted.¹

Secondly, as we’ve already seen, Dussen’s proposed chronology does not work. Although it is true that history as a science becomes Collingwood’s interest from the

¹ *NL*, 30.75-76, 34.62

mid-1920s, too much about history being concerned with unique, individual facts survives in Collingwood's later work to allow us to say that the conception of history we see in *Speculum Mentis* is ever replaced. It is not "just a bit of youthful scholasticism which had somehow escaped his bonfire".¹ Rather, the very rudimentary claims about history made there are complemented by more sophisticated later thinking. This is why, having reviewed *Speculum Mentis* while writing his *Autobiography* fifteen years later, Collingwood finds nothing in it to retract.

Finally, Dussen's error is not so much what he concludes from his evidence, but what he sets out to decide. His is a chronological question which seeks changes in Collingwood's view of history. The implicit question he sees Collingwood answering is 'What is history?' and, he notices, the answers appear to change. When, after a certain point, a new answer is given to a question that remains the same, we commonly assume that the old answer is no longer being offered. This, I think, is not the case in Collingwood's philosophy of history. Instead, the old answer is being offered implicitly as part of the new; the answer that was unsatisfactory is retained and *made* satisfactory through the extended form of the next answer.

¹ *NL*, 5.21

The forms of history in an overlapping scale

“When a concept has a dual significance, philosophical and non-philosophical, in its non-philosophical phase it qualifies a limited part of reality, whereas in its philosophical it leaks or escapes out of these limits and invades the neighbouring regions, tending at last to colour our thought of reality as a whole. As a non-philosophical concept it observes the rules of classification, its instances forming a class separate from other classes; as a philosophical concept it breaks these rules, and the class of its instances overlaps those of its co-ordinate species.”

– *An Essay on Philosophical Method*¹

‘History’ is a dually-significant, philosophical and non-philosophical, concept. We’ve already seen some of its non-philosophical significances: the story (or, more cautiously nowadays, *a* story, *a* history) of something; the things that have happened in a certain place; the human past, or the past in general. History in these senses obeys the rules of everyday classification by being distinct from fiction and mythology by being *true*, by not pretending to be the present, and by not pretending to be other subjects, such as physics or philosophy.

But in its philosophical significance, at least as Collingwood explains it, history does indeed invade its neighbouring regions. Those invasions are properly pursued and properly limited only from the point of view of the highest form of history, ‘history as a science’.

I’ve said that these three forms of history are distinct, but also that they ‘overlap’. The idea of classes overlapping and concepts being arranged in a scale of forms is outlined in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*.² There is no need to describe it in general because it really demands an example. Collingwood, realising this, offers the example of philosophical concepts of the good,³ but we’ll stick with the concept of history. I must be clear first that I am not claiming that Collingwood’s methodology of history is the same as his methodology of philosophy, or that there are more parallels between the two than has been noticed. In fact in their methods philosophy and history are very distinct. What

¹ *EPM*, p. 35

² See particularly *EPM*, pp. 26-91

³ *EPM*, 54-91. See especially pp. 90-1 for the culmination of Collingwood’s example, the overlapping scale in moral theory: utility - expediency - duty.

I am claiming is that Collingwood's philosophy of history, as a 'system' of philosophical thinking, conforms to what he says about how philosophy is to be done – “everywhere the same rule holds good”.¹

Each of these forms I've described offers an answer to the implicit question 'What is history?' Each “member” of the scale is an answer that realizes the “generic essence”.² But the lower member is “good in itself but bad relatively to its neighbour”.³ Lower forms of 'history' are defective from the point of view of higher forms. They are not complete answers. In the instance of Collingwood's philosophy of history, those 'defects' tend to take the character of *arbitrariness*. Collingwood is aware that arbitrariness must somehow be eradicated from the description of a concept like history:

Upholders of the doctrine under examination would say that here the historian is making an arbitrary distinction between things that are really the same, and that his conception of history is an unphilosophically narrow one, restricted by the imperfect development of his technique; very much as some historians... have mistakenly restricted the field of historical thought to the history of politics. The question must therefore be raised, why do historians habitually identify history with the history of human affairs?⁴

Each form of history offers (or *is*) something of the “essence” of history, but the reason for that answer rather than another is not offered. Lower forms appear, then, not as satisfactory answers to a question, but as arbitrary, perhaps habitual, restrictions and definitions. It is only from the point of view of the highest form – history as a science – that the defective lower forms are cured of their arbitrariness. The primitive “essence” survives, while defects are negated.

'Question and answer' helps to show in very simple terms what that overlap looks like. History, in the first form, means “the assertion of fact” – unique, individual, concrete facts, and not abstract rules or laws. The third form (history as a science) does not, as Dussen says, replace the first form in Collingwood's thinking, but complements it, because 'history' in this third form means the investigations of historians whereby those individual facts are asserted. When, in *Speculum Mentis*, Collingwood stresses that

¹ *EPM*, p. 44; *NL*, 10.34

² *EPM*, p. 82. For Collingwood's explanation for why the Principle of Limited Objective does not abrogate “the idea of essence”, see *NL*, 36.21-24

³ *EPM*, p.86

⁴ See *IH*, pp. 212-13

history is the assertion of *fact*, he is showing that although ‘science’ deals in categories, classes, universals, and so on, its concepts are actually abstractions from the kind of individual facts that comprise reality, and with which history is concerned. The assertion of individual, unique, concrete facts is done not by a scientific consciousness, therefore, but by an historical one, which is why science presupposes history.¹

History still asserts individual facts in Collingwood’s thinking from 1925/26 onwards, but now it is the method of the assertion that is in Collingwood’s sights.² The emphasis now falls not on history asserting *facts*, but on history *asserting* facts. There are, he is then adding, good and bad ways of asserting historical facts. So, he begins to ask, which are the good, and which the bad?

The overlap of the first and second forms of the concept ‘history’ has already been remarked upon. History as the assertion of individual facts overlaps with history as becoming in the ‘subject-matter’ of history. The subject-matter of history is processes (of a certain kind³) that really happened/that really are happening. Without the element of ‘fact’ here, the subject-matter of history would be processes alone, which would mean that history might have the same subject-matter as fiction. And without the element of process, the subject-matter of history would be individual facts, or states of affairs at points in time: the processes by which one state of affairs becomes another, and then another, and so on, could not be narrated. That would be to cancel what all history hitherto told has been.

For Collingwood it is only certain kinds of process that history should, and can, concern itself with. History should be about actions.⁴ Stein Helgeby’s *Action as History* is especially pertinent here. Helgeby is not interested in Collingwood’s philosophy of history as a science, and his chapter on the logic of question and answer is not about

¹ *SM*, pp.201-2

² What I am crudely describing here is the development of the concept of ‘history’ in Collingwood’s thinking – or at least part of it. Gary Browning has already done something similar for Collingwood’s concept of philosophy, so I have not touched on that here. Browning pays special attention to consistencies with Hegel. See Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 27-50

³ For a concise overview of Collingwood’s idea of the kinds of actions and processes that comprise the ‘object’ or ‘subject-matter’ of history, see Mink’s summary in ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, pp. 161-7

⁴ In a short section of *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood* called ‘Mind and history’, David Boucher discusses history as the “explanatory model which Collingwood used for the study of mind and its activities.” (See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 110-19. This passage taken from p. 110.) What Boucher finds is that through making the subject-matter of history “mind as pure act” (pp. 111-12), or mind as becoming, Collingwood aligns himself with a familiar idealist trope: the continuous identity of mind amid flux and change – the doctrine of absolute immanence. (See p. 114) He also finds that the subject-matter of history is conceived slightly differently in *The Idea of History* from how it is conceived in *The New Leviathan*. Because this study is concerned with history as a science, and because he has already done the work, these differences that Boucher has found are of no concern here. See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 110, 118-19

historical method.¹ His intention is to analyse and exhibit in fine detail everything *else* Collingwood says about history. He analyses Collingwood's theories of action, process – including his argument that reality is history, which Helgeby calls “The World as Process”² – and his theory of the link between philosophy and duty. It is a fine piece of scholarship. But whether Helgeby knows it or not, he has presented only Collingwood's philosophy of history where ‘history’ denotes what I'm calling the ‘second’ form. Without the advantage of ‘retrospect’ from the form ‘history as a science’ – which Helgeby refers to occasionally as “epistemology”³ – those theories of action and of processes never lose their sense of arbitrariness, and the arguments Collingwood gives for their relevance to a philosophy of history are still only analyses of what is presupposed by history in the sense he intends.

But where all three forms overlap, “history is a kind of research or inquiry”⁴; a science in which the conclusions established are the facts of a reality that is itself a process. Because this is the highest form of ‘history’, it incorporates the two lower forms, gives reason to what is hitherto arbitrary, and thus provides the most complete answer to the question of what history ‘is’.

v

The forms of history on a philosophical menu

We face, then, three possible directions in which to continue pursuing our questions about the how and the why of history. We might pursue what Collingwood says about the method and value of history in any of these three forms. But only one of them suits both questions.

The first form, according to which history is something concerned with unique, individual facts, is not (stated in this way) an activity at all, so there can be nothing to say about how to do it properly. Just because we have been told that there is an activity concerned with ‘unique, individual facts’ does not mean that we can work out how to do it, or say anything about why it is to be done. As long as we focus on the individual,

¹ Helgeby therefore needn't devote more than a paragraph to ‘question and answer’ as a theory of inquiry. See *Action as History*, p. 81. For the most part ‘question and answer’ is dealt with by Helgeby as it is dealt with by Mink: as a theory of logic in the abstract. See pp. 77-100

² Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 47-62. The discussion of reality as process only really gets going from p. 52.

³ Helgeby, *Action as History*, p. 58

⁴ *IH*, p. 9

unique, concrete nature of the facts asserted, we are concerned only with subject-matter, albeit incompletely described. As soon as we turn attention to the way in which the assertion is made, we have already left behind the first form of history.

The second form, history as becoming, *is* a process, so it is not nonsense to talk about how one best ‘does’ it, or takes part in it. But that question is not yet about how to ‘do’ history. It is instead about how to take part in becoming. It might, then, be taken quite reasonably as a question about how best to take part in the process of human history – which is a question about how to live a good life. If history is change as such, a philosopher of history (of ‘history’ in this sense) might even exploit contemporary parlance and offer advice on how to be a good ‘change agent’. Secondly, the value of the historical process, or the question of what it is for, makes sense only with the presupposition – and an ‘absolute presupposition’ at that¹ – that reality has a purpose at all. And historians do not need to share that presupposition.

Taken together these two forms give us the subject-matter of history. But even if we take Collingwood’s side and define the subject-matter as *res gestae* as he does² – things done, done deliberately for reasons, and done in reality not in fiction – we still have no reason to evaluate different ways of doing it. Helgeby’s *Action as History* is as complete an account of Collingwood’s philosophy of history *as* ‘the subject-matter of history’ as one could want. “The underlying idea of the study (and which I take to be Collingwood’s)”, he says, “is that to give an account of history is to give an account of action, and to give an account of action is to give an account of history”.³ But it is precisely because he accepts the equation of the second form unmodified that Helgeby cannot discuss what Collingwood says about how investigative history is done and why.⁴ With these two forms of history taken together (giving us a philosophy of history *as* its own subject-matter), ‘scissors and paste’ is perfectly legitimate, as long as it doesn’t stray from the subject-matter of *action*. And although it makes sense to ask what scissors-and-paste history could be for, the answer remains a matter for utility or caprice, because there is nothing within its codes of practice that points to a more specific purpose or value. There is nothing wrong with history born of propagandistic intent, for example.

¹ See *EM*, pp. 29-33

² *IH*, p. 9

³ Helgeby, *Action as History*, p. 2

⁴ Quite rightly Helgeby *does* attempt to deal with Collingwood’s argument about the purpose of history as serving the concept of duty. But, as I’ve explained below, regardless of whether or not the reader, unlike Alan Donagan, can extend his agreement to Collingwood’s theory of duty, the whole argument about history and duty does not actually do justice to his philosophy of history anyway. See Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 121-37

There is a further point to make about doing philosophy of history by recourse to philosophy of subject-matter. Like Dussen, David Boucher has provided, in his *Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, an insightful account of how Collingwood's discussions of the subject-matter of history invoke his philosophy of mind.¹ Boucher illuminates the very fine points of Collingwood's philosophy of the subject-matter of history, says what this reveals about his philosophy of mind, and eventually explains how Collingwood thinks it serves morality.² Dussen's and Boucher's focus on Collingwood's philosophy of mind is entirely faithful to Collingwood because, as Mink has also noticed, most of what is discussed in *The Idea of History* belongs to the philosophy of mind, rather (Mink says) "than to what is *ordinarily* called 'the philosophy of history'."³ But these discussions of the subject-matter of history are not about how history is done according to Collingwood – and, in view of their respective aims, they don't need to be.

Boucher is, however, unusual in paying close attention to what Collingwood takes Locke's "historical, plain Method" to be.⁴ Now this, you might think, says something about how history is to be done. It is, after all, called a 'method'. The historical plain method is briefly discussed in both *The Idea of History* and *The New Leviathan*. And what Boucher notices – rightly – is that the historical plain method isn't an investigative historical method at all. Locke means by it (according to Collingwood's description) merely the aim of accounting for "the ways whereby our understandings come to attain those notions of things we have".⁵ By "historical, plain Method" Locke means, then, making claims, or *assertions*, about how we got our ideas.⁶ Nothing is said about the procedure whereby those assertions are arrived at or made, either by Locke or by Collingwood's reading of Locke's historical plain method. In fact the historical plain method refers only, again, to the kind of process that forms the subject-matter of historical narrative. According to these criteria, Locke's theory of private property as laid out in the *Second Treatise*, and Rousseau's similar but importantly different version in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, both accord perfectly with the historical plain method – even though both accounts are entirely speculative and offer nothing resembling good

¹ See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 110-19

² Collingwood thinks the idiographic nature of history serves the true conception of duty. His argument though, as I've said in Chapter Six, does not work. My only intention here is to remind the reader that subject-matter does not have a purpose: only activities have a purpose.

³ Mink, 'Collingwood's Historicism', p. 155

⁴ See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 111-12

⁵ *IH*, pp. 71-2

⁶ *IH*, pp. 71-2

evidence. If this is a ‘method’, it is not investigative at all, let alone scientifically investigative.

Now, if “historical, plain Method” were taken to mean digging up the presuppositions of our current ideas, and presenting them chronologically forwards – which is to say ‘archaeologically backwards’ – with the deepest (absolute) presuppositions coming first, and the narrative culminating in ‘the present’, then the *Second Treatise* is such a work. Indeed, *The New Leviathan* too would then be a work of historical plain method.¹ But that would not accord at all with what Collingwood says about the importance of historians using relics and offering evidence to the court of truth in history. In fact, it would be a kind of pseudo-history: it would be metaphysics narrated as history. Furthermore Collingwood does not say that this is what he means by historical plain method. In *The New Leviathan* he actually says that “the essence of this [historical plain] method is concentration upon *facts*. ‘Facts’ is a name for what history is about: *facta, gesta*, things done, *πεπραγμένα*, deeds”.² What this shows is, firstly, that historical plain method is not what Collingwood means by history as a science; and secondly, it shows how easily a philosopher of history can be diverted from an analysis of method into a discussion of the features of the kind of thing that method is supposed to deal with.

The fact that these two lower forms of history, each on its own or taken together, respond to two perfectly ordinary questions about an activity either (a) by making a nonsense of them, or (b) by leaving their answers so much to caprice that answering them becomes frivolous, indicates that they are inadequate conceptions of history. The only form of history in Collingwood’s thinking that fits with our questions is, then, scientific history. Indeed, it is partly because only scientific history can deal with such questions that it is ‘higher’ than the other forms which it anyway contains. As history is something that can be done, it is possible potentially that it may be done well or badly. And as it is a special activity it presupposes some kind of purpose, so it makes sense to ask what that activity is for.

¹ This, I think, is what Gary Browning takes *The New Leviathan* to be. “*The New Leviathan* reveals that Collingwood is committed to the Hegelian project of working out a highly generalised historical account of the development of freedom”, he says. Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 95. See also p. 75 where Browning says that, for Collingwood, philosophy “rethinks the principles underlying practices, which have been developed historically”; and see especially pp. 125-33 where Browning stresses the Hegelianism of *The New Leviathan*, and compares it to *The Philosophy of Mind* and *The Philosophy of Right*. I daresay Browning has a point. My own point is merely that the philosophical method of *The New Leviathan* – even if it does coincide with what Collingwood takes as Locke’s historical plain method – is not the method of investigative history.

² *NL*, 9.11. See also 9.2

From here on we're dealing almost entirely with history as a science – that is, the mode of 'Baconian', systematic, question-and-answer thinking that we call history. I define Collingwood's work on history as a science as that which concerns how history is to be done properly; the philosophy of historical method which, in his letter to Croce, he looked forward to working on; the "problems in historical methodology" which he says in his *Autobiography* his "head was already full of"¹; and the answers to one of the three opening questions of the 1926 'Lectures', "What is the best way of doing it? in other words, what are the principles of method by which historical study is or ought to be guided?"²

"Strangely enough", Dussen writes, "his [Collingwood's] views on the methodological aspects of history have not received the attention one would expect – and, one should add, they deserve"³ Dussen adds that "it is no exaggeration to assert that Collingwood's contribution to the theory of historical methodology is an almost completely neglected aspect of his thought on history"⁴

This neglect seems to be due at least in part to a debate going back to the mid-1950s over whether what Collingwood says about history is to be taken to be taken as 'methodology' of history at all, rather than, perhaps, just a 'philosophy of history' in a less prescriptive sense – something like 'what we're doing' when we do history.⁵ This debate had already been widely discussed – more, I think, than it deserved to be. If Collingwood's writings had nothing prescriptively 'methodological' about them, then he not only fails to put into writing whatever it was he had in mind when he wrote, in his *Autobiography*, that his "head was already full of problems in historical methodology",⁶ but he also fails to attempt an answer to one of those three opening questions laid out in his

¹ *A*, p. 85

² L26, *IH*, p. 359

³ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 283. Dussen continues shortly after by pointing to the (then) emerging work of Cebik, Couse, and Coady. See note 2 on p. 415. He also explains, on pp. 292-3, why he supersedes what they've said.

⁴ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 295

⁵ The debate arose in the context of discussing the doctrine of re-enactment. For a neat overview of this debate see Margit Hurup Nielsen, 'Re-Enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory* vol. 20, no. 1 (February, 1981), p. 3 (figures identified on p. 4, note 11). Fred Inglis refers obliquely to the same debate; see *History Man*, p. 84. The debate then rather burst its banks, and was carried on as if what was at stake was not only the correct interpretation of the doctrine of re-enactment specifically, but what Collingwood says about historical knowledge in general. See for instance R. B. Smith, 'R. G. Collingwood's definition of historical knowledge', *History of European Ideas* 33 (2007), pp. 350-71. It is of course possible to think that the doctrine of re-enactment is 'non-methodological' in the sense that it is meant to signal something about what is demanded for the satisfaction of historical questions, without concluding that Collingwood has nothing to say about historical method. See Dussen's discussion of this in *History as a Science*, p. 283

⁶ *A*, p. 85

own 1926 'Lectures', "What is the best way of doing it? in other words, what are the principles of method by which historical study is or ought to be guided?"¹

This debate over whether or not Collingwood is to be read 'methodologically' is anyway, I think, based on a false dichotomy. The whole purpose of *The Idea of History* is to exhibit the great variety of ways people have thought about history, about the past, and of how they have practised history as a discipline; and Collingwood intends the reader to learn from this historical overview something about the correct and incorrect ways to think about all of those. Collingwood's philosophy of history is *prescriptive* in the regard that it *describes* what he takes to be the correct way of thinking about and doing history. If it weren't meant to be this, then there would be no reason for him to devote so much of *The Idea of History* to explaining to his readers/audience what was and *is* wrong with so much of what he describes, which he does in every one of his short case-studies. Collingwood's is indeed a study of the historian's method, but *not* 'method' in the sense of recommending to historians how to compare, date, and verify their sources, telling archaeologists what clues to look for on the surface, or how to organise and present their findings. That may be the sort of thing that 'methodologically'-minded readers are sometimes looking for. But Collingwood's 'methodology', although still prescriptive, is more general than that, more abstracted from such details of practice.² Take the three 'rules of method' he prescribes in 'The Historical Imagination', for instance: (1) The historian's picture must be localized in time and space; (2) it must be coherent with itself, since there can only be *one* true past; and (3) it must stand in a particular relation to evidence.³ These three rules of method are hardly debatable: the first two are actually presuppositions of historical practice as everyone knows it already. But they are no less prescriptive, no less methodological, just because historians already presuppose them.⁴

It is no longer true to say that history as a science has been neglected, and this is due largely to Dussen. *History as a Science* is a mighty work, and the reader must not think that the criticisms I have made of some of its minutiae constitute an attack on it or its author. But it should be noticed that, because I have outlined history as a science as 'the

¹ L26, *IH*, p. 359

² Collingwood, I think, says as much about the methods of historians in general as it is possible to say without inviting infinite possible exceptions. As Louis Mink points out in *Mind, History and Dialectic*, "no matter how circumspect and carefully qualified your generalization, it can be confuted in an instant by a university president with original ideas and a post to fill – or even, for that matter, by an historian with original ideas". Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 161

³ *IH*, p. 246

⁴ This same 'general' or 'abstract' prescriptive methodology is to be found also in *An Autobiography*. See for example *A*, pp. 84-7

highest form of history’, which Dussen does not, I must now explain how what Collingwood says about the lower forms is ‘absorbed’ by it – how the “essence” of history they offered survives into the highest form – and how this fits with what we’ve already heard about ‘question and answer’. Because Dussen does not entertain the idea that the two different forms of history he discusses complement each other, he does not need to outline how this ‘absorption’ works. And because he does not see the importance of ‘question and answer’ that I do in Collingwood’s philosophy of scientific history, he does not need to devote the space to describing, as I have, the characteristics of historical questions.

Conversely, Louis Mink *has* written about Collingwood’s philosophy of history as part of an overlapping scale of forms, which he thinks makes sense only in view of the ‘dialectical’ nature of Collingwood’s philosophy as a whole. According to what Mink says in his article ‘Collingwood’s Historicism: A Dialectic of Process’, in his statements about activities and processes in general Collingwood “is thinking of them at different levels related so that one includes but transforms the other. A relation of this sort is *dialectical*”.¹ “A dialectical series”, he says later, “is *cumulative* in the sense that earlier or ‘lower’ members are not merely replaced by later or ‘higher’ members but are preserved although modified in the later ones”²; “the key to understanding Collingwood’s thought is an appreciation of how fundamentally and pervasively dialectical it is”³.

I have avoided the term ‘dialectical’ here, since I’ve found it to invite more misunderstanding into discussion than it does clarity.⁴ What it would indicate here, were it to be employed is, I think, clear enough anyway.⁵ Now, Mink closes his article, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, by claiming that appreciating the dialectical nature of Collingwood’s thinking shows why it has been “so subject to misinterpretation”. The meaning of Collingwood’s general principles (or “recessive doctrines”), Mink says, “is dependent on his conception of dialectic as a presupposition, and it is they [*sic*] which most systematically relate his ‘principles of history’ to his larger philosophy”.⁶

¹ Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, p. 168. Mink provides an overview of how he understands ‘dialectic’ in Collingwood’s *Essay on Philosophical Method* (on pp. 170-3).

² Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, p. 173. Mink cites *NL*, 9.51

³ Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, p. 168

⁴ Any of Collingwood’s readers who wishes to discuss Hegel-style dialectics in his work ought to consult first *NL*, 33.83-92, especially (in reference to Collingwood’s philosophy of history) 33.92.

⁵ A further reason I have avoided it is that it might too easily be confused with the distinct sense of ‘dialectic’ Collingwood employs in *The New Leviathan*. See *NL*, 24.57. Both are to be contrasted with the sense Collingwood thinks Hegel (mistakenly) gives to ‘dialectic’, and Marx’s attack on free will by his modification of it. See *NL*, 33.83-99

⁶ Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, p. 177

My dissatisfactions with these claims are, again, very minor. Firstly, what Mink says here closes his article: he does not go on to show his reader exactly how, in view of this ‘dialectical nature’, Collingwood’s principles of history make sense – though he recognises that, more generally, Collingwood’s view is that “earlier terms are *retrospectively and only retrospectively* both necessary and sufficient”.¹ And secondly, Mink seems to imply that those principles can only be assented to by one prepared to presuppose ‘dialectical’ philosophy. I think most writers in philosophy of history will not assent so readily to such a presupposition, albeit partly because of what they think ‘dialectics’ means. But it seems to me that they don’t need to assent to ‘dialectics’ anyway. They only need to presuppose history as a science in Collingwood’s basic, ‘Baconian’ sense. We’ll shortly see exactly what this entails. I will attempt to give the account that Mink doesn’t give, and try to explain why Collingwood’s embattled doctrines make sense in view – in ‘retrospective’ view – of history as a science. My answer is, in short, that the features of history that Collingwood discusses, in contexts other than that of how history is to be done scientifically, are absorbed as terms of a unique kind of question – the *historical question* – to which history as a science, uniquely, asserts answers.

When I say ‘they are absorbed’ I don’t mean that this is what Collingwood is trying to describe. He isn’t, and to claim that he is would be a claim about Collingwood’s secret intentions that would starve the reader of evidence. I mean rather that this is how Collingwood’s conclusions are rescued from his sometimes weak arguments – weak because they often fail to be conclusive, and sometimes don’t quite succeed in shaking off ‘arbitrariness’. The way in which I’m trying to provide that rescue, however, is faithful to the question-and-answer logic of history as a science, upon which as we’ve seen Collingwood certainly does intend to insist.

¹ Mink, ‘Collingwood’s Historicism’, pp. 174-5

Question-and-answer history in Collingwood scholarship

First let us survey the existing work on the subject now at hand: ‘question and answer’ in Collingwood’s philosophy of history. My claim is not that those who have studied Collingwood’s philosophy of history have always missed the question-and-answer principle,¹ but rather that they might not always see, or remember, how thoroughgoing it is meant to be for *all* systematic thinking, all science. They do not see it as having the same thoroughgoing significance to Collingwood’s philosophy of history that I do, and they have not offered defences of his contentions that appeal to ‘question and answer’ in history.

Alan Donagan devotes chapter four of his excellent *Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (1962) to ‘Question and Answer’.² It is an insightful discussion of the theme and, in what it deals with, perfectly accurate. But Donagan is concerned only very briefly with history in that chapter. Mostly it is dedicated to the theory of presuppositions in itself.³ Even in §3 of the chapter, ‘The Functions of Interrogative Thinking’, Donagan says nothing about history. Donagan saves history for two later chapters, ‘Scientific History’ and ‘The Philosophy of History’. Quite rightly, a ten-page section in the former chapter deals with ‘Question and Evidence’.⁴ There Donagan discusses the formal logic used by historians (especially *tollendo tollens* demonstrations) to connect their evidence to their conclusions. There is more on the principle of question and answer in archaeology specifically in a later four-page section,⁵ where Donagan’s intention is only to defend Collingwood’s principle against certain misinterpretations – including the misreading according to which “to pose a problem permitted its answer to be predicted”. He also discusses the criticisms Collingwood received in an obituary from I. A. Richmond concerning his archaeological practice specifically. In chapter nine, ‘The Philosophy of History’, Donagan discusses several of Collingwood’s arguments about history, including

¹ Dussen has said that he finds it “amazing how little attention has been paid by philosophers interested in Collingwood’s philosophy of history to his activities in the fields of archaeology and history”. He also reminds his readers that “Collingwood made it abundantly clear in his *Autobiography* how closely his theory of history was based on his archaeological and historical practice”. (See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 201) The general thrust of the present essay is that philosophers writing about Collingwood have also commonly paid little attention to the full scope of ‘question and answer’. I would suggest that the two oversights may well be related.

² Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 66-93

³ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 66-79. For Donagan’s explanation of how Collingwood’s conception of presuppositions differs from that of other (later) thinkers, see pp. 68-72.

⁴ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 182-91

⁵ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 196-200

his presuppositions, his doctrine of re-enactment, and his claims about history and what Donagan calls “practical wisdom”. But except for a short mention in the section on re-enactment, he does not refer to the logic of question and answer – and even there it is a little obscured by Donagan’s tendency to refer to it in passing as ‘Baconian’ thinking.¹

The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood deserves its reputation as a ‘classic’ study and, as we’ve seen, ‘question and answer’ is by no means absent from it. But there are lacunae. (See summary below.) Again, these lacunae are not failings: Donagan probably never intended to speak to such tasks. It is my intention here merely to discover where there is room for more to be said and where there isn’t.

Louis Mink’s *Mind, History and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (1969) is another ‘classic’ study. Mink’s sub-section, “The ‘Logic of Question and Answer,’ and Some Criticisms of It”, actually falls in chapter five, ‘The Logic of Thought’, and not in chapter six, ‘The Grammar of Action: History’. ‘Question and answer’ makes no significant reappearance in the chapter on history. It is because Mink limits ‘question and answer’ to his treatment of Collingwood’s logic that he makes his job of defending some of Collingwood’s claims about history more difficult, I think, than it needs to be. It is, though, quite an artificial limitation, as I think Mink probably realised. He says, while discussing ‘question and answer’, that what Collingwood “had in mind was not a propositional logic at all, or a substitute for one, but a *theory of inquiry*. He was interested not at all in the theory of *proof*, which is the subject of formal logic, but in the theory of *discovery*, which formal logic does not even claim to deal with”.² Mink is right, and it is this theory of inquiry as it pertains to history as a science that the present study is given over to.

More recently, in *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R. G. Collingwood* (2004), Stein Helgeby has renewed Mink’s divorce of ‘question and answer’ from Collingwood’s philosophy of history. Helgeby’s book is a fine exposition of Collingwood’s theories of action,³ thought,⁴ process,⁵ and morality.⁶ All of these, he says, form parts of Collingwood’s philosophy of history. As I’ve explained, Helgeby is not wrong. But, as a treatment of Collingwood’s philosophy of history, it is incomplete, because it neglects

¹ See especially *Later Philosophy*, pp. 214-16 (Donagan’s section on re-enactment), and within that his very brief (paragraph-long) argument that re-enactment is still methodologically ‘Baconian’.

² Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 124. See also p. 138

³ The whole book really presents a theory of action, but Helgeby’s discussion of “activity” specifically is to be found in *Action as History*, pp. 27-45

⁴ Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 63-76

⁵ Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 47-62

⁶ Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 121-37

history as a science. Helgeby is satisfied with the second form of history, according to which history 'is' its own subject-matter, which comprises processes of a particular kind. Helgeby therefore needn't devote more than a paragraph to 'question and answer' as a theory of inquiry.¹ For the most part 'question and answer' is dealt with by Helgeby as it is dealt with by Mink: as a theory of logic in the abstract.²

Another recent work, Marnie Hughes-Warrington's *How Good an Historian Shall I Be? R.G. Collingwood, the Historical Imagination and Education* (2003), is a very suggestive study of the relevance of Collingwood's philosophy of history to education – in theory and in practice. With this in mind she revisits debates around re-enactment, the subject-matter of history, and history's claim to self-knowledge. She is particularly focused, though, on Collingwood's theory of 'historical imagination'. Imagination and historical imagination are of particular importance to education, she argues, and she has provided a very high-quality discussion of what Collingwood says about how the imagination operates in history.³ What she does not discuss is how imagination relates to 'question and answer', and how 'question and answer' operates in historical thinking. Rather, historical imagination in its *a priori* guise is taken to be a method of its own.⁴ This is, I think, because she is interested in the implications of Collingwood's philosophy for history as a lesson, and not history as a science. There is nothing wrong with this focus. But it does mean that she has nothing to say about the possible educational implications of what Collingwood says about the importance of framing historical questions properly. Hughes-Warrington also ignores 'question and answer' in her discussion of re-enactment. This, I think, forces her into a diversionary comparison of Collingwood's process of re-enactment with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. I have explained in the right place why this is diversionary and anyway unnecessary.

We've already heard much from Jan van der Dussen. His admirably thorough *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (1981) is of greatest relevance to the present study, which is why I mention him last. Dussen's treatment of 'Question and Answer' in *History as a Science* falls precisely where it should: in his chapter on 'Historical

¹ Helgeby, *Action as History*, p. 81. The discussion is also exegetical.

² Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 77-100. With his great benefit of years of reading Helgeby has, however, been able to provide a more extensive overview of other commentators' work on 'question and answer' in general than I have here. See *Action as History*, pp. 84-8. On pp. 88-91 there is also a neat comparison of Collingwood with Dewey.

³ See Hughes-Warrington, pp.129-54

⁴ See Hughes-Warrington, pp.135-45

Method'.¹ He discusses 'question and answer' as a "logic of inquiry" in history; and he devotes a couple of pages to each of three requirements laid out by Collingwood for a question to be meaningful – namely, that it must 'arise', that its relation to evidence must be clear, and that it must be put in the right way. There is also a short discussion of 'limited objective'. Dussen deals masterfully with each, and draws on his usual depth and breadth of knowledge of Collingwood's writings, published and unpublished.

To summarise: The effect of some commentators' neglect of the fact that, for Collingwood, scientific knowledge means answers to questions has been two-fold. Firstly, elaborate defences of some of Collingwood's apparently contentious points about history have been mounted which might easily have achieved their aims by showing that, with the question-and-answer principle in position, there was little need for a defence of that kind in the first place. And secondly a dispute has been allowed to erupt over whether Collingwood thought historical facts and knowledge were 'objective', or whether he thought they were 'subjective'² (xvi, below).

The first can, I think, be said of Louis Mink's defences of what he thinks are Collingwood's six key theses in his ambitious study, *Mind, History and Dialectic*.³ Mink's six key theses are at least partly inspired by the layout of Alan Donagan's chapter, 'The Philosophy of History',⁴ published eight years earlier. Donagan's strategy is similar, firstly in so far as he mostly attempts to defend Collingwood's claims on Collingwood's own terms in order to remain faithful to the original reasoning, and secondly in so far as he doesn't appeal to the logic of question and answer for those defences.

Donagan's strategy is, though, interestingly superior to Mink's, because he very frankly admits that the points Collingwood presents as arguments about history – *i.e.* that it is about thoughts/the insides of actions; that historians must re-enact past thoughts; that past thoughts 'live' in the present, etc. – are in fact *presuppositions* of the kind of history Collingwood has in mind.⁵ Donagan is right, and I'll warn the reader now that this is a point I will repeat here *ad nauseam*. What are frequently taken to be Collingwood's argument about *why* history 'is this' or is 'about this' are actually attempts to shore up the presuppositions that those conceptions of history make – which is not the same thing.

¹ See Dussen, *History as a Science*. Dussen's chapter 'Historical Method' covers pp. 283-308. Of that chapter, pp. 295-305 deal with 'question and answer'.

² Dussen has documented this dispute in a section of *History as a Science* called 'Historical Objectivity'. See pp. 119. I also deal with this below in conjunction with the dispute over 'constructionism'.

³ See pp. 157-94

⁴ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 210-47

⁵ See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 210-47

Dussen's lacunae are much tighter – more, as we say, 'niche'. In neither *History as a Science* nor his article 'Collingwood's Claim that History is a Science' does Dussen say anything about what sense 'question and answer' might make of re-enactment¹ (Part IV, below); or of the 'what-why paradox' (xv, below); or what it might help to clarify about the historical 'object' (xvi, below). And he does not discuss 'question and answer' in the section of *History as a Science* on 'The Use of History' (Part VI, below). Dussen's book will not be surpassed for some time, but one minor shortfall is that he is not interested in historical questions beyond what Collingwood says quite explicitly.²

In what remains of this 'Part' of my study I have selected and discussed from Collingwood's writings four 'key theses' of my own: first, that history is only about meaning (x); second, that history is about particulars and not universals (xi); third, that history is about processes (xii); and fourth, that once the historian knows *what* was done he knows *why* it was done (xv). Fifthly (xvi) I have dealt with this debate about 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' / 'realism' and 'constructionism'.³

My principle of selection has been either (a) that the point is an important contention in the context of what Collingwood was trying to correct, so that seeing the sense in it is important to evaluating him as a thinker on history; or (b) that the point pertains especially to debates about 'method' in the history of ideas still. All of these 'theses', I am now saying, are actually presuppositions of scientific history. In general these presuppositions of scientific history that Collingwood discusses are actually widely shared. They can be bolstered in other ways,⁴ or they might not be questioned at all. The difficulties around these points can be 'unlocked', I will show, by using 'question and answer' as something like what Gary Browning calls a "skeleton key".⁵

¹ See *History as a Science*, pp. 96-109. Dussen's argument is based on deciding into which of two categories the doctrine of re-enactment falls, methodological or non-methodological. I have explained below why the dichotomy between the two categories is a false one.

² See for example *History as a Science*, pp. 354-5, where Dussen follows loyally Collingwood's reasoning about the distinctness of history from natural science owing to a difference between natural and historical processes.

³ Dussen has documented this dispute in a section of *History as a Science* called 'Historical Objectivity'. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 119. I also deal with this below in conjunction with the dispute over 'constructionism'.

⁴ Donagan too defends those presuppositions. But when he comes to an argument that is not about the presuppositions of history, but concerns instead the practical use of history, his defence turns into attack. See his *Later Philosophy*, pp. 236-47

⁵ Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 2

The special character of inference in history: a problem

Now, it is not part of Dussen's purpose, either in *History as a Science* or in 'Collingwood's Claim', to deal with Collingwood's assertion that history is a *distinct* science. Yet this is the crux of Collingwood's contentions about history as a science. 'History as a science' is not 'history as part of another science'. Plenty of the authors dealt with in *The Idea of History* contend that history could be made more scientific, but Collingwood attacks them because he thinks what they say bulldozes history's distinctness. In general, Collingwood appeals to features of the natural-scientific model of knowledge that do not exist in history, or do not exist in the same way: features such as ascertaining facts, withholding value judgements, and framing laws or "subsuming" objects under them.¹ Because it has been so successful over the last few centuries, Collingwood says, that kind of science, that model of knowledge, had attained default status as the model of knowledge *per se*. This is probably why, Collingwood observes, recent philosophy of science had 'totally neglected' history.² All of this, Collingwood thinks, was accepted by the historians or philosophers of his youth:

Any of them, without special preparation, could have given an entire set of lectures on the problems of 'scientific' method. And when they discussed the theory of knowledge it was plain that, as a rule, they regarded the word 'knowledge' in that phrase as more or less equivalent to knowledge of the world of nature or physical world... My 'realist' friends, when I said this to them, replied that there was no gap at all; that their theory of knowledge was a theory of knowledge, not a theory of this kind of knowledge or that kind of knowledge; that certainly it applied to 'scientific' knowledge, but equally to historical knowledge or any other kind I liked to name; and that it was foolish to think that one kind of knowledge could need a special epistemological study all to itself.³

There was, then, a gap in the philosophy of history that was invisible to these thinkers because it was thought to have been filled by 'the' theory of knowledge more

¹ *IH*, pp. 126-7

² *A*, p. 84

³ *A*, pp. 84-5

generally. “I could see”, Collingwood continues, “that they were mistaken”.¹ Anyone who attempted the application of natural-scientific knowledge to history would find, “if he knew what historical thinking was like, that no such application was possible”.²

I think ‘question and answer’ serves very well Collingwood’s arguments for history as a distinct science. And, it seems to me, he does need rescuing on that point, since he typically circumnavigates what is essential: the starting point of history as a distinct science is a type of question that is distinctly ‘historical’. By ‘circumnavigate’ I mean that, in order to make his point, Collingwood usually discusses history as being distinct on account of (1) a distinct subject-matter and/or (2) a distinct form of inference. But, in the first place, this argument about distinct subject-matter is actually one he also attacks; while, in the second, he never successfully explains the supposed specialness of historical inference. What he should have argued instead of all of this, especially in view of his own logic of question and answer, is that, as I’ve said, history is the science that answers questions of a particular character, and is the only science that can do so.³

That’s the overview. Here’s the detail: It is commonly thought that sciences are distinct because of essential differences between their respectively distinct subject-matter, or ‘objects’. Collingwood gives his readers plenty of reasons to think that this is his argument for the distinctness of history as a science. He even introduces *The Idea of History* by telling the reader that “historical thought has an object with peculiarities of its own”.⁴ History is the science of *res gestae*, he says.⁵ This argument has been faithfully followed by the ever close-reading Jan van der Dussen, who says that Collingwood’s “refusal to reduce natural science to history is derived from the distinction between a natural and an historical process”.⁶ It is also faithfully followed by Alan Donagan who (as Dussen would later) opens his description of ‘scientific history’ with a distinction between different types of object.⁷ Stein Helgeby has since written a whole book on the distinct subject-matter of history, *Action as History*. “The epistemology of history follows from the character of its object”, he says; “In Collingwood’s view, because the processes of nature differ from the processes of history, our knowledge of nature and of history

¹ *A*, p. 85

² *A*, p. 85

³ *IH*, pp. 220-1. See also pp. 239-40

⁴ *IH*, p. 5

⁵ *IH*, p. 9

⁶ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 354

⁷ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 176-7

differ, and the methods of each differ”.¹ More recently still, Gary Browning observes that there is “overlap” between the subject-matter and method of history. Browning is right about this. But the kind of overlap he describes is one in which the subject-matter “demands a free rational investigation that respects [it]”.² There is, he explains at length, “reciprocity” between method and subject-matter. Later this reciprocity turns out to be a “unity”.³ This “unity”, Browning says, links Collingwood and Hegel, and additionally shows what is wrong with Walsh’s assumption that method and subject-matter are “separate”.⁴

But it is not really Collingwood’s position that what makes history distinct is that it deals with a distinct class of objects, a distinct ‘subject-matter’. In ‘Reality as History’ Collingwood tells his reader, rather tersely, that

the true scope of historical thinking has been much misunderstood. It has been supposed to be a special kind of thinking appropriate to a special kind of object... According to this doctrine, historicity was peculiar to mind; nature had no history; thinking historically was therefore right and proper when we were thinking about mind, but about nature it was right to think scientifically as distinct from historically.⁵

This would do as a summary of what Collingwood is almost always thought to argue. But this conception, Collingwood then says, “rested on a fundamental mistake”:

¹ Helgeby, *Action as History*, p. 58

² Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 78. Next we’ll see why, despite all of this, the relationship between subject-matter and method should actually be the other way round. Subject-matter does not determine method for a science. It is that science’s characteristic question that determines the science’s subject-matter. Because method, for Browning, is implied by subject-matter, Collingwood’s agreement with Hegel concerning the question of subject-matter signals agreement with Hegel concerning method. (Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 84-90) But of course Hegel does not offer the kind of philosophy of history that could explain, for instance, what is wrong with ‘scissors and paste’. Hegel is not talking about how historians should proceed in their inquiries. And indeed Collingwood actually attacks Hegel for conceiving of history’s ‘dialectic’ such that “everything *argued itself into existence*”. (NL, 33.85) Browning is right that subject-matter and method are not, as he claims Walsh thinks, “separate”, but neither are they a “unity”. When Browning points to a shared philosophy of historical method he is really referring to what is described by both Collingwood and Hegel as history’s subject-matter. That form of history – ‘history’ as the subject-matter of history (which is what Helgeby’s book is about) – is contained within Collingwood’s ‘history as a science’. It is part of it, but does not exhaust it.

³ Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 92

⁴ Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 93

⁵ See PH, p.179. This is a direct contradiction of something Collingwood had written earlier, and which is cited (directly from the manuscript) by Dussen. The passage reads: “In the seventeenth century, he says, “[i]t was evident that physical science had discovered its own proper object and (what comes to the same thing) the proper methods of investigating that object”. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 284

Scientific thought is in reality based not on a recognition that certain peculiar kinds of things need to be thought of in that peculiar way, but on a belief that this is the way in which thinking is to be done.¹

The difference between (and the relation between) these two sciences is not, it turns out, on the objective side, but on the *subjective* side. *En route* to making this point, Collingwood also accuses (I think wrongly) the ‘theorists of the *Geisteswissenschaften*’ of making the very mistake that those I’ve just named, Dussen, Donagan, and Helgeby, attribute to Collingwood himself.² Where, Collingwood thinks, the *Geisteswissenschaft* theorists held the distinction between different sciences to be based on two essentially different kinds of object, *he* sees that it is actually the two different kinds of thinking that produces the two species of science. The difference between natural science and history does not, for Collingwood, owe to a difference inhering to the two sciences’ objects in themselves – their ‘subject-matter’. Rather the difference is on the ‘subjective’ side, the *way of systematically thinking* about them. (It is ironic, considering Browning’s argument, that Collingwood also attacks Hegel for making this very mistake.³)

Collingwood’s point is a good one, and it is by no means limited to the essay ‘Reality as History’.⁴ The same object, he says in *The New Leviathan*, can be the focus of both a natural-scientific inquiry, and an historical inquiry – but this does not make them the same kinds of inquiry. Asking ‘What is Man?’ (where the object is ‘man’) invokes more than one kind of inquiry.⁵ Neither of these inquiries, Collingwood says, “can do anything but harm, either to itself or to its fellow, by trespassing on its fellow’s hunt”. “Of these two different forms of science”, he adds, “*the one that has started a hare must catch it*”.⁶ The “hunt”, then, is the pursuit, and not the hare itself. The same ‘subject-matter’ can, then, be the object of different sciences.⁷ Collingwood also reminds the reader of something else “laid down by Bacon and Descartes in the seventeenth [century]: to speak not merely ‘to the subject’ but ‘to the point’”.⁸

¹ *PH*, p. 179

² *PH*, p.179

³ *IH*, p. 434-5

⁴ See *NL*, 2.6-64 for a later example.

⁵ *NL*, 1.83-84

⁶ *NL*, 2.64-65

⁷ The reader will see below why it is this principle – the principle that it is not the subject-matter itself, but something else that makes a science what it is – that makes Collingwood’s metaphysics more relevant to his philosophy of history, and that philosophy of history more enduringly provocative.

⁸ *NL*, 1.19. See also 1.4-43

So, if the methods of natural science are inappropriate to history, it is not because the object of inquiry – man, mind, *res gestae*, the ‘inside’ of actions – is inappropriate to natural science, but because natural science does something in its form of scientific thinking, its form of inference, that historians cannot do, or do not need to do.

So what is it? What is so special about the systematic thinking of history? Perhaps it is the “special characteristics of historical inference”?¹ Section V of ‘Epilegomena’ §3 is called ‘Historical inference’, so it is here that one might expect to find the supposed “special characteristics of historical inference” explained.² But once there we find Collingwood discussing only the supposed difference between ‘compulsive’ and ‘permissive’ inference, and the problem of implication. And what he says about this, it turns out, “arises in history or pseudo-history of any kind whatever, and indeed in any kind of science or pseudo-science”. So ‘permissive’ or ‘implicative’ inference is not a special characteristic of historical inference at all.³ Collingwood also claims that those special characteristics are the historian’s thinking ‘critically’ or being ‘autonomous’; using evidence; using the imagination to ‘fill in the gaps’; and ‘re-enacting’ past thought. But he is surely wrong if he thinks any except possibly the last is exclusive to history.

Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment has of course been challenged on all sorts of grounds. As it is very important to his philosophical reputation at present, I’ve devoted all of Part IV of this study to the doctrine. I might as well tell the reader now that I think Collingwood is right to think re-enactment a necessary condition of historical knowledge, but only because it can be rephrased in an entirely commonsensical way which removes from it all the ‘sting’, and everything that has been thought controversial or unscientific about it.

But, even in view of this, re-enactment does not demonstrate the distinctness of historical thinking – at least, not on its own – because re-enactment is not a ‘feature’ that is exclusive to history among the activities of mind. We re-enact thoughts in Collingwood’s sense all the time: when we are being told a funny story, for example, or when we are following the reasoning of another person’s conference paper, or identifying flaws in an opponent’s logic. Even if listening to a story or someone else’s reasoning is (or involves) what Collingwood calls ‘historical thinking’, that does not mean that instances of thought re-enactment are scientific historical investigations. It may be one

¹ *IH*, p. 256

² *IH*, p. 256

³ Dussen has also voiced dissatisfaction with what Collingwood says about historical inference, though for different reasons. He is looking for a description of what historical inference *is*; I am looking more specifically for what is *peculiar* about historical inference. See Dussen, ‘Collingwood’s Claim’, pp. 7-11

‘feature’ of history as a science, but too much is still missing for it to demonstrate history’s distinctness alone.

viii

The solution: the special character of historical questions

The following passage is taken from the part of Collingwood’s *Essay on Metaphysics* where he attempts to show that there is no science of pure being. Nevertheless, what Collingwood says here is of interest to the present discussion, because it is a rare instance of his discussing explicitly how the subject-matter, method, and special problems of a given science relate to each other. Here is what he says:

An ordinary science is the science of some definite subject-matter, having special problems of its own that arise out of the special peculiarities of the subject-matter, and special methods of its own that arise out of the special problems; whereas the ‘science of pure being’ has a subject-matter which is not a something but a nothing, a subject-matter which has no special peculiarities and therefore gives rise to no special problems and no special methods.¹

What this passage proves is, firstly, that a distinct science arises from problems of its own which are “special” (read ‘distinct’), and that those special problems are themselves somehow related to a “subject-matter” which is *not* itself “special”, but which is “definite”. I take this to mean that the ‘distinctness’ of a science comes directly from the distinct class of problems, and only indirectly from subject-matter – whether or not subject-matters can have special peculiarities that serve scientific classification rather than philosophical overlapping classes. But this passage from the *Essay on Metaphysics* also discusses “special methods”. It is to the problem of delineating those “special methods” that so much of Collingwood’s work on history offers solutions. But here we can also see that those special methods themselves “arise out of the special problems”.

This, then, is what I think Collingwood’s arguments mean – either (or both) by his own authorial intention, or by logical implication: If all knowledge and truth in fact belongs to a “complex consisting of questions and answers”, then all historical knowledge must only be a distinct kind of knowledge because of its relation to the

¹ *EM*, pp. 14-15

distinct kind of questions or problems it answers, or ‘correlates’ to. This puts the fact that humans have, or produce, historical questions at the foundation of everything we can say about how history is done or why. The principle here is that, whatever it is or however it is done, history is a one of Collingwood’s “various specialized forms of consciousness”¹ – historical consciousness – because its starting points are questions that are distinctly ‘historical’. If history is a special science, it is because its questions are of a special kind, meaning that they may have a special characteristic or combination of characteristics, and/or that they may have a special presupposition or combination of presuppositions. The answer is the former: it is certain characteristics, namely, the kind of thing that an historical question *demand*s, or, in Collingwood’s own term, “expects”.² Questions that are composed in a certain way can only be ‘satisfied’ by answers composed in a correlative way.

The task of a philosophy of history as a distinct science is to demonstrate what those characteristics are that make historical questions distinctly ‘historical’. Something similar is true of the task of demonstrating that historical knowledge is possible. A philosophical demonstration that historical knowledge is possible, the question that lies at the root of ‘neo-Kantian’ philosophy of history, is achievable simply by showing that historical questions are possible – by showing, that is, that they are not ‘nonsense’ questions, that they do not presuppose anything that may not be presupposed, and perhaps that they are in some way answerable without importing further nonsense into their practical answering strategies. And an explanation of what history is *for* involves explaining why historical questions are important or, at least, in some way relevant to human life in general, and why answering them is important.

I’m giving this principle – the principle that what makes a science distinct is that it answers a distinct kind of question – the quasi-technical name ‘the starting question principle’. There are flashes of the starting question principle in *The Idea of History*, albeit in a sometimes obscured form. In a passage in §1 of the ‘Epilegomena’ Collingwood discusses whether “the ordinary historian” is right to maintain that “all history properly called is the history of human affairs”, or whether he is in fact making an “unphilosophically narrow”, “arbitrary distinction” between objects of the human past (such as are dealt with by archaeologists) and objects of the natural past, such as are dealt with by geologists and palaeontologists. What Collingwood then says is this:

¹ *NL*, 4.17

² *EM*, pp. 73-4

In order to answer this question, it is not enough to consider the characteristics of historical method as it actually exists, for the question at issue is whether, as it actually exists, it covers the whole field which properly belongs to it. We must ask *what is the general nature of the problems which this method is designed to solve*. When we have done so, it will appear that the special problem of the historian is one which does not arise in the case of natural science.¹

The arbitrariness of subject-matter, Collingwood is saying, is negated by answering the question about the general nature of history's problems. In this passage Collingwood has formulated a specific way of carrying out the task for philosophy of history which he explained briefly in his 'Outlines of a philosophy of history' in 1928: "the philosophy in the old Voltairean and Hegelian sense is concerned only with history *a parte objecti*", he says; "but the philosophy of history in our sense is concerned with history *a parte subjecti*... it is primarily a logic of historical method".²

Collingwood's philosophy of history is, in its highest form, a "logic of historical method" in just this sense. Despite everything he says about the subject-matter of history, his attention to the 'subjective side' of historical practice – the thought processes of historians – is also fairly consistent. But what is not consistent is his saying that the most important feature of that "logic", in the method distinct to history, is what lies at the root of historical thinking, its starting point – and that this starting point is an historical question. The rare expressions of this starting question principle, the above examples included, are limited to Collingwood's 'mature' thinking, and even then they are not consistent. It is a great shame that he neglects it. It is as if he had for so long known that the answer to his questions about history are to be answered by examining the 'subjective' side of what historians do, that he never manages to hold the specific "nature of the problems" principle in his mind, and returns habitually to the *a parte subjecti* principle in general. We should be slow to admonish thinkers for not having found their most sophisticated answers at an early point in their lives. Collingwood's 1920s writings are those of a sociable Oxford thirty-something, after all. But it is a failing that, having successfully found and formulated it at least once, Collingwood does not continue to use the same point, or to make a great display about what this principle shows. The starting question principle would certainly, I think, have provided him with an easy way to explain the special character of scientific history among the other kinds of scientific

¹ *IH*, pp. 212-13. Emphasis added.

² *IH*, p. 434-5

thinking. The systematic character of a science will, Collingwood says, “be exhibited in the clear-cut and orderly manner in which it states problems and marshals and interprets evidence for their solution”.¹ But, in his quest to show how history *is* such a science, he focuses almost entirely on the correct way of marshalling and interpreting evidence, to the near total neglect of the correct way of stating problems in history. This, I know, is a strong way of putting it. How can I justify it? How is this ‘neglect’ manifest?

Well, there are all those instances where Collingwood tells his reader that “historical thought has an object with peculiarities of its own”;² history is the science of *res gestae*,³ *res gestae* are the correct “subject-matter of history”.⁴ But we’ve already seen that it is not, according to much of what Collingwood says, the ‘object’ of a science, but something about its ‘subjective’ side that makes it what it is. Hegel and Voltaire, Collingwood claims, failed to see this,⁵ as supposedly did the nineteenth century’s theorists of *Geisteswissenschaft*, he says in ‘Reality as history’, who again appealed to the special kind of object with which a science deals in order to indicate the special character of that science.

But we’ve already seen that, when properly defined, the first two forms of history (‘the assertion of fact’ and ‘becoming’) *do* characterise the subject-matter of history. And if Collingwood doesn’t really think that, why does he devote so much of even his mature writings to clarifying the subject-matter of history? By putting together the claim that history has its own special subject-matter, and the claim that the differences between sciences owes not to differences in their respective objects, but to differences in the ‘points of view’, I have decided that the two can be reconciled. They are, to use the technical language, ‘dialectically’ related, not ‘eristically’ related.⁶ The question-and-answer logic of what Collingwood is saying is this:

Although history *does* deal with *res gestae*, that distinct ‘object’ or ‘subject-matter’ is not, strictly speaking, what constitutes the special character of history. It is rather that historians properly ask a kind of question which has such characteristics that it can only be sensibly (*i.e.* not nonsensically) asked about *res gestae*. The distinction is slight, but important. One can ask questions about *res gestae* which are not themselves historical questions, because they might not meet other conditions of what it is for a question to be

¹ *EM*, p. 65

² *IH*, p. 5

³ *IH*, p. 9

⁴ ‘The Subject-matter of History’ is the title of §5 of *The Idea of History*’s ‘Epilegomena’.

⁵ *IH*, p. 434-5

⁶ See *NL*, 24.57-58, 26.21-22

'historical'. But if you ask historical questions about things that are not *res gestae*, you ask nonsense questions.

How else is the neglect of the starting question principle manifest? The chapter 'Question and Answer' in *An Autobiography* deals with the importance of understanding the questions or problems of others in order that one (the historian) might understand their solutions – what they 'meant'. That chapter deals also with propositional logic and truth in general, with consequences for historical truth which are not there explicated. But it does not discuss explicitly historical questions as that to which historical knowledge is the answer. This might be because Collingwood thought it followed on obviously enough from what he'd said about all truth and knowledge and the principle of correlativity. It might also be because he considered it such an ordinary presupposition of historical method that it hardly needed explication. Or, alternatively, it might be because he didn't even make this starting question principle explicit to himself – he 'didn't realise' it. It is more likely though that he failed to state this principle explicitly in the chapter 'Question and Answer' because the arguments he makes there are aimed chiefly at proponents of "the current logic". In short, that chapter is not motivated by the desire to lay out comprehensively a description of historical truth and method. A final alternative, which I'm saying can be ruled out, is that Collingwood had really concluded that the correct starting point for historical thinking was something *other* than a question.

But just because I say it can be ruled out as what Collingwood thinks does not mean that it is not what he all too often says. "It is true that in history, as in exact science, the normal process of thought is inferential", Collingwood says in *The Idea of History*, and he continues: "But the starting points are of very different kinds."¹ Now this looks promising. Unfortunately, what follows is not a statement to the effect that the difference of starting point between these sciences is the difference in the kind of question asked: it is rather a claim that exact scientists start with "assumptions" where historians start with "relics".²

This is obviously not right, as a natural scientist might seek natural-scientific knowledge of something that is man-made, as we do today with carbon dating; and historians always work with "assumptions". Like all forms of thought, history has its own

¹ *IH*, pp. 250-1

² *IH*, pp. 250-1. In the sense that it might be a relic that inspires an historian's question, this is of course right – or at least possible. Similarly it is true that scientists' questions contain assumptions. But it is not consistent with Collingwood's account that 'historical thinking' begins here. Historical thinking is systematic thinking, and all systematic thinking begins with questions. The way to reconcile this – which Collingwood does not – is to point out that historians' questions contain the idea of the relic in question within their 'terms'; or, the question *concerns* the relic, in some way.

presuppositions. Next, rather than explain how this itself might lead to or inspire questions of a different species, Collingwood moves straight on to discuss the different kinds of conclusion that follow from this difference of starting point: natural scientists' conclusions are about universals, "things which have no special habitation in space or time", whereas the historian's conclusions are idiographic, being "about events, each having a place and date of its own". Now, Collingwood's focus here is not really the differing characteristics of 'starting points', but rather other differences that might be observed within the lines of reasoning typically thrown up by inquiries in these sciences. So the real nature of the difference of starting point has been neglected here too.

This is quite a significant example, because although most readers have encountered it in *The Idea of History*, it was actually composed for the introduction to *The Principles of History*, Collingwood's intended masterwork on the philosophy of history. It is followed, of course, by chapter one, which for obvious reasons is intended to elaborate on the 'starting point' of history. Chapter one is not called 'The Historical Question', though, it is called 'Evidence'. The centrality of the question only becomes apparent twenty pages in, where Collingwood says: "The scientific historian reads them [books] with a question in his mind, having taken the initiative by deciding for himself what he wants to find out from them."¹ Even here Collingwood does not explain how what he is saying proves his point about the special distinctness of history from natural science.

Jan van der Dussen has, I think, followed Collingwood's thinking so well that he repeats his error about history's special starting point. Chapter seven of *History as a Science* proceeds directly from 7.1, which deals with the historical 'object', to 7.2, which is called 'Evidence'. "The way evidence is used by historians being the starting-point", Dussen says, "the question arises how this is done or should be done".² A sub-section called 'Question and Answer' follows only some pages later.³ In his later article, 'Collingwood's Claim that History is a Science', Dussen explains very nicely what historical inference is for Collingwood, by way of the comparison with C. S. Peirce. But again he ignores the distinctness of history's questions.⁴

¹ *PH*, p. 25. Also *IH*, p. 269

² Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 289

³ *History as a Science*, p. 295. Dussen's discussion of 'Evidence' is very detailed and, as I have no need to compete with it, I'd rather direct the reader to it. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 287-95

⁴ In the context of what this later article is for, Dussen's ignoring questions is perfectly excusable, because he is not attempting to explain why for Collingwood historical inference is distinct. He only wants to show why inference in history is scientific, an objective in which he succeeds very convincingly. See Dussen, 'Collingwood's Claim', especially pp. 7-11, 14-15, and the applied examples on pp. 15-17 and 18-20. There is one minor point where I think Dussen's ignoring the question principle intrudes on his interpretation of what Collingwood says: he describes 'what the evidence says' as if 'what it says' is the same as what Henry

The reason we can call these examples of Collingwood's 'neglectful' of the starting question principle is not simply that they do not mention it, or do not mention it properly. An author can't be criticised for failing to state some principle or other every time he says anything at all. It is rather that he either promises to discuss what it is that makes history a distinct science, or that by focusing on what makes historical questions 'historical' he would have hit upon a quicker and better way of answering the points we've just seen him trying to deal with, and others which we will see him trying to deal with next.

So perhaps Collingwood does not consider historical questions to be distinct from the questions answered by other sciences? Perhaps there are only individual questions, and there are various sciences for answering them which we can choose between by some other principle? That principle is either mere preference, or it relates to the grounds upon which one science is appropriate to certain questions, and another science is appropriate to other kinds of question. If the importance of history as a distinct science is to be a matter of anything other than preference, there must be something about certain kinds of questions that makes them the preserve of history.

I'll clarify again that I am not trying to conflate different kinds of claims about Collingwood's work by 'providing a reading'. What I have said, I think, is the best extension of Collingwood's own logic of question and answer, and that which best supports his more embattled arguments about history. But it is not what he always says, and it is probably not what he always meant. To claim that this is what Collingwood 'really means', or what he 'tried to say', would be an insult to his obvious talent for lucid self-expression.

When Collingwood does not neglect the starting question principle however, the effect is, I think, efficient and conclusive. We've seen one example from *The Idea of History*. "We must ask what is the general nature of the problems which this method is designed to solve", he says. "When we have done so, it will appear that the special problem of the historian is one which does not arise in the case of natural science."¹ We've also seen the intriguing triangulation of problem, method, and subject-matter, in

P's edict 'says'. What Collingwood really means when he discusses what evidence 'says', in *The Principles of History*, is what the evidence *shows*. See *PH*, pp. 48-9, and Dussen's discussion of it in 'Collingwood's Claim', p. 21. There is also one point where Dussen comes very close to discussing the 'specific' questions to which "abductive inferences" seek answers – he is, at that point, discussing Jaakko Hintikka's article 'What is Abduction?' On the subject of "the inquirer's specific questions", though, Dussen declines to comment further. See Dussen, 'Collingwood's Claim', p. 29.

¹ *IH*, pp. 212-13. Emphasis added.

the *Essay on Metaphysics*.¹ There is another example in Collingwood's last book – itself a model of efficient argument and conclusive demonstration – *The New Leviathan*. There Collingwood states with bold conciseness that each of the “two approaches to the problem of self-knowledge: the natural sciences and the science of man” has “its own problems and must solve them by its own methods”, and that “neither can do anything but harm, either to itself or to its fellow, by trespassing on its fellow's hunt”.² In order to understand how the two ‘sides’ of man relate to each other, he adds – which is essentially the ‘mind-body problem’ – we need to know about the relationship between the two breeds of epistemology, and not simply more ‘about man’. Collingwood does not always neglect the starting question principle, then. Indeed it seems to me that when he deals with points in the philosophy of history by reference to it, his arguments are at their strongest.

ix

What makes historical questions ‘historical’?

So what are the special peculiarities of the problems with which this distinct science, history, deals? One might have thought that what makes an historical question historical, is that it is about the past. The non-philosophical significance of the term ‘history’, imported into philosophy, would seem to demand dealing with the idea of ‘the past’ first. Indeed Collingwood made exactly this assumption at the outset of his 1926 ‘Lectures’, so he opens with a discussion of what the past is.³ Thereafter, though, this is an assumption that he fairly consistently tries to overturn. ‘Historical thinking’ is equally about the present – or at least the very recent past that we call the present.⁴ This is, I think, because in the highest form of history – the form in which ‘history’ is the systematic answering of a certain kind of question – *the non-philosophical distinction between past and present is cancelled*. There is no difference because both past and present can be investigated in exactly the same ‘historical’ way. Collingwood writes in his *Autobiography* about his experiences of academic seminars, for example:

¹ *EM*, pp. 14-15

² *NL*, 2.6-64

³ See L26, *IH*, pp. 363-5

⁴ See for example *EM*, pp. 56-7

This habit of following and taking part in discussions where both subject and method were other people's proved extremely valuable to me... To think in that way about philosophies not your own, as I have hinted, is to think about them historically.¹

Historical questions can then, one presumes, also be about 'the present'. One might even pose and answer an historical question about what someone is *really* trying to do by making such-and-such an argument in a conference paper, before that someone has even got himself safely out of the room and into the sanctuary of the buffet queue. The distinctness of historical questions has nothing to do with the objects of inquiry being things past.

So, again, what are the special peculiarities of the problems with which history deals? Actually it seems that Collingwood says very little about the distinct features of historical questions – and this probably cannot be unrelated to what we've already observed to be his habit of neglecting the starting question principle in general.

To be charitable, one might suppose that Collingwood doesn't discuss the distinct form of historical questions very much because he thinks he's already done so sufficiently somewhere. There are, after all, also sections in the 1926 'Lectures' summarised in the contents under the titles 'How historical problems arise'² and 'Primary and secondary problems'.³ But here Collingwood discusses only the fact that historical problems arise in the present, and the fact that there is a closer relationship than is usually realised between questions about history, and questions about the history of history. There is actually nothing about what it is that makes an historical question 'historical'. There is also a very short passage in the 1928 essay, 'The Limits of Historical Knowledge', which arises without warning in the midst of a discussion about historical 'realism', which does more or less describe the organising principle of historical thinking as a "central question". Here Collingwood even hints at the form taken by that "central question" in general:

It is enough for the present to have stated the general thesis that all historical thought is the historical interpretation of the present; that its central question is:

¹ *A*, pp. 57-8

² L26, *IH*, pp. 406-7. How historical questions 'arise' is also dealt with in the *Autobiography*. See *A*, p. 114

³ L26, *IH*, pp. 407-8

“How has this world as it now exists come to be what it is?” and that for this reason the past concerns the historian only so far as it has led to the present.¹

But what Collingwood says here might serve equally well as a general characteristic of the kind of questions asked not of ‘things done’, but of things that have turned out a certain way as a result of a quite unconscious natural process. ‘How did we come to have two kidneys?’, for instance – or, as an example of a biological development which obviously reflects no intelligent planning, ‘Why do we have wisdom teeth?’

Collingwood would see, if he were trying to prove it, that this cannot work as a demonstration that history has a distinct kind of question. The fact that he leaves it so rough is proof, I think, that he is not trying to make that argument here at all. So if he thinks he’s already explained the distinctness of historical questions, he can’t be thinking of these discussions; and, if he is, he’s wrong about what they contained.

There is also a section called ‘the question’ in §3 of *The Idea of History*’s ‘Epilegomena’, ‘Historical Evidence’ (also the opening chapter of *The Principles of History*).² But it contains nothing about the specific features of historical questions, and merely illustrates how investigation of all kinds depends on questioning, and how one primary question can and should be broken down into constituent parts of sub-questions.

It was initially quite surprising to me, in view of what Collingwood says about the question-and-answer nature of all systematic thought, that there are so few points at which he discusses explicitly what it is that makes ‘historical questions’ historical. I do not think this is deliberate evasiveness. I think in fact he thinks he throws a lot of light on this question, but never explicitly, and not deliberately, because he habitually discusses historical answers, especially what counts as an historical answer. This is partly because it is actually quite difficult to describe the characteristics of different types of question – a ‘typology’ of historical questions – without slipping into typologies of (a) what those questions can be about, *i.e.* of their ‘objects’ or ‘subject-matter’, or (b) how questions of that kind would be (as I’ve put it) ‘satisfied’, or (as Collingwood puts it) what they “expect”.³ Recognising this difficulty, we can only try to overcome it more satisfactorily than Collingwood did. When I say that the typology of historical questions – the typology that supports Collingwood’s arguments about history – is expressed in terms of ‘historical answers’ I mean to refer to history *a parte objecti*, in both the sense of what

¹ *EPH*, p. 102

² *IH*, pp. 269-74; but also republished as something closer to its originally-intended role in *PH*, pp. 24-9.

³ *EM*, pp. 73-4

historical inquiry ‘produces’ (the facts it asserts), and the sense of what it is about (the facts and processes of history); and I also mean historical *answering*, the way in which historical answers are produced, historians’ ‘methods’, their reasoning. This concentration on historical answers and answering in Collingwood’s work is an effect both of the difficulty of classifying historical questions themselves, and of the actual question Collingwood poses himself, ‘What are the special characteristics of historical inference?’ – and by ‘inference’ he is already thinking of the historian’s process of question and answer as underway.

So given that Collingwood won’t tell us himself, let us devise some tortures for his philosophy so that he might yield clues about what makes a question an *historical* question. Questions and answers are, Collingwood says, correlative. It is therefore from the material of Collingwood’s theories of history in the forms just outlined that we have to re-tailor something to clothe a typological dummy in order to behold the special features of an historical question. I’ve probably made it sound much more complicated than I needed to, but it is quite straightforward.

x

What he meant

Once we are looking for instances of Collingwood outlining and explaining the special character not of historical inference, but of historical *questions*, certain passages become much more helpful. As significant as any, I think, is the following from *An Autobiography*:

Now, ‘To what question did So-and-so intend this proposition for an answer?’ is an historical question, and therefore cannot be settled except by historical methods.¹

I must have read this passage fifty times before I noticed that what is important about it is not the claim that it is a matter of historical fact what question a past author was trying to answer, and that this is therefore investigable by normal historical methods, but rather that *it is an historical question*, because it is inquiring about another’s reasoning.

¹ *A*, p. 39

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood is more explicit: “Historical questions are questions in which one tries to understand what somebody was doing on a certain occasion.”¹ This is what Collingwood means when he says that the historian...

is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is a unity of the outside and inside of an event... His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there... his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.²

In *The Idea of History* Collingwood writes that the business of the historian when faced with certain written words is to “discover what the person who wrote those words meant by them”, and, he continues, “this means discovering the thought... which he expressed by them”.³ The question here is, then, ‘What did this author mean by this?’ – an historical question. This example is closely followed by others in which the question seems to be the same but rephrased: ‘What is the historical significance of this edict?’, ‘How are we to understand this passage of ancient philosophy?’⁴ “It cannot,” Collingwood then says, “be denied by anybody that these descriptions... call attention to the central feature of all historical thinking”.⁵ The ‘central feature’ he is referring to here is the re-enactment of past thinking in the historian’s own mind.⁶ By putting it this way – in terms of the ideal of re-thinking and the kind of description offered by historians – he is privileging his definition of what it is to answer these questions correctly. He is explaining what satisfies typical historical questions. The “central feature” of historical thinking as he’s just described it is equally what the questions which initiate historical thinking demand in common. An historical question arises when instead of knowing ‘what someone meant by something’ I have only a specific ‘unknown’. This is why, as long as I’m simply reading *Leviathan* and making sense of it, as long as no questions arise about what Hobbes means, I’m not doing history – at least, not history as a science, let alone systematic history of political thinking. I am simply reading an old book.

This ‘meaning’ that exists in an historical question as the specific unknown might be of a text or speech, but it might also be of a silent action. People can ‘mean’ things by

¹ *EM*, p. 191

² *IH*, p. 213

³ *IH*, pp. 282-3

⁴ All *IH*, p. 283

⁵ *IH*, p. 283

⁶ *IH*, p. 215

actions – indeed, that is why we make a distinction between things that were done (*res gestae*) and things that happened (‘events’).¹ History provides “narratives of purposive activity”, Collingwood says.² His way of expressing this, as is well known, is that history pertains to “the inside of the event... that in it which can only be described in terms of thought”.³

It might be objected that I am only putting into question form something that might just as well be phrased like this: ‘the subject-matter of history is meaningful action’.⁴ This would be to forget that Collingwood rightly objects to the distinctness of a science being thought to owe to the distinctness of its objects, and insists instead on the distinctness being on the ‘subjective’ side. Consider, for instance, the differences between an historian’s inquiry and a coroner’s in the case of a deliberate act of murder. In both inquiries the ‘object’ or ‘subject-matter’ is the same. But to analyse the mode of inquiry by asking ‘What is deliberate action?’ would be to invite a diversionary inquiry on the ‘ancient’ scientific model of questioning without limited objectives. And anyway it would reveal nothing about the two sciences or the differences between them. As Collingwood puts it in *The Idea of History*, “The methods of criminal detection are not at every point identical with those of scientific history, because their ultimate purpose is not the same”.⁵ It is in relation to the purpose, and not to the ‘subject-matter’, that the differences become obvious. The historian would ask what the murderer ‘meant’ by his deed. The coroner asks only what caused the death.

All of this seems to indicate that the essence of history is hermeneutic inquiry, and that historical questions are hermeneutic questions. The historian seeks to discern the thoughts of others by re-thinking them himself.⁶ Historical knowledge therefore *is* hermeneutic understanding.⁷ This is what introduces Collingwood’s notorious claim that “the history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind”.⁸

¹ Most of the time Collingwood uses the term ‘action’, though in *The New Leviathan* he explains his new preference for the term “*deed*”. (NL, 13.86) Here I’ll follow Collingwood’s usage and use them non-technically, and more or less interchangeably.

² A, p. 109

³ IH, p. 213

⁴ Thanks to ES for forcing me to clarify this.

⁵ IH, p. 268

⁶ IH, p. 215

⁷ This is why Dussen’s distinction between historical methodology on the one hand (how the historian arrives at his knowledge), and hermeneutics on the other (how the historian comes to *understand*) is a false one. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 296-7

⁸ IH, p. 215. Dussen provides a comprehensive overview of the objections made to Collingwood’s claim that “all history is the history of thought”, though he declines to offer a defence of it. See *History as a Science*, pp. 81-8

Dussen makes a minor blunder, then, in distinguishing between “two aspects of the logic of question and answer: that of historical understanding (hermeneutics) and that of historical inquiry (historical methodology in the broad sense)”.¹ I can quite see why Dussen would be led to make this distinction. When Collingwood discusses ‘question and answer’ in the *Autobiography*, the ‘Baconian’ principle of inquiry is dealt with separately from the discussion of reconstructing authors’ questions. Dussen has certainly followed Collingwood’s apparent distinction very closely – as he always does. But the two cannot really be separated when what one wants is a fuller description than Collingwood provides explicitly of what the characteristics are of the questions to which historians’ inquiries are meant to provide answers. They are themselves necessarily hermeneutic questions.² Because Dussen separates the two, he has to explain the relevance of ‘question and answer’ to hermeneutics by appealing to the problem-solving nature of history *a parte objecti*.³ Now, it is certainly Collingwood’s position, I think, that all ‘action’ is ‘problem-solving’, and Dussen follows Collingwood’s reasoning that, therefore, knowing the problem means understanding the solution. But because the logic of inquiry has already been dealt with, Dussen does not ask how the historian discovers what the agent’s problem was.⁴ The answer is, of course, by normal historical inquiry.

All historical questions thus share a certain presupposition: namely, that the thing of which meaning is being sought ‘means’ something, or was ‘meant’ for something. The fact that this is a presupposition of historical inquiry is attested in *An Autobiography*, where Collingwood refers to questions about history’s subject-matter as “metaphysical”.⁵ In his sense of ‘metaphysical’, this means that ‘meanings’ are presuppositions of historical questions. If the relic does not in fact mean anything – *i.e.* if it is not a ‘something done’ – then the question about what was meant by it is a nonsense question. This does not mean that historical questions are nonsense questions. It means that historical questions are sometimes posed even though they contain false presuppositions.

In practice, historians are almost always right to assume that what they are asking about was meant for something.⁶ It is, though, possible to get this wrong, and historians might try to interpret an object or series of marks that look man-made, but which are in

¹ Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 296-7

² Dussen’s distinction returns in a later discussion where he aims to cover the role that the logic of question and answer plays in historical understanding (*History as a Science*, pp. 344-5). Dussen is forced to say only that “history *a parte objecti* should be seen as problem-solving in nature”. (*History as a Science*, p. 345)

³ See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 344-5

⁴ See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 345-50

⁵ *A*, p. 77

⁶ Here I’m using Collingwood’s technical terminology deliberately. See *EM*, pp. 27-8

fact natural phenomena. The false presupposition is that they are ‘things done’. It is forgivable for a child to ask, ‘What is the purpose of this amazing structure?’ when he encounters the Giant’s Causeway, for instance, but only because his presupposition that it was built by man is a forgivable presupposition. The presupposition that unusual natural phenomena like the Giant’s Causeway are the relics of actions is perhaps the reason why people formulate elaborate myths and stories in order to make sense of them, before they eventually relinquish the presupposition and recognise them as natural phenomena. In the case of the Giant’s Causeway, the problem presupposed by the old myth was that the sea was blocking someone’s desired journey on foot between Ireland and Great Britain – and he must, given the form his solution took, have been a very big someone.

What I have just described is the presence of an earlier form of ‘history’ in the highest form, history as a science. That earlier form is the concept that history is primarily about the actions of people, and not about natural phenomena except as they affect the doings of men. As *The Idea of History* demonstrates, this has been the typical subject-matter of history since long before it was realised that history was a science that operated by posing and answering questions, let alone questions of a unique kind. But it is only, as it were, retrospectively that that selectiveness is anything less than “an arbitrary distinction”, a ‘mistaken restriction’.¹ Properly historical questions have as their specific unknown what someone ‘meant’ by something. Since philosophers became especially interested in language, there has been a tendency to distinguish between different philosophies of history by the different accounts of ‘meaning’ they give. Although Collingwood offers theories of language,² his philosophy of history has no use for such debates. The important thing for historical questions is the legitimacy of presupposing in at least *some* sense that somebody ‘meant’ something by what he ‘did’. Until that presupposition is seriously challenged, narratives formulated in answer to the “academic”, “*make-believe*”³ question ‘What is meaning?’ are of no practical relevance to working historians.

¹ *IH*, p. 213

² See for example *NL*, ch. VI

³ *NL*, 2.51, 2.55

Universals and particulars

As well as being about deeds done, history is concerned with unique, individual facts; not “what mind *always and everywhere does*”, but “only *what mind has done on certain definite occasions*”.¹ This is part of the reason why Collingwood insists that natural science actually depends upon history. The categories, classes and rules with which natural science properly operates are abstractions from the unique, individual facts of reality, he says. This form of history, I am now claiming, is absorbed into history as a science as another feature of historical questions. And it is this combination of features which makes historical questions distinct from any other kind of question, and hence history a distinct science.

I have struggled greatly with what Collingwood says about this, because until the ‘individuality’ of historical knowledge is put into the language of ‘question and answer’, some of what Collingwood says about it seems a little contradictory. It would be easy to maintain, as he does in *Speculum Mentis*, that history, unlike natural science, is about particular facts as such. In *The Idea of History* he praises those historians of the nineteenth century who saw that their business “was to ascertain facts by the use of this critical method, and to reject the invitation given them by the positivists to hurry on to a supposed second stage, the discovery of general laws”.² But Collingwood also has examples in his 1920s work of how history *does* provide ‘general’ knowledge and rules: “we can now assert that Samian bowls of shape 29 went out of use about A.D. 80”, he says; and history can also provide predictions, such as “green-glaze pottery will be found in a mediaeval ruin”.³ He also offers general rules, apparently suggested by history, in his last book, *The New Leviathan*. “The Turks are no exception to the rule which elsewhere, to the best of my knowledge, is unbroken: the rule that barbarists in the end have always been beaten; a rule which I state here merely as a conclusion arrived at by the inductive study of cases... an inductive proposition ‘tells you what to expect’”.⁴

Dussen, as I’ve already said, doesn’t pursue Collingwood’s grounds for claiming that history is a distinct science – only that it *is* a science. So it is this trope of ‘universals versus particulars’ that Dussen identifies as the characteristic of Collingwood’s

¹ *NL*, 9.18

² *IH*, p. 130

³ *EPH*, pp. 31-2. There are other similar objections in *IH*, pp. 166-7

⁴ *NL*, 45.94. See also 16.21. For more rules see 44.35-39

conception of history, and then traces very nicely through its early development in Collingwood's writings of the 1920s.¹ There *can* be a science of particulars, Dussen is saying, and, as Collingwood shows in his philosophy of history, it *can* be scientific. Although Dussen has surveyed to a depth that can only be admired Collingwood's essays of the 1920s, including the essay 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?',² exceptions like those I've pointed to about what history can also 'provide' he seems to ignore. Dussen is not attempting to mislead his readers: his task is different from mine. Collingwood's attempt to distinguish where in historical thinking generalizations and universals are appropriate, and where they are not, is messy in those essays and elsewhere,³ and Dussen does as well as anyone could to follow Collingwood's struggle with it and to present his readers with a faithful version.⁴

Here, then, is how I think Collingwood's various claims about universality and particularity in history can be reconciled. Again it has to do with what historical questions demand. The specific unknowns of historical questions are individual, unique instances, and not general rules or laws. It is perfectly true that history can *provide* rules and predictions, but as long as one's inquiry is aimed at rules and predictions, one's question is not itself historical. This is why Walsh's attack on Collingwood – for what Walsh thinks is the claim that there should never be any appeal to generalization in historical thinking – actually gets to the heart of the matter. "I have already said that I agree", Walsh says, "that it is not the business of the historian to arrive at universal truths: we do not find historians ending their works with a list of results stated in general terms. But that does not mean that there is no appeal to such generalizations in history..."⁵ Walsh thinks that Collingwood's claim is the latter, but actually it is merely the former.

The 'results' of the natural scientist's inferences are abstract universals, "in one sense everywhere and in another nowhere", which is why natural scientists study the "constant or recurring features in all events of a certain kind".⁶ The historian's results are though "not abstract but concrete, not universal but individual".⁷ This is because answer and question are correlative – or, 'results' and 'specific unknowns' are correlative. The

¹ Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 41-52

² *EPH*, pp. 23-33. Dussen does in fact discuss this essay briefly in *History as a Science*. See pp. 41-7

³ This 'messiness' is evident in the competing understandings that have sprung up in reaction to it. See for example W. H. Walsh, 'The Character of a Historical Explanation'.

⁴ See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 41-52

⁵ W. H. Walsh (with A. M. MacIver & M. Ginsberg), Symposium: 'The Character of a Historical Explanation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes vol. 21, *Explanation in History and Philosophy* (1947), p. 60

⁶ *IH*, p. 250

⁷ *IH*, p. 234

historian knows, for example, “that no explanation of the French Revolution can be the right one which will fit any other revolution”.¹ This does not mean that there are not historical rules about revolutions that ‘tell us what to expect’.² It means simply that a historian’s specific unknown is never a rule about the mechanisms and causes of revolutions as a class of occurrences.³ Thus, when an historian claims that an action is to be ‘understood’ by virtue of a particular chain of events that ‘produced’ it, and which ‘always’ produces this kind of outcome, he is not ‘thinking historically’. He is not thinking historically because his conclusion does not satisfy an historical question. This is why psychological explanations leave ‘historical’ subjects “completely unilluminated”.⁴ An historian who offers biological, psychological, or economic answers to historical questions cancels history’s distinctness by implicitly accepting that the unknowns of historians have no typological differences from the unknowns of biologists, psychologists, or economists. He cancels history’s distinctness because he replaces a distinctly historical question with one that is not historical. Collingwood in fact says this, regarding natural science, in ‘Reality as History’. “Scientific thought” – and here he means natural-scientific thought – “does not answer the question asked. Instead of explaining why this and nothing else happens, it explains why something of this kind happens. And scientific thought only succeeds so long as we are content with thus altering the question”.⁵

This, then, is how the ‘idiographic’ subject-matter of history is absorbed into history as a science. Although Collingwood’s claim is always phrased in terms of the different nature of explanation provided by the historian, its root is a difference in what is sought by the historian – his specific unknown. Collingwood attempts to explain this, as many still do, by showing that there is more than one kind of ‘explanation’, more than one sense of ‘cause’ – which is what he thinks positivism cannot face. But in fact what positivism cannot face is the very idea that there are different kinds of question.⁶ Questions pursuing specific unknowns that are not ‘nomothetic’ rules or laws are not known to positivism – at least, not as questions that can produce scientific knowledge.

¹ *PH*, p. 180

² *NL*, 16.21, 45.94

³ The concept and wording is paralleled in *NL*, 16.63.

⁴ *A*, p. 93

⁵ *PH*, p. 179

⁶ In *Religion and Philosophy* Collingwood identifies “historical positivism” as failing on the grounds that history is unable to answer “theological questions”. See *RP*, pp. 43, 38

Finally we need to see how what I've called the second form of history, 'history as becoming', is incorporated in the higher form, history as a science. Not much needs to be said here to illuminate the processual nature of the specific unknowns of historical questions. Firstly it is not simply a single idea that an historical investigation seeks to discover, but a thought process: the kind of process in which an action is related to its agent's reason or reasons for doing it; the kind in which a practical solution is related to the problem it overcame. In this sense the 'processes' in which historians are interested are better elucidated by Collingwood in his philosophy of mind than in his philosophy of historical method. As I've already said, the 'subject-matter of history' serves as the concept in which the overlap between those two analyses – philosophy of history and philosophy of mind – consists. "History", Collingwood says, "therefore, cannot be made to square with theories according to which the object of knowledge is abstract and changeless, a logical entity towards which the mind may take up various attitudes".¹ Part of what he is trying to express is that historians seek to discover not unique, individual states of affairs that once stood (as 'states'), but unique, individual processes that once happened.

Secondly historical answers are never given as single propositions, but are always presented as narratives, and/or incorporated into narratives. The narratives of historical writing, in reality, reflect a mixture of the different forms of history – as would be expected of a form of history that contains 'primitive survivals' of other forms. As a narrative purely of history as a science, an historical narrative would explain the question posed, the process whereby it was answered – what evidence was found and so on – and end with the conclusion. The narrative of history as a science is formally closer to an account of a good archaeological investigation, in that it would be a narrative not *supported* by evidence, but a narrative *of* the evidence.

Although there are usually elements of this – when historians say 'but from his correspondence we can see', and things like that – narratives of that kind are mixed in with narrations of one situation becoming another. Thus history as process is absorbed into history as a science in various ways, never completely replaced, and never completely

¹ *IH*, p. 234

dominant. ‘Process’, in short, survives as a feature of historical questions and as a feature of historical narrative.

xiii

Science and method

We’ve now seen some of the significance of ‘question and answer’ – the essence of all systematic thinking, all science – in Collingwood’s philosophy of history. Specifically we’ve seen how the highest form of history, history as a science, absorbs the lower forms that it complements by taking them as characteristics of its distinct type of question. There has been plenty about posing questions, but so far very little about answering them – about, that is, the distinct methods by which scientific historians provide answers.

The significance of Collingwood’s logic of question and answer to the ‘methodology’ of providing historical answers is quite iconoclastic, especially in view of the ever-expanding literature on the subject. The important principle is that questions are answered by using *evidence* to offer the best available conclusion to other historians.¹ Evidence is the most important part of the process of constructing answers, which is why *The Principles of History* opens with a chapter dedicated to it entirely. “Anything is evidence which can be used as evidence”, he writes, “and no one can tell what is going to serve him as evidence for answering a certain question until he has formulated the question”.² In §2 of the ‘Epilegomena’ (‘The Historical Imagination’), Collingwood discusses the ‘principles of method’ according to which evidence can and should be used. He ends with the bold statement that “The evidence available for solving any given problem changes with every change of historical method and with every variation in the competence of historians. The principles by which this evidence is interpreted change too”.³ Now, Collingwood is not, I think, merely describing changes in historical standards over time here. What he is *prescribing* is that the use of evidence not be subordinated to special methodological rules *at all*. The only ‘rules’ of method that determine the ways in which evidence may be used are the ‘rules’ of normal logical demonstration in practice. (Alan Donagan has already provided ample examples of this

¹ *IH*, p. 246

² *PH*, p. 38

³ *IH*, p. 248

in *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*.¹) What Collingwood means, when he says that there is “nothing other than historical thought itself, by appeal to which its conclusions may be verified”,² is that conclusions are not verified by appeal to “academic discussions”³ about what evidence means, what sort of thing should be thought of as evidence and what shouldn’t, or how evidence should be used in the abstract (normal logic excepted). Such discussions offer only abstractions formulated parasitically from concrete attempts to answer historical questions. This is not to say, of course, that individual cases of misusing evidence cannot resemble each other. But it *is* to say that the only way to evaluate the methods of evidence-use employed by an historian is to ask whether what he has done has helped or hindered his investigation in the case at hand⁴; whether his conclusion survives all the tests that could be devised for it⁵; and whether the evidence proves what it is supposed to – that is, whether we are convinced.⁶ We criticise an historian’s method when he ignores likely alternative answers or sub-answers, or when he draws invalid conclusions from the evidence he’s presented, or when the evidence he discusses is irrelevant. We can also point out that his question is actually ‘nonsense’, or that it isn’t specific enough. But the particular kind of evidence which needs to be considered, the particular degree of reasonable doubt which can be permitted, the terms that ought to be employed in the narratives an historian presents and so on, are not things that can be dismissed or recommended in abstraction from a particular piece of historical work. A particular kind or use of evidence might be clearly appropriate in one investigation while entirely redundant in another.⁷ As far as questions of method go, the “academic” methodological philosopher who “has all his ideas cut and dried and his answer ready for any challenge” has actually put himself in “a very dangerous position”. Like Collingwood’s ‘barbarist’, “he is giving away the initiative... It is no compensation for losing the initiative to be ready with an answer to every problem with which the enemy may confront you; it means always being one jump behind him”.⁸

¹ See *Later Philosophy*, pp. 182-92

² *IH*, p. 243

³ *NL*, 2.55

⁴ Goldstein writes, in a footnote to his bold essay ‘Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past’, that “Collingwood’s is a theory about what the discipline of history is and how it carries out its work; it does not purport to say what historians ought to do, other, of course, than to say that they ought to do historical work to the best of their ability.” Leon J. Goldstein, ‘Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past’, in Krausz (ed.), *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, p. 248, note 1

⁵ See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, p. 183

⁶ *NL*, p. 4.74

⁷ I recently heard a colleague’s paper which entreated researchers in International Relations to “use more data”.

⁸ *NL*, 41.58-61

What Collingwood says about the autonomous problem-solving of historians – and what he has to say about methodological prescription being relative to particular investigations – shows, I think, what is wrong with one of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s methodological contentions. In his own discussion of Collingwood in *Truth and Method* – a discussion he also gives the subtitle ‘The Logic of Question and Answer’ – Gadamer says this: “That a historical text is made the object of interpretation means that it puts a question to the interpreter.” The *text* puts the question to the *interpreter*, Gadamer says. It is not, then, the *historian* who puts the text to a *question*. Indeed Gadamer is quite explicit about this being a ‘reversal’ of the Collingwood position.¹ But what Gadamer’s reversal entails is that a given text can only be used as evidence for answering *the same* questions it was originally supposed to answer. If historians of ideas must, in order to understand a text, reconstruct the questions to which they were intended as answers, it is (Gadamer is saying) illegitimate to use them as evidence for answering one’s own questions. This is why Gadamer says “that “making the text speak” is not an arbitrary procedure that we undertake on our own initiative but that, as a question, it is related to the answer that is expected in the text”.² This principle of method is necessary, Gadamer thinks, if we are to be “open to the experience of history”.³

But in view of Collingwood’s autonomous historical method, we can see why Gadamer must be wrong. Scientific historians are no longer tied to the questions of other writers as, Collingwood says, nineteenth-century historians were.⁴ Gadamer’s historian, then, is prevented by a prior methodological proscription from using texts as evidence unless those texts have already given express consent that they may be approached for solving *their own* questions. In view of what Collingwood says, Gadamer must be wrong to think that it is past texts themselves that open us up to the ‘experience’ of history. It is rather the unlimited range of possible historical questions *we* might want to ask that opens up the experience of investigating history. Collingwood might have commented that the only experience facilitated by such a principle of method as Gadamer’s is the cramped experience of working like an historian of the nineteenth century.⁵

Finally, some questions have been raised about something Collingwood seems to describe as another ‘method’ in *The Idea of History*: namely, the “*a priori*” function of the

¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 366

² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 370

³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 370

⁴ *IH*, pp. 260-1

⁵ *IH*, pp. 260-1

historical imagination.¹ The discussion of it spans roughly the second half of §2 of the ‘Epilegomena’ (‘The Historical Imagination’).² What Collingwood describes as the “*a priori*” function of the historical imagination is actually just a possible logical use of evidence for constructing historical answers: he is describing the situation in which accepting A means committing yourself to accepting B, even though there is no ‘independent’ evidence for B (that is, evidence independent of A). Collingwood illustrates this point with unperceived physical objects. Even without having seen them we know that the table has an under-side, that the egg has an inside, that the moon has a back, etc. It is an uncharacteristically poor analogy, intended only to show that sometimes in historical reasoning one thing can be as evidence for something else that is then, if the first is accepted, certain. Collingwood’s example is better than his analogies: If Caesar was in Rome one day and in Gaul some time later, it follows *a priori* that there must have been a journey, Collingwood says.³ I think we should avoid quibbling over his use of the term “*a priori*”, and concentrate on the actual point.⁴ That point is that, when a fellow historian points out that there is no record of this journey, he ought anyway to be convinced, given that he accepts that Caesar was in Rome one day and in Gaul some time later. Some evidence leaves other possible explanations. But some admits no other explanation: if we accept these two ‘fixed points’, then we have what is in common speech called ‘hard’ evidence of what has been inferred.

¹ *IH*, pp. 240-8

² Mink considered the point about the *a priori* imagination to be of sufficient importance to devote a short section of his *Mind, History and Dialectic* to showing that we can “give sense” to it by recourse to “the development in his thinking of the theory of mind and the theory of absolute presuppositions”. (*Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 183. The discussion continues onto p. 186.) Mink’s defence does not misconstrue anything of what Collingwood meant in the passages he cites. But the recourse to Collingwood’s theory of mind and of absolute presuppositions – that is, the recourse to Collingwood’s metaphysics – is actually unnecessary for making sense of the “*a priori*” function of the historical imagination. Mink *makes* it necessary by putting Collingwood into a jam that he “apparently does not see”: namely, that “by his own account, even though evidence may be used to fill in details of the historian’s “picture,” he has ruled out the possibility that evidence could either confirm or disconfirm the outlines of that picture”. (p. 184) “Now I would suggest”, he continues, “that the mystery of these descriptions is dispelled if we recognize the “*a priori* imagination” as an early and imperfect attempt to bring out the notion of a “constellation of absolute presuppositions”. (p. 185) He then confuses the issue further by discussing the relation of these presuppositions to another claim, also in ‘The Historical Imagination’, that history is itself *a priori* – “in Cartesian language, “innate”.” (pp. 185-6. Collingwood’s claim is in *IH*, p. 248) I won’t reproduce for the reader the rest of Mink’s defence since, as I’ve already said that, although it is not wrong, and although it is very interesting on its own account, it is unnecessary as a defence of Collingwood’s point. More recently Marnie Hughes-Warrington has made what she thinks Collingwood says about the *a priori* historical imagination part of her message for teaching. See Hughes-Warrington, pp.135-45

³ *IH*, p. 240

⁴ My thanks to ES for explaining to me with great commitment why this is “not what *a priori* means”.

The transition from general solutions to specific points

There is much about the distinctness of historical questions that remains to be elaborated upon, let alone philosophically demonstrated to be right. I will now combine tasks. I want to find out whether certain of Collingwood's claims about history – and, by extension, the history of ideas – are right. I've already shown how some of his arguments about history can be made more intelligible by relating them to his fundamental logic of question and answer and his theory of knowledge production by 'systematic thinking', and now we'll now begin to do this for more of his contentions. To repeat: It seems to me that 'question and answer' provides simple support for even Collingwood's most contentious claims about history, and that overlooking it has tended to generate unnecessarily elaborate defences of them among sympathetic commentators.

The contentions I'll deal with are (xv) that when the historian knows *what* happened he also knows *why* it happened; and (xvi) that history exists in the minds of historians. I've devoted Part IV entirely to the claim that historians must re-enact past thoughts. Following that I've discussed in Part V Collingwood's claim that (vii-x) historians must not ask only what an author thought but also whether he was right. And in Part VI I've discussed his claims that (vi-xi) history is necessary or conducive to freedom, duty, civilization, and progress.

Our first set of tasks then is to find out whether those contentions can be more easily demonstrated by way of the logic of question and answer. And secondly (this is the combination of tasks) in each case we'll see what those arguments of Collingwood's can tell us to fill out our hitherto rough characterisation of historical questions. The alternative would be to try the reader's patience further with a growing list of what historical questions demand, while defending Collingwood only in passing against some major criticisms. It's because those criticisms and debates are more significant than would deserve only marginal discussion that I've organised further discussion of historical questions around them.

The 'what-why' paradox

We'll start with a claim that continues to cause some aggravation among Collingwood's commentators, even the most sympathetic ones: "an historical fact once genuinely ascertained, grasped by the historian's re-enactment of the agent's thought in his mind, is already explained", Collingwood writes in *The Idea of History*. "For the historian there is no difference between discovering what happened and discovering why it happened."¹

This is a consistent claim throughout Collingwood's mature writings on history, and I think little really needs to be said to elaborate what is counter-intuitive about it. In history 'generically' it means there is no difference between knowing what Caesar did, and knowing why he did it. In the history of ideas – and we'll deal with this in the right place – this seems tantamount to holding that once you know *what* Hobbes says, you already know *why* he said it.

Alan Donagan has said that this is perhaps Collingwood's "boldest saying" about history.² William H. Dray, though, always remained unconvinced by what he gave the convenient title "the what-why paradox".³ But actually I've come to think that Collingwood is even right about this – again, by virtue of the question-and-answer theory of scientific history, which reveals a terminological ambiguity to 'what happened'. I'll try to illustrate this with an exaggeratedly simple example.

There is a common-sense difference between knowing, in the first place, what Nelson's manoeuvres at Trafalgar were and, in the second, knowing why he made them.⁴ The first seems to be the fact, and the second the explanation. One possible rescue of Collingwood's argument, that the 'what' and the 'why' are in fact the same, would be to say that you might be able to describe some manoeuvres without knowing why they were

¹ *IH*, pp. 176-7. My emphasis.

² Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, p. 200. Donagan's explanation of the point eventually won the agreement of W. H. Walsh. Compare Walsh's argument in 'The Character of a Historical Explanation' (1947), with a statement in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 71, where he says "I should... no longer wish to rely on the passage from *The Idea of History*... to show that Collingwood believed thought to be self-explanatory, as Donagan has convinced me that the word 'it' at the end of the second sentence was intended to refer back to 'event' in the first". See also Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 114, 392

³ See Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, pp. 72-80. Dray's struggle with the "what-why paradox" is indicative of a deeper struggle with Collingwood's definition of historical knowledge, which is what Dray wrestles with in his section of *History as Re-enactment* devoted to 'Re-enactive Explanation and Completeness' (pp. 72-80). See also Dussen's dealing with Dray in *History as a Science*, pp. 114-15. Dussen does not say whether Dray is right or wrong, so I've corrected this little lacuna here.

⁴ *NL*, 5.33

made, but you would not thereby ‘understand’ what the manoeuvres *were*. This ‘what they really were’ refers to the idea that you would not see them in their full ‘light’. It is an appeal to a sense of ‘understanding’ something in which much more context has to be included in a description of an action, with the aim of showing its ‘true significance’ or something of that kind.

This usage of ‘understanding’ – which I think is rife in contemporary history of political thought – does not, though, work terribly well as expressed in this way. Firstly no action can ever be described in its ‘full’ significance. The historian must still select what is ‘illuminating’ and what is not, relative to the purpose of his analysis. His purpose is never to achieve a description which leaves nothing out at all. So it is not clear that a very rudimentary description of Nelson’s manoeuvres is actually always inadequate for all purposes. By the same token, there is no reason to think that historians of ideas should have to give ‘full’ accounts of agents’ intentions. Accounts of military moves and intentions that are not ‘full’ are not really illegitimate history: they are just associated with knowing less.

This attempt at a rescue does suggest a better answer though. Louis Mink has already attempted one in line with the logic of question and answer in his *Mind, History and Dialectic*. Collingwood, for Mink, really means to say that an historical narrative is not a story supported by evidence, but is the statement of the evidence itself. In this sense, when the historian knows *what* happened he already knows *why* he knows it.¹ Mink’s is a fine book, and the shortcomings of his defence of this point are not great. But his point is obviously not the same as Collingwood’s.

My defence is different and, I think, truer to Collingwood’s intention. It is important to keep the concept of ‘explanation’ and ‘cause’ in history tied to the concrete example of what is demanded by the question, otherwise explanation becomes a very slippery concept indeed. “For ‘causing’ we may substitute ‘making’, ‘inducing’, ‘persuading’, ‘urging’, ‘forcing’, ‘compelling’, according to differences in the kind of motive in question”, Collingwood says in his *Essay on Metaphysics*.² “It should be remembered”, Dussen adds, “that the questioning activity has to stop somewhere, because otherwise one can go on asking “why” as long as one pleases”.³ He is right.

¹ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, pp. 187-94, especially pp. 192-3

² *EM*, p. 290

³ Dussen, *History as a Science*, p.110. Dussen also cites an argument of Dray’s which appeals to “levels” of ‘why’ questions. See W. H. Dray, ‘Historical Understanding as Re-thinking’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 27 (1958), pp. 200-15) Although I don’t disagree with Dray on this, I think his is an unnecessarily complex

An historical question, we already know, takes the form of what someone meant by what he did. Now, the ‘situation’ in which the agent ‘did’ whatever it was he did might well have had irreducibly ‘natural’ features: material stuff like oak, gunpowder, shot, canvas, etc. – things with ‘objective’ material properties. But questions about, for example, where exactly the vessels involved in the Battle of Trafalgar were in relation to each other at a given point, where they were an hour later, what speed they were moving at, and where they all were by the end, would not be complete historical questions on their own. Such questions admittedly concern processes, and they are in principle answerable, and furthermore they are answerable by recourse to the same kinds of systematic evidence-sifting that historians usually use. But they would not be historical questions if they did not pursue what was ‘done’ with all these arrangements of wood and cannon moving through brine. The specific unknown in questions of past logistics not a ‘what he meant’. The historian must go further, for Collingwood, because an historical question is not such that it can be satisfied by logistical description alone.

Suppose our question concerns the fact that Nelson sailed *Victory* at a right-angle directly into the Franco-Spanish line, and takes the form ‘What was Nelson doing?’ If by ‘What was he doing?’ our question meant ‘What did he think he was doing?’ – which is what, for Collingwood, historical questions *do* mean – then we might phrase the same question as ‘What did Nelson think he was doing?’ But the same thing is expressible – and this is important – as ‘Why did he do that?’ *What* he did, and *why* he did it signify the same specific unknown in these three questions. The answer to the question (simplified for the sake of example) is that Nelson was trying to break up the Franco-Spanish line. Thus ‘what he did’, in a form correlative to the historical question, is not the blank logistical event of *Victory* approaching Villeneuve’s defensive line at right-angles. What Nelson was doing was attempting to break the Franco-Spanish line.

The ‘paradox’ Dray wrestles with owes to the ambiguity of ‘what happened’. As logistical knowledge, what happened is that *Victory* approached at a right-angle. As historical knowledge, what happened is that Nelson tried to break the line. Historical knowledge is not any knowledge about the past: it comprises only answers to historical questions. Logistical knowledge correlates to only logistical questions. As historical knowledge, knowing what Nelson did means knowing why he thus manoeuvred *Victory*. This is Collingwood’s point. But Dray’s objection is that knowing what happened logistically, knowing that *Victory* approached at a right-angle, is not the same as knowing

way of dealing with a point which can be more simply tidied up by appealing to what the question itself demands for its satisfaction.

what Nelson thought he was doing. This is quite true – in fact it is the very point Collingwood is trying to make. But where the ‘what happened’ in Collingwood’s example is historical knowledge, the ‘what happened’ in Dray’s objection says nothing about what was done, so it is not historical knowledge.

The confusion is amplified when mangled by the language of explanation or causation – even when the attempt is being made to define an historical sense of those words. This is why Collingwood too opens his discussion, in his *Essay on Metaphysics*, by making it quite plain that the sense of ‘causation’ meant by an historian when he speaks of a cause may be expressed in other terms “according to differences in the kind of motive in question”.¹

Alan Donagan has offered a strong attempt to make sense of historical explanation in Collingwood.² What makes his account so good is that he refers obliquely but repeatedly to the sorts of things it is “an historian’s business to know”. What weakens it, on the other hand, is that because he is looking for a definition of ‘explanation’, rather than one of historical questions, he falls into the trap of thinking that only individual acts count as explanations for Collingwood, and therefore “he was a methodological individualist, in the strongest sense of that disputable term”. (This objection is dealt with in Part IV, below.)

Back to our example: What is our historian trying to explain? If he is trying to ‘explain’ the logistical move in terms of Nelson’s plan, then he is just trying to answer an historical question. Knowing the answer to this historical question will mean that he has explained what happened historically, which means he has explained why it happened. But if he is trying to explain Nelson’s plan itself, then he has at some point begun to demand more detail about that plan. That is the demand of another question, if it was not already contained in his first. Nelson wanted to break the line in order to inflict maximum damage to the Franco-Spanish ships; he wanted a conclusive battle; he wanted to secure British control of the sea, etc. This is where Mink’s interpretation isn’t quite precise enough. An historical description does not, as he supposed, need to leave “no questions” about the manoeuvre “unanswered”.³ It only needs to answer the question originally posed.

The point I’m trying to make here is that the ‘what happened?’ in a properly historical question is synonymous with a ‘why?’, and a specific ‘why’ at that. The passage

¹ *EM*, p. 290. See also Boucher’s interesting discussion of this in *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 115-16.

² See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 200-9

³ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 189

I quoted a few pages ago shows Collingwood referring to “an historical fact” and a “what happened”. Both stand, in this passage, for an historical question that has already been answered – the answer “genuinely ascertained”. Here is that passage again:

an historical fact once genuinely ascertained, grasped by the historian’s re-enactment of the agent’s thought in his mind, is already explained. For the historian there is no difference between discovering what happened and discovering why it happened.¹

Is Dray to blame for failing to see all this? Not in the slightest. Collingwood is, I think, responsible for his own terminological ambiguity. The fact that he doesn’t explain his claim about ‘what-why’ by reference to the question-and-answer logic of historical inquiry leads Dray to ask about the special logic of historical explanation according to Collingwood, and he rightly realises that “the explanatory ideal is formally different in the re-enactive and [natural] scientific cases”.² But Dray is never, I think, quite able to make full sense of the ‘form’ Collingwood thinks explanations in history must take, because all the time Dray carries with his reading the assumption that that which has been explained is unambiguously the outward material fact or event – which is not, for Collingwood, an historical fact at all, since it does not correlate to an historical question.

¹ *IH*, pp. 176-7. Emphasis added.

² See Dray, *History as Re-Enactment*, p. 77

'Ideality' and 'constructionism'

Most of what Collingwood has to say about historical knowledge applies to 'history *a parte subjecti*' – that is, it is about what happens on the 'subjective side', the side where the historian is investigating and constructing his knowledge.¹ What he leaves unclear is what this means for 'history *a parte objecti*', what is known. This has led some commentators to ask whether, for Collingwood, history *a parte objecti* is something real and objective, or merely constructed in some way 'subjectively'.²

This question is at the heart of a dispute that has claimed not inconsiderable man hours on the part of eminent Collingwood scholars, because it pertains to the nature of the 'facts' that constitute something like 'historical reality'. It has also, I think rightly, been recognised by some Collingwood scholars that what has been called 'historical constructionism' is actually essential to recognising why Collingwood thought it was in history that the false dichotomy between mind and its object is overcome,³ and thereby an important feature of his brand of 'idealism'. 'Constructionism' in these debates means the position that something, in this case 'history' or 'the past', is constructed, or created, whether imaginarily, socially, institutionally, or by whatever other means, rather than being 'real', 'objective', or simply 'given'. So although there may be little at stake for working historians, there is a major philosophical point here, especially for Collingwood scholars. This is why it deserves some discussion in light of what I'm saying about the 'special character' of history being its characteristic type of question. To some readers, it seems that Collingwood is taking an apparently circular, 'idealist' position that historians create the very objects they are investigating, and invent the very facts they are meant to be discovering. Some have attacked Collingwood for making historical knowledge 'subjective', or 'relativistic'.⁴ It is clear, then, what is at stake here. If the past isn't 'real',

¹ Indeed Collingwood is quite explicit about this. See *IH*, pp. 434-5

² For the sake of simplicity I am dealing at once with what seem sometimes to be two debates: one about whether history is *real* or merely constructed, and the other about whether historical facts are objective or subjective. The latter is dealt with exclusively by Dussen in *History as a Science* (pp. 119-23). In all the ways that are important, the disputes essentially line up together: the 'objectivists' on the one side, and the 'constructionists' and 'subjectivists' on the other.

³ See for example Boucher's introduction to *EPP*, pp. 48-9

⁴ Dussen has documented this dispute in a section of *History as a Science* called 'Historical Objectivity'. He cites among those who have attacked Collingwood for being a 'subjectivist' or 'relativist' D. M. Mackinnon, who says that Collingwood "flirt[ed] with a complete relativism"; M. Mendelbaum, who thinks the doctrine of re-enactment must "inevitably lead to scepticism"; J. N. Hartt, who says something similar about Collingwood's thinking leading to scepticism; and B. Verhaegen, who describes the "subjectivism" that Collingwood apparently shares with Croce. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 119-23, and his corresponding references on pp. 393-4

and therefore isn't something we can claim 'knowledge' of, then what is the point of historians?

The fact that it does remain unclear in Collingwood's writings whether man's historical past, in this sense, is truly 'discovered' or merely 'constructed' is attested by the uncertainty on this point among commentators.¹ The question generated much debate in the 1980s by distinguished scholars like Dray, who argued that Collingwood wasn't a 'constructionist', and Leon Goldstein, who insisted that he was. (See below.) Margit Hurup Nielsen doesn't enter the debate, but she seems to accept Collingwood's historical constructionism – in fact she seems to take it for granted, though she prefers the term 'constructivism'² – and notes that some interpreters have considered the scope of Collingwood's historical methodology to be broader than usually thought, *i.e.* "to consist of the establishing or constitution of historical facts, not the explanation of them".³ "The question whether or not the distinction between constitution/establishing or explanation is tenable *per se* – or in relation to Collingwood – is a matter", she says, "not to be discussed here".⁴

It is, though, to be discussed here. It seems to me that Collingwood intended for the two questions of (1) how the objects, past thoughts, exist, and (2) how we can know them, to have one answer: by inferring from evidence to construct answers to historical questions. It is only in the highest form of history, history as a science, that this becomes clear. History still 'asserts facts', but the philosophy of scientific history is about straightening out how those assertions are decided upon. It is also only in history as a science that the apparent mutual exclusion of 'realism' and 'constructionism' is dissolved. As long as they are treated, as they are by Stein Helgeby,⁵ as two competing answers to the same "first-order" question about history, they cannot be resolved. From the point of

¹ See for example Leon Goldstein, 'Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past'; and Elazar Weinryb, 'Re-Enactment in Retrospect', *The Monist* vol. 72, no. 4: *The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (October, 1989), pp. 568-80. One of David Boucher's early essays on the idea of the 'creation of the past' with regard to Oakeshott and Collingwood shows that he was at one time uncertain about it. See David Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory* vol. 23, no. 2 (May, 1984), especially pp. 204-6

² Nielsen, p. 1. Nielsen addresses Collingwood's "constructivism" more explicitly on p. 26, where she defines it thus: "By a "constructivist," I mean one who regards history primarily as an activity, not as an "object." Constructivism is in opposition to a "discovery theory" of history... [and] is based on a sceptical evaluation of the possibilities of knowing the real past, but it is not itself a sceptical – only a relativistic – position. A theory of this kind would consider answers to metaphysical, ontological, or, in fact, any kind of theoretical questions about history, to be determined by the character of the process which brings history about, that is by the method by which "past facts" are constituted, constructed, or as we may say "re"-constructed. The problem of method is, therefore, the central problem for such a position." Nielsen, p. 26

³ Nielsen, p. 6

⁴ Nielsen, p. 6, note 24

⁵ Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 48-52

view of history as a science, though, there is nothing hypocritical about historians constructing conclusions while taking the idea of historical truth as a presupposition of their practice.

Dray's first article on the subject was written in 1980. He republished his 'objectivist' thesis in volume one of *Collingwood Studies* (1994), and in 1995 he improved and reaffirmed it in *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History*. Here is what Dray says in *History as Re-enactment*:

Many critics have read into what he says... the doctrine that what we normally call historical events are not past realities, but mere mental constructions, thoughts generated in the minds of historians by their own inquiries, the true object of historical knowledge therefore being present, not past...¹

For Dray, Collingwood should nevertheless be seen as an 'objectivist', and he points to the apparently 'realistic' language Collingwood uses when talking about the work, material, and conclusions of historians. Collingwood describes, Dray points out, the 're-enactment' of past thought, "reconstructing, re-evoking, re-creating, re-thinking, reviving, even repeating, the past"; and it would seem impossible to do this with something that is not 'there' to have these things done with it.² So none of this, Dray thinks, would make sense on a constructionist interpretation; and neither would the long passage in *The Idea of History* in which the author explains how the re-enacted thought of the historian should be *the same* as that of the (original) agent.³ "I have little doubt that he had constructionist moments", Dray writes, "but, as I read him, his constructionist tendencies recede into the background of his thought [after the late twenties], only occasionally gaining fresh, if sometimes startling, expression... I can see nothing in Collingwood's mature philosophy of history that *required* him to be a constructionist".⁴ Collingwood, then, on Dray's account, mostly remained committed to the view that the past, even the inside of history, is or was in some sense real, and is therefore to be discovered, not created, by the historian.⁵ This is not to say that we should call Collingwood a 'realist', of course – no-one who'd read *An Autobiography* would want to

¹ Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, p. 8

² W. H. Dray, 'Was Collingwood an Historical Constructionist?', *Collingwood Studies* vol. 1 (1994), p. 59

³ See Dray, 'Was Collingwood an Historical Constructionist?', p. 61. Dray cites *IH*, p. 283 (footnotes)

⁴ Dray, 'Was Collingwood an Historical Constructionist?', p. 59

⁵ Dray, 'Was Collingwood an Historical Constructionist?', p. 59

be so clumsy. But we should, Dray thinks, read Collingwood as an ‘objectivist’, rather than a ‘constructionist’.

Dray is right that many of these ‘constructionist moments’ arise in work from before the late twenties. In ‘The Limits of Historical Knowledge’ (1928) Collingwood explains how...

Again, historical realism involves the absurdity of thinking of the past as something still existing by itself... a world where Galileo’s weight is still falling, where the smoke of Nero’s Rome still fills the intelligible air, and where interglacial man is still laboriously learning to chip flints. This limbo, where events which have finished happening still go on, is familiar to us all; it is the room in the fairy-tale, where all the old moons are kept behind the door; it is the answer to the poet’s refrain: *Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?* It is the land east of the sun and west of the moon. Its prose name is Nowhere.¹

In the same article Collingwood also discusses the ‘rules’ of the game of history, and what they tell us about the idea of “what really happened”. I’m afraid I have provided this passage at length, albeit abridged, since I think the reader will find here further proof for what I’ve said already about scientific historical thinking, as well as correspondences with passages we’ve already seen from Collingwood’s later work:

One rule – the first – runs thus: “You must not say anything, however true, for which you cannot produce evidence.” The game is won not by the player who can reconstitute what really happened, but by the player who can show that his view of what happened is the one which the evidence accessible to all players, when criticised up to the hilt, supports. Suppose a given view is in fact the correct one, and suppose (granted it were possible) that all the extant evidence, interpreted with the maximum degree of skill, led to a different view, no evidence supporting the correct view: in that case the holder of the correct view would lose the game, the holder of the other view win it... For there is no way of knowing what view is “correct,” except by finding what the evidence, critically interpreted, proves. A view defined as “correct, but not supported by the evidence,” is a view by definition unknowable, incapable of being the goal of the historian’s search...

¹ *EPH*, p. 101

But, I shall be told, I have frankly reduced history to a game. I have deprived its narratives of all objective value, and degraded them to a mere existence in the interpretation of arbitrarily selected bodies of evidence, every such body being selected by the operation of chance and confessedly impotent to prove the truth.

It is time to drop the metaphor of a game. The so-called rules of the game are really the definition of what historical thinking is; the winner of the game is the historian proper – the person who thinks historically, whose thought fulfils the ideal of historical truth. For historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened, if “what really happened” is anything other than “what the evidence indicates.” ...“What really happened” in this sense of the phrase is simply the thing in itself, the thing defined as out of all relation to the knower of it, not only unknown but unknowable, not only unknowable but non-existent.¹

Perhaps the reader will think that I am exaggerating Collingwood’s ‘constructionism’ by giving an account of the question-and-answer nature of historical investigation and then grafting onto its root some specimens trimmed from Collingwood’s ‘early’ philosophy of history – roughly the 1920s variety supposed by Dray to be distinct from the mature variety. So here are some reaffirmations, harvested this time from *The Idea of History*:

Hence *all* theories of knowledge that conceive it as a transaction or relation between a subject and an object both actually existing, and confronting or compresent to one another, theories that take acquaintance as the essence of knowledge, make history impossible.²

The fundamental thesis there [in Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*] is that reality is not something other than its appearances, hidden behind them, but is these appearances themselves, forming a whole of which we can say that it forms a single system consisting of experience and that all our experiences form part of it. A reality so defined can only be the life of mind itself, that is, history.³

¹ *EPH*, pp. 98-9

² *IH*, p. 233. Emphasis added.

³ *IH*, p. 141

This principle has served us to distinguish history from natural science on the one hand, as the study of *a given or objective world distinct from the act of thinking it*, and on the other from psychology as the study of immediate experience, sensation, and feeling, which, though the activity of a mind, is not the activity of thinking.¹

There is also a brief explanation in chapter four of *An Autobiography* of why the ‘realist’ theory of knowledge, according to which the mind ‘apprehends’ (or is ‘compresent’ with) what is known, is incompatible with the experience of historical thinking.² Collingwood has various physical metaphors for this misconception of the historical fact: “the positivistic view of history as a crude lump of magma”³; “a solid block for us to study”⁴ etc. Actually, he says, what we call the ‘facts’ of history are “to be apprehended not empirically but by a process of inference according to rational principles from data given or rather discovered in the light of these principles”.⁵ Historical facts are, then, arrived at inferentially from “data” or, what he really means here, from *evidence*.⁶ The ‘facts’ of history are, as Bradley says, actually conclusions.⁷

Leon Goldstein, in his powerful essay ‘Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past’, argues for a ‘constructionist’ interpretation of Collingwood.⁸ But apart from a couple of passing references to evidence, he ignores the theory of question and answer. I think this indicates that Goldstein doesn’t consider, as Collingwood does, the process of historical construction and the process of historical inquiry to be the same thing. Because he ignores ‘question and answer’, Goldstein has to find some other ‘technique’ of the working historian to identify with the construction process. For Goldstein, that ‘technique’ or ‘method’ is re-enactment. As well as missing the most fundamental principle of historical inquiry, then, Goldstein’s identification of constructionism with re-enactment plays into the hands of Collingwood’s less charitable critics, because it allows him to be seen as abandoning evidence, and conjuring up pasts in the imagination without it.

¹ *IH*, p. 305. Emphasis added.

² See *A*, pp. 25-6

³ L26, *IH*, p. 417

⁴ L26, *IH*, p. 419

⁵ *IH*, p. 176

⁶ *IH*, pp. 132-3

⁷ F. H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History* (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1874), pp. 9-10

⁸ Published in Michael Krausz’s edited collection, *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. See pp. 241-67

Among Collingwood scholars the question of Collingwood's 'constructionism' was never conclusively settled. Anyway, the right to apply this label to Collingwood's name is not what is really at stake: more important is the dispute it stands for concerning what Collingwood is actually saying. If 'constructionism' means that historical knowledge is 'not objective', or is knowledge of things that did not really happen, and that therefore historical claims are in some way illusory, then Dray is right that Collingwood is not an historical constructionist. History for Collingwood is *real*, there is historical *reality*, there are historical *facts*. And Dray is right: certainly Collingwood is discussing a discipline that deals in facts, reality, and discovery.

But Dray misses Collingwood's 'constructionism' because of the framing of his question. Rather than to ask whether, for Collingwood, the historical world is 'unreal' as opposed to 'real', it is better to ask what is entailed by Collingwood's idea of scientific history, specifically by its practice and by its presupposition that there is one historical truth, and that two irreconcilable claims about it cannot both be right. Dray's question forces the historical world into either of two positions which, for Collingwood, would both be wrong. The first is that the historical world is independent of the observer. This is in fact the 'horn of the dilemma' accepted, Collingwood thinks, by English philosophy following Bradley, and which (he writes in *The Idea of History*) resulted in Oxford and Cambridge 'realism'. And the second position has to be that the 'historical world' is 'unreal', which is to convert history into plain fantasy.¹

The question is, then, how can we have historical knowledge, given that 'knowledge' can no longer be thought to be acquaintance between the subject – the 'knowing' historian – and his (independent) object, the 'known'? Collingwood thinks this is the problem dealt with by Bradley, and "It remains to be seen", he says in *The Idea of History*, "whether, sixty years later, his problem, which in the meantime I believe no English-speaking philosopher has discussed in print, can be advanced beyond the point at which he left it".²

I've argued that Collingwood's attempt to advance the point consists in his attempt to explain that the truth of claims about historical reality and historical facts is correlative to the questions that are asked by historians, and to the rigour and reliability of the constructive processes by which conclusions are preliminarily established. The most accurate sense in which we can apply the term 'constructionism' to Collingwood

¹ Collingwood criticises Simmel for precisely this second mistake: Simmel does not, in Collingwood's view, do enough to prevent the subject of historical knowledge from becoming an 'illusion'. See *IH*, pp. 170-1

² *IH*, p. 240

becomes clear, I think, when the reader co-ordinates what Collingwood says about historical thinking and historical knowledge with what he says about the question-and-answer logic of systematic thinking – the “thinking hard” to which is due “everything that we call specifically human”.¹ If by ‘constructionism’ we mean this, then to deny Collingwood’s constructionism one has to overlook, it seems, not only all of those passages in which Collingwood attacks the idea that the historical object is ‘there’ compresently, to be apprehended like something still happening, but also his claim that the ‘known’ of history is the conclusion itself – that is, that history is inferential. The historian’s conclusions, which are formulated as narratives, are not propositions true or false by virtue of their correspondence to some reality that is *not* a proposition. Conclusions are ‘right’ when they follow from good, sound reasoning about what the evidence shows.

This is to say, in simple terms, that ‘history *a parte objecti*’ is ‘ideal’ because the conclusions of history as a science are in this sense ‘ideal’. Historical facts are the product of an inquiring mind. To slip for a moment into technical language, Collingwood’s inquiry into historical knowledge must, then, prioritise the ‘*a parte subjecti*’ examination of historical epistemology, with any ‘ontological’ theory of history emerging from it secondarily. Indeed he says so quite explicitly in chapter two of *The Principles of History*:

There are two questions to be asked whenever anyone inquires into the nature of any science: ... the first question concerns the subjective characteristics of the science, its peculiarities as a kind of thinking; the second concerns the characteristics of its object, that which in the course of this thinking people come to know.

What I shall try to show in this section is not only that of these two questions the one I have put first must necessarily be asked before the one I have put second, but that when in due course we come to ask the second we can answer it only by a fresh and closer consideration of the first.²

The fact that this debate can arise among readers who know Collingwood’s writings better than most shows, I think, that our man also failed to state his arguments

¹ *EM*, p. 37

² *PH*, pp. 39-40. He adds on p. 43 “any systematic consideration of history must begin by discussing history *a parte subjecti*, history as a special form of thinking which goes on in the minds of historians, and go on afterwards to discuss history *a parte objecti*...” and on p. 48 “so long as any unanswered questions remain about the object of historical knowledge, the only way in which we can answer them is by inquiring more closely into the nature of historical thinking”.

explicitly enough. Collingwood's answer to the *a parte objecti* question of how historical facts exist is only stated scantily, sometimes confusingly, and usually only implicitly – and this is the side of the question Dray and Goldstein were struggling to clarify in the 1980s. They struggled because Collingwood's writings in the philosophy of history deal overwhelmingly with this second, 'subjective' question of historical *knowing*, and indeed part of what is confusing about Collingwood, at least initially, is that his examination of historical epistemology seems to proceed without any proper, explicit statement of how that which is the object of inquiry exists. This only makes sense in view of history as a science, which clarifies why it is that in order to find out an entity's mode of existence we must begin with an investigation of *how* the mind experiences the 'encounter' with it. In the case of a 'known' object, this means investigating how we construct knowledge of it.

Part IV

The ‘Doctrine of Re-enactment’

- i. A survey of the site
- ii. Critique
- iii. Defence 1: analysis of ‘object’ processes
- iv. The problems with philosophy of history *via* philosophy of mind
- v. Defence 2: ‘question and answer’
- vi. Textual foundation
- vii. Criticisms answered
- viii. ‘Methodological individualism’
- ix. Further criticisms answered
- x. ‘Intuitivism’
- xi. History, hermeneutics and language

i

A survey of the site

We now come to what has become Collingwood’s most notorious contention in connection to history: that “the history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind”.¹ This has been called Collingwood’s ‘doctrine of re-enactment’. I’ll continue to use the term, though the same concept also appears as ‘re-thinking’ and occasionally as ‘re-experiencing thoughts’.²

The doctrine of re-enactment became a sort of target for authors writing about methodology in the history of ideas in the 1960s and ’70s, so its influence has mostly taken this reverse form. Quentin Skinner’s attitude reflects today’s general consensus. He writes:

Nothing I am saying presupposes the discredited hermeneutic ambition of stepping empathetically into other people’s shoes and attempting (in R. G. Collingwood’s unfortunate phrase) to think their thoughts after them... the

¹ *IH*, p. 215

² Instead of ‘doctrine of re-enactment’ Dussen prefers to use the term ‘concept of re-thinking’. I consider this equally legitimate, though the reader might benefit from being told that we mean the same thing. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 72-8

mysterious empathetic process that old-fashioned hermeneutics may have led us to believe [in].¹

Skinner has repeated his attack on re-enactment in his contribution to Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk's edited collection of essays, *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (2001), despite the promising title of his chapter, 'The rise of, challenge to and prospects for a Collingwoodian approach to the history of political thought'. A re-examination of Collingwood's infamous doctrine, it turns out, is not among those prospects. "We can surely never hope", Skinner says, "to abolish the historical distance between ourselves and our forebears, speaking as though we can spirit away the influence of everything that has intervened, empathetically reliving their experience and retelling it as it was lived".² In light of this, one might think that Skinner's own position is a little contradictory: "My aspiration is not of course to enter into the thought-processes of long-dead thinkers", he says; "it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical inquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way".³

Initially re-enactment was taken by commentators such as Gardiner and Walsh as a prescription of one among other possible methodologies of historiography. They had a point: the fact is that in many of its appearances in Collingwood's writing, re-enactment is described as an activity. Re-enactment is not, Collingwood writes, "a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind; it is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking".⁴ It is clear enough that, for Collingwood, the re-enactment of past thoughts is the *sine qua non* of historical thinking at least; though sometimes he discusses it as if it is synonymous with 'historical thinking'.

It seemed to these early commentators, then, that re-enactment was being prescribed by Collingwood as an historical method. This consensus was soon reversed by Alan Donagan's 1956 article 'The Verification of Historical Theses' in *The Philosophical Quarterly*. (Gardiner and Walsh openly changed their minds.⁵) Donagan's contention was that re-enactment is in fact an "element in the goal of historical inquiry"; "part of the end

¹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, vol. I, Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 120

² Skinner, 'The rise of, challenge to and prospects for a Collingwoodian approach to the history of political thought', in D. Castiglione and I. W. Hampsher-Monk, (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 185

³ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 3

⁴ *IH*, p. 215. See also p. 218

⁵ See Nielsen, pp. 3-4, and especially note 15, where Nielsen cites her own conversations with Gardiner and Walsh in 1975.

an historian strives to accomplish”.¹ On this point, as I’ve explained below, Donagan was (and is) right. The message that has been taken from what Donagan says is that Collingwood is *not* doing methodology of history. This view, which has become widely shared, Margit Hurup Nielsen calls the ‘non-methodological’ interpretation.² In a recent article for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Dussen reaffirms it, albeit with a new name: the “transcendental interpretation” of re-enactment which has replaced the “misconceived methodological interpretation”, he says, means “taking the doctrine of re-enactment to be describing a universal and necessary characteristic of history”³ – not, then, a prescribed ‘method’.

But the apparent difference between the ‘methodological’ and the ‘non-methodological’ interpretation is not a real difference. By returning to the primacy of ‘question and answer’, and in particular Donagan’s original point back in 1956, we can see why. The doctrine of re-enactment prescribes a necessary condition of historical knowledge, because properly-formulated historical questions cannot be satisfied without it. The methodological implication of Donagan’s correct interpretation is that an historical question that does not demand or “expect” re-enacted thought is not an historical question at all. Historians therefore must pursue only such questions – otherwise they are not historians. This part of the study is devoted entirely to clarifying and evaluating the doctrine of re-enactment. First let’s begin with what Collingwood actually says about it.

For such a notorious ‘doctrine’, re-enactment seems strikingly simple, a little obvious even, and it is certainly not original: Wilhelm von Humboldt pointed out in his 1821 essay ‘On the Historian’s Task’ that the task of understanding past thoughts seems to be one of attempted replication in a present mind.⁴ Collingwood’s version is stated in what is still its most accessible and essential form in §4 of the ‘Epilegomena’ of *The Idea of History*, ‘History as Re-enactment of Past Experience’:⁵

¹ Donagan, ‘The Verification of Historical Theses’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1956), p. 199-200

² Nielsen, p. 3. Nielsen numbers among this group Walsh, Donagan, Toulmin, Dussen, “and possibly Rubinoff”. See Nielsen, p. 4, note 11. Dussen identifies R. G. Shoemaker, Toulmin, Rubinoff, P. Gardiner, and Rex Martin. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp.103-5. See also Dray, *History as Re-enactment*, pp. 52, 54-5, and his article (W. H. Dray) ‘R. G. Collingwood and the Acquaintance Theory of Knowledge’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 11 (1957), 420-32

³ Dussen, ‘Collingwood’s Claim’, p. 6

⁴ Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘On the Historian’s Task’, reprinted in *History and Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1967)

⁵ The first editor of *The Idea of History*, T. M. Knox, made ‘History as Re-enactment of Past Experience’ §4 of the ‘Epilegomena’. It was originally a lecture given in 1936.

When a man thinks historically, he has before him certain documents or relics of the past. His business is to discover what the past was which has left these relics behind it. For example, the relics are certain written words; and in that case he has to discover what the person who wrote those words meant by them. This means discovering the thought... which he expressed by them. To discover what this thought was, the historian must think it again for himself. ...and only in so far as he does this has he any historical knowledge, as distinct from merely philological knowledge, of the meaning of the edict.¹

Collingwood's point here is, firstly, that understanding 'what somebody meant' means having in mind the same thoughts, rather than different ones. In itself this is hardly controversial, just as it is not controversial to say that misunderstanding 'what he meant' is when people ascribe to the words of others thought-content that is different from that intended by the speaker. (It is also the *content* of thought that is re-enacted, not the original *act* of thinking.²)

Re-enactment though is not only about reading and understanding "documents": it is about all history, and applies equally to objects that 'embody thought' that were not intended as communication. Understanding an iron implement 'historically', for instance, requires re-thinking the idea 'embodied' in it. Collingwood's metaphorical phrase for this is seeing the object historically, 'from the inside', as mind – metaphorical because the idea, of course, is not really 'inside' the object. It is to understand the thought embodied that is to have historical knowledge.³ We understand such an implement historically when and only when we have enacted the thought embodied in it⁴ – which might be the idea of hacking at something with it with the intention of severing or crushing, or of drilling a hole in it, removing nails with it, etc. This is, we then think, the 'same thought' that the implement's maker would have had when he decided that an implement serving such a function needed to be made.

This does not mean that it is the aim of historians to discover 'purposes' in a uniform sense – what Hobbes's 'purpose' in writing *Leviathan* was, for example. Rather

¹ *IH*, pp. 282-3

² There is a parallel with the act/content distinction in *EM*, p. 29, where "that which is presupposed" is distinguished from "the act of presupposing". Dussen has identified that the misreadings of re-enactment, or 're-thinking', of Walsh and Karl Popper owe to their failures to grasp this distinction. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 319-20

³ In his *Autobiography* Collingwood writes "but in history these were narratives of purposive activity, and the evidence for them consisted of relics they had left behind (books or potsherds, the principle was the same) which became evidence precisely to the extent to which the historian conceived them in terms of purpose, that is, understood what they were for". *A*, p. 109

⁴ *A*, p. 109

they ask their characteristic questions about ‘solutions’ in a sense so broad that these questions can be asked of all purposive thought.

All of this seems fairly straightforward and, if true, perhaps trivially so. But Collingwood’s attempt to illustrate what is really a very simple idea again leaves him inviting more questions than he answers. The difference between the thought contained in the original action, and the thought content sought by the historian, is simply that in the latter case the thought, although itself the same, is (in Collingwood’s phrase) “incapsulated”.¹ This invites questions such as ‘How does incapsulation work?’, ‘Is this a special function of mind?’, ‘How do we know if we are incapsulating?’, ‘What is the status of ‘the incapsulated?’’, ‘Is it still the same idea if it’s incapsulated in a different mind and context?’, and so on. Collingwood attempts to deal with such questions in the following passage:

The difference is one of context. To Nelson, that thought was a present thought; to me, it is a past thought living in the present but (as I have elsewhere put it) incapsulated, not free. What is an incapsulated thought? It is a thought which, though perfectly alive, forms no part of the question-answer complex which constitutes what people call the ‘real’ life, the superficial or obvious present, of the mind in question...

So I reached my third position: ‘Historical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought incapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs.’²

Other things Collingwood says about re-enactment confuse the picture still further. The designation of this construction as a ‘re-’ – as a repetition of an earlier, cognate process – is, he says, what orientates the activity towards history, executed by the mind ‘disentangling’ the past from the present.³ The ‘re-’, then, is applied because the thinker must recognise or designate thought as ‘past’ – and this becomes a conscious activity which is history itself:

One can only apprehend a thought by thinking it, and apprehend a past thought by re-thinking it... History means not *re-thinking* what has been

¹ See *A*, pp. 113-14

² *A*, pp. 113-14

³ *IH*, p. 243. See also Nielsen, p. 12

thought before [in the sense of merely – and perhaps inadvertently – repeating it] but thinking about yourself as re-thinking it.¹

My intention next is to show how ‘question and answer’ rescues Collingwood’s confused and (therefore) embattled doctrine of re-enactment, not only from the bombardment it has received from critics, but also from the inadequate support it has been offered by other commentators. I’ll begin with the attacks.

ii

Critique

Whatever else he might be trying to do, Collingwood is clearly entering hermeneutic territory here, so it isn’t surprising that protests arise mostly among philosophers of hermeneutics. Following the posthumous publication of *The Idea of History* in 1946 it became commonplace for the doctrine of re-enactment, however interpreted, to be described as ‘obscure’, ‘metaphysical’, and ‘mystical’. G. Barraclough, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, called re-enactment “sublime mysticism and nonsense”,² while Georges Lefebvre attacked Collingwood for advocating a kind of “communion” with the reality of the past – as if what lurked behind the doctrine was the need for clairvoyance, or for entry into a trance.³

One can understand their view. Understanding another person might be taken to mean understanding what it was like to *be* him, saying what he was saying, doing what he was doing. Collingwood’s account of what happens when the historian understands Nelson’s words encourages this interpretation: “what I am doing is to think myself into the position of being all covered with decorations”, Collingwood writes.⁴ He seems, then, to be invoking something like empathy, or what some nineteenth-century German thinkers had developed as a theory of *Einfühlung*.⁵ On this account, Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment tells historians that it is their job to try to describe things for

¹ *PH*, p. 223

² G. Barraclough, *Times Literary Supplement* (January 6, 1956), p. 2. See Nielsen, p. 3, note 9

³ Georges Lefebvre, review of *The Idea of History*, in *Revue historique* 202 (July-September 1949), p. 133. See David Bates, ‘Rediscovering Collingwood’s Spiritual History (In and Out of Context)’, *History and Theory* vol. 35, no. 1 (February, 1996), p. 34

⁴ *A*, p. 112

⁵ For a brief summary of how ‘empathy’ and *Einfühlung* were employed by Herder, Dilthey *et al*, and how those usages shaped discussion of re-enactment, see Hughes-Warrington, pp. 47-52

their readers in such a way that they too can know ‘what it was like’. There are other similar expressions. In *The Idea of History* Collingwood writes that historical knowledge is really “knowledge of the past in the present, the self-knowledge of the historian’s own mind as the present revival and reliving of past experiences”.¹ Reliving other people’s experiences, of course, seems more mysterious than merely grasping someone else’s reasoning.

It is no longer the common view among Collingwood scholars that re-enactment is mystical. Received opinion now takes the doctrine seriously.² But the view that re-enactment is ‘mystical’ is still common among those who, though perhaps less familiar with *why* Collingwood says some of the things he says, nevertheless take inspiration from some of it – those such as Quentin Skinner, for example.³

By way of an historical note, Collingwood has not been the only casualty of this kind of charge. In the mid-twentieth century the so-called *Verstehen* tradition, whose figures are commonly identified as Dilthey, Croce and Collingwood (Willem DeVries gives these three the regrettable school name ‘classical interpretationists’⁴), was under attack *en masse*. Part of the assault came from the quarters Collingwood would have identified as the traditional enemies of his kind of thinking: ‘positivists’ and ‘realists’. But, more importantly for our purposes here, in the 1950s a new strategy of anti-positivism, based on the philosophy of language, was taking hold of the theory of the social sciences generally, and it quickly started to affect what became the ‘methodological debates’ of the history of ideas. Re-enactment was exiled as part of this coup.

The claims of the new school were two: firstly that re-enactment is *not* necessary for historical knowledge. We can still achieve understanding in history without, as Skinner sees it, “stepping empathetically into other people’s shoes and attempting (in R. G. Collingwood’s unfortunate phrase) to think thoughts after them”.⁵ And the second claim was that philosophy of language now afforded insights, or conceptual ‘tools’, that could be used to formulate a better philosophical account of meaning and understanding in history (and in the history of ideas) than had been offered by the authors of the *Verstehen* tradition, to whom such insights were unavailable. The kind of account Collingwood gives of how we understand other minds is, it now seemed, recognisably

¹ *IH*, p. 175

² Nielsen, pp. 3-4

³ See Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 120

⁴ Willem A. DeVries (‘Meaning and Interpretation in History’, in *History and Theory* vol. 22, no. 3 (October, 1983), pp. 253-63) identifies ‘classical interpretationists’ as “Dilthey, Croce, and Collingwood” (p. 253).

⁵ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 120

the old empiricist theory of linguistic communication, which Wittgenstein had attacked. *Verstehen* authors like Collingwood represented the tradition the linguistic school wanted to be seen as both reviving, against positivism (in the sense that meaning and understanding were still not cancelled in favour of natural-scientific concepts and terms), and superseding through improved attention to language and linguistic context.¹ The new school would replace ‘classical’ accounts of interpretation and understanding with their own version, and there was little doubt where the weaknesses of the old philosophy lay: ‘Classical interpretationist’ theory had misplaced ‘meaning’, and had, as a result, relied on “some mysterious faculty of insight through re-enactment”.² And as P. M. S. Hacker sees it...

The terms in which such thinkers and their followers attempted inchoately to articulate the character of the form of knowledge and understanding which they thought distinctive of hermeneutics, ‘fantasia’, ‘inner understanding’, ‘Einfühlung’, ‘acts of divination’, ‘empathetic understanding’ (and, in the twentieth century, ‘re-enactment’ (Collingwood)), were obscure and their attempts to explain them were philosophically unilluminating.³

Collingwood and his predecessors, it seemed, had failed “to give a coherent and philosophically illuminating explanation” of historical understanding.⁴ We’ll now see that in fact Collingwood does provide a coherent explanation, even though he also provides a lot of confusing ones. This final criticism would, though, still potentially stand that Collingwood’s attempt to explain re-enactment is ‘unilluminating’. So that’s how we’ll take it. The doctrine of re-enactment is accused, then, of being (1) mysterious, (2) ‘empiricist’ and the same as that shown to be false by Wittgenstein, (3) anyway unnecessary, and (4) “philosophically unilluminating”.

¹ I’ve used a more cautious term, but Robert Lamb has observed the same thing: “This location of language as the source of both structure and agency contrasts sharply with the other methodological traditions that the Cambridge School has successfully usurped.” See Robert Lamb, ‘Quentin Skinner’s Revised Historical Contextualism: A Critique’, *History of the Human Sciences* vol. 22 (2009), p. 55

² DeVries, p. 259

³ The full passage runs “The terms in which such thinkers and their followers attempted inchoately to articulate the character of the form of knowledge and understanding which they thought distinctive of hermeneutics, ‘fantasia’, ‘inner understanding’, ‘Einfühlung’, ‘acts of divination’, ‘empathetic understanding’ (and, in the twentieth century, ‘re-enactment’ (Collingwood)), were obscure and their attempts to explain them were philosophically unilluminating.” P. M. S. Hacker, ‘Wittgenstein and the Autonomy of Humanistic Understanding’, *e-Journal Philosophie der Psychologie* (November, 2007), pp. 14-15

⁴ Hacker, p. 15

Defence 1: analysis of 'object' processes

One possible way of defending Collingwood's doctrine of re-enactment would be to point to the coherence of re-enactment with what he says about language, inference, ideas and feelings, in his works on history and on other subjects. Such a defence would draw, in short, on what can reasonably be called Collingwood's philosophy of mind.¹ The intention would be to insinuate something similar to what Leon Goldstein was bold enough to say explicitly: "all those critics who have treated rethinking as a species of empathy or intuition have simply no idea at all of what it involves".²

But there is too much wrong with this particular line of defence, as I'll explain once I've illustrated it. There is a better defence of the doctrine of re-enactment that can be mounted based on the logic of question and answer. It is not the argument Collingwood actually makes, or intends to make: it is mine. But still it does not force Collingwood to say anything that he does not already say, or to make any argument that is not already logically implied.

The first possible defence goes like this: Part of the reason the doctrine of re-enactment has been thought mysterious is perhaps that some readers have failed to notice Collingwood's insistence that it is *not* feeling or the experience of life in general that is re-enacted: it is only thoughts. So the claim that re-enactment is 'mysterious' can only be made if one overloads the cart that the doctrine is meant to be pulling. According to most interpretations, at least outside of discussions among Collingwood specialists, re-enactment means putting yourself into the shoes of others and attempting (in Quentin Skinner's unfortunate phrase) to see things their way.³ It is thought to be about finding out and communicating 'what it was like'. This is anyway the root of Skinner's criticism: that Collingwood wants us to transpose ourselves into the perspective of others, which might involve the 'spirit of the age', etc. *An Autobiography* contains a passage that is particularly misleading in this regard: that in which

¹ This is in fact the strategy Dussen employs in defence of Collingwood in *History as a Science*. Dussen, I think, follows Collingwood's own reasoning extremely faithfully. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 262-9, 316-20. Mink has also pointed out that "the main questions of *The Idea of History* belong to the philosophy of mind rather than to what is *ordinarily* called the 'philosophy of history'". See Mink, 'Collingwood's Historicism', p. 155

² Goldstein, 'Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past', pp. 253-4

³ See Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 3. See also p. 120

Collingwood says “what I am doing is to think myself into the position of being all covered with decorations”.¹

But it is actually only rational thought, or ‘ideas’ that are and can be re-enacted, according to Collingwood. This is also clear from a proper reading of the passage about Nelson’s decorations, which is also about what it means to grasp (and ‘think through’) for oneself the thoughts embodied in Nelson’s words “in honour I won them, in honour I will die with them”. If this is overlooked then reading *Leviathan* and ‘re-enacting’ Hobbes’s thinking sounds a little bit like a game in which the participant pretends to be Thomas Hobbes, his head filled with feeling, fear, and ambition – a whole psychological structure containing the memories of a geometric epiphany, recent debates at Great Tew, and the spectral memory of an imprisoned king. If re-enactment is required for understanding in history, and if re-enactment means all this, then historians must almost become a special caste of psychological time-travellers.

But none of this is what Collingwood is talking about. He says explicitly that historians can only re-enact thoughts. Feelings are actually un-re-enactable.² There are inherent differences between thoughts and feelings, ‘ontological’ differences, as they are differences in how each relates to “the general structure of experience”.³ Collingwood attempts to illustrate these differences in *The Principles of Art*.⁴ There is, he writes, “a

¹ *A*, p. 112. This is why, although it sounds strange, Goldstein is right when he says that Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment is not about ‘understanding’, but is in fact about knowing the past in some other sense. (See Golstein, ‘Dray on re-enactment and constructionism’ [Review: *History as Re-enactment*: R. G. Collingwood’s *Idea of History*, by William H. Dray], *History and Theory* vol. 37, no. 3 (October, 1998), p. 410. Of course, *prima facie* Goldstein is wrong: history is, for Collingwood, about understanding the actions of others. Goldstein’s intention is really only to distance re-enactment from explanation (p. 413) and from ‘understanding’ in a technical sense, as a version of the alleged ‘*Verstehen*’ ambition of ‘knowing what it was like’; that is, thickly laden with feeling content and psychological structures. This is the charge of which he rightly wants Collingwood’s doctrine of re-enactment cleared.

² *NL*, 5.5-55. Christopher Parker – *The English Idea of History from Coleridge to Collingwood* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) – notes that “Much effort has gone into arguing about whether or not Collingwood allowed for emotional re-enactment or just re-enactment of reasoned thought according to the logic of the situation, whether that be a purely philosophical situation or a more practical one.” (Parker, p. 166) The confusion Parker refers to can, I think, be defused by noting that, in *The Principles of Art*, Collingwood uses ‘thought’ and ‘feeling’ as if they are the two subclasses of ‘emotion’. ‘Thought’ is emotion raised out of the world of impressions by retention before the consciousness. Feeling is emotion that has not been so raised, but which the individual comes to understand through expression. Thus one kind of emotion can (technically) be re-enacted, and the other cannot. I have tried to acknowledge the ambiguity by saying ‘feelings’ where some other commentators might use ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably. See also Hughes-Warrington, pp. 78-80, for example.

³ *PA*, p. 236

⁴ Collingwood explains much about the nature of thought, feeling, impression, expression, etc. in *The Principles of Art*. This, of course, gives great credence to the view that *The Principles of Art* is an important resource for filling out the details of Collingwood’s philosophy of history. The same points, and certainly those that bear as much upon philosophy of history as they do upon philosophy of art, are actually put more concisely in *The New Leviathan*. See especially chs IV-X

special kind of privacy about feelings, in contrast with what may be called the publicity of thoughts”:

A hundred people in the street may all feel cold, but each person’s feeling is private to himself... it is simply a feeling in them, or rather a hundred different feelings, each private to the person who feels it, but each in certain ways like all the rest...

But if they all think that the thermometer reads 22° Fahrenheit, *they are all thinking the same thought*: this thought is public to them all. ...the ‘fact’ or ‘proposition’ or ‘thought’ that there are ten degrees of frost is not a hundred different ‘facts’ or ‘propositions’ or ‘thoughts’; it is one ‘fact’ or ‘proposition’ or ‘thought’ which a hundred different people ‘apprehend’ or ‘assent to’ or ‘think’.¹

The privacy of ‘feeling,’ Collingwood writes, means that it is ‘carried away’ by time.² This is simply to say that once a person stops feeling cold, that sensation of coldness ceases to exist, and it cannot even be compared with another feeling of coldness by the same person, because it does not remain ‘present’ before the mind. Any future sensation of cold will not be ‘the same’ one as before being re-enacted. When one has a similar feeling at another time – say I am angry one day because my train is delayed, and angry another day because the same thing happens – it is not the same anger. “The flux of sense, it would seem, destroys any *sensum* before it has lasted long enough to permit of its relations being studied.”³

Feeling, Collingwood is saying, is completely immersed in its context; it is inseparable from its context; it is private to the individual and to the moment. It cannot be ‘lifted’ out of its immediate context, so it cannot be re-enacted. This is why, strictly speaking, it is only true to say that we can ‘understand’ our *own* feelings. We cannot understand another’s anger, as we cannot relate to that same anger as he does. We can ‘know’ his anger as an idea, but we cannot take part in the same anger ‘from the inside’.

Thinking, however, is a different ‘level’ of experience from feeling or impression, (though it still originates in the ‘raw material’ of human emotion).⁴ Ideas are present to mind in a way that feelings are not: we can voluntarily hold ideas in the mind, or recall

¹ *PA*, pp. 157-8. I have rearranged the order of some of the sentences for clarity.

² Here Collingwood echoes a passage in Bradley’s *Presuppositions of Critical History*. See especially pp. 8-9

³ *PA*, p. 169. See also p. 168

⁴ See *PA*, p. 249. The relationship between emotion and thought, like much of the philosophy of mind presented in *The Principles of Art*, is repeated in *The New Leviathan*. See *NL*, 41.33

them at a later stage,¹ and this is what has ‘lifted’ thought out of its immediate context. (All of this, of course, goes back to Hume and Locke.) Thus emancipated from the ‘flux of sense’ that carries feeling away with it, the *idea* ‘22°F’ is something re-enactable by another consciousness – that is, another can stand in the same relation to that idea as the original thinker. When apprehended again, it is not a phenomenologically similar experience – it really is the same idea apprehended by two different thinkers.

Thought, then, is ‘universal’ in a way that feeling is not.² It stands in a different relation from feeling to “the general structure of experience”.³ Both thought and feeling (or idea and impression) are present to consciousness, and both seem to have unlimited potential content. But the differences in how they relate to “the general structure of experience” show that thought is re-enactable, and hence historically knowable, while the other, feeling, is not re-enactable, and is therefore historically unknowable.⁴

Finally, a note: Collingwood is not terminologically consistent with his analysis in *The Principles of Art*. He often says that historians have to re-enact the ‘experiences’ of past individuals. But this does not show that he does not believe his own argument; it only shows that he does not always use ‘thought’ and ‘experience’ as technical terms. Indeed this is probably why the doctrine of re-enactment is thought by some readers to be about ‘feeling what it was like’ to be a past person.

¹ In ‘The Subject-matter of History’ Collingwood says that it is this retention in mind which ‘positively’ identifies thinking is also the activity of becoming aware of the self “persisting through the diversity of its own acts”. See *IH*, p. 306

² See *IH*, p. 309

³ *PA*, p. 236

⁴ Collingwood’s distinction between feeling and thinking echoes some passages of Bradley’s *Presuppositions of Critical History*, one of Collingwood’s ‘starting points’. Here is what Bradley says: “An assertion, and much more so a proof, is intellectual; it is a judgement which implies the exercise of the understanding; and the terms united by the judgement must therefore fall within the sphere of understanding. They must be objects for the intellect, and so, in a sense more or less entire, relative to the intellect; in a word intelligible. But the essence of mere sensation was the entire absence of the intellectual, and hence to make one single affirmation with respect to sensation, as sensation, is to treat as relative to the understanding that which is supposed to exclude the understanding; and this is a contradiction.” Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History*, pp. 7-8

The problems with philosophy of history via philosophy of mind

In *History as a Science*, Jan van der Dussen stages a defence similar to that just sketched of Collingwood's claim that all history is the history of thought, and that historical knowledge is thought re-thought. Dussen appeals, as I just have, to Collingwood's philosophy of mind, which seems to clear Collingwood of the 'mystical' charge.¹ According to Dussen "we cannot avoid the conclusion that it is impossible to give a proper assessment of Collingwood's philosophy of history based only on *The Idea of History*. For this work is only understandable within the context of a philosophy of mind, which is not explained in it".²

In *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, Alan Donagan makes a similar observation. Collingwood's "most original contribution to the methodology of scientific history", Donagan says, "rests on an analysis of conscious action".³ Dussen puts his case powerfully, and what he shows rather brilliantly is that what Collingwood says about history fits with what he says about mind; and that critics cannot complete their attacks on Collingwood's philosophy of history without taking that philosophy of mind into account. More recently Marnie Hughes-Warrington has appealed to alleged parallels in the philosophy of mind and language which she argues are shared by Collingwood and Wittgenstein.⁴ "On his [Wittgenstein's] account", she writes, "understanding others is made possible by virtue of the training we receive in the language rules of our community. Though not as explicitly stated, that same view of language underpins Collingwood's view of re-enactment".⁵

Now, these defences certainly 'illuminate' Collingwood's philosophy of mind (and, in Hughes-Warrington's case, of language) and the coherence between it and the doctrine of re-enactment – the coherence that Collingwood does not really explicate. By stressing that history is the history of thought, and not therefore also of feelings, they put to bed the old charge that re-enactment is 'mysterious', and demonstrate the scholarly

¹ Dussen's defence is aimed at answering objections canvassed by him (and therefore not here) to what Collingwood says about human action, purpose, the 'inside' of history, and the past living in the present. Because he's already done this, I have not reproduced his work here. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p.257

² Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 259. See also Dussen's extended attempt to rescue re-enactment in this way on pp. 316-20

³ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, p. 192

⁴ Hughes-Warrington, pp. 61-71

⁵ Hughes-Warrington, p. 66

virtue of returning an author's contention to the wider context of other works by him, and by others.

There are still problems, of course, especially with Collingwood's claim that feelings cannot be re-enacted. Collingwood might deny its possibility, but we can think of instances in which sensation does *not* really seem to be 'carried away by time', but seems to be retained without being 'converted into an idea'. It makes perfect sense to say that one feels colder today than one did yesterday; and we can taste, compare, and communicate the tastes of different wines.¹ It is also quite easy for anyone who tries to recall at will the taste of an orange or the smell of mothballs. Perhaps even more familiarly, when I reflect on some recent embarrassment, the *feeling* of embarrassment often returns just as strongly as anything we could mean by the 'idea' of embarrassment and of its cause in that instance – and this sometimes even comes complete with a wince and a hand over the eyes. Collingwood might be guilty here of his own "Fallacy of Misplaced Argument": "arguing about any object immediately given to consciousness".²

But it is not because of little problems like these in Collingwood's philosophy of mind or language that such defences fail. It is because they don't anyway demonstrate that this coherence with other areas of Collingwood's philosophy *rescues* the doctrine of re-enactment. The charge that re-enactment is "unnecessary" for *history* still survives, as does the charge that it is "philosophically unilluminating" for working historians. Furthermore, these defences actually only show that the doctrine of re-enactment carries certain implicit presuppositions, some of which are made explicit in Collingwood's philosophy of mind. And this does the doctrine no real service, since Collingwood now appears to be invoking a theory of psychology that seems rather rudimentary. Re-enactment then becomes vulnerable to the declaration that thought and feeling are not, as a matter of psychological fact, so tidily separable. (Indeed Collingwood scholars can even point out that the distinction between thought and emotion is much less clear in *The New Leviathan*.) This demonstrated, either we can, *pace* Collingwood, re-enact the feelings of others, or alternatively, also *pace* Collingwood, thoughts cannot be re-enacted.

These failures are due to the dominance of the 'non-methodological' interpretation. If re-enactment is not meant to be necessary method for historians to follow, then it doesn't matter that historians think it "unnecessary", and that challenge doesn't need to be refuted. In a recent article for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Dussen modifies his position. The doctrine of re-enactment, he now says, addresses a

¹ My thanks for these examples to ES and IHM.

² *NL*, 4.73

general issue in the philosophy of mind.¹ It seems to me that, because Dussen now recognises that Collingwood's philosophy of mind does not rescue the claim that historians do and must re-enact past thoughts, he has revised the question for which Collingwood intends it as an answer.

But the doctrine of re-enactment *is* intended as something historians should do, and when it is so 'methodologically' interpreted, different objections arise from what we've just heard. In an article for the inaugural volume of *Collingwood Studies* (1994) Stein Helgeby praises Collingwood for finding "rationality and historical process among people previously thought to be irrational, savage or 'natural'"; for showing that folklore can be used as historical evidence by recognising that "the themes of such stories are integral to the customs and beliefs of the people who tell them", rather than springing from the 'unconscious'; and for showing colonised peoples not as passive victims, but as actively resisting incursion, "constructing options and negotiating solutions".²

But, if it is meant as a prescriptive historical method, the doctrine of re-enactment might also be *attacked* for this same thing. Collingwood seems to recognise thought as the sole currency in which mind performs its transactions. If this is so, Collingwoodian history might be *too* rationalistic, too intellectualistic – even too 'propositional'. The re-experiencing of emotion and feeling is too philosophically problematic for him (our critic could complain), so perhaps this is why he dismisses emotion and feeling from history. This would certainly make for sterile historical writing where, for example, the state of Charles's emotions as he stepped out onto the scaffold to face the headsman's axe cannot, and should not, be of any interest to us (or even should not be narrated) – only his public-relations logic of wearing two shirts, or the rational processes informing his last words to the gathered mob. History hampered in this way, our criticism goes, makes for a science of human affairs that is obviously not fit for purpose. After all, 'human affairs' very often means the tangled social wreckage of people acting out of irrational preference, cowardliness, high-spirited frivolity, or what Wyndham Lewis calls man's "instinct for blood and carnage". So ignoring all of this, or trying to convert it all into the language of ideas and intentions, seems to put

¹ Dussen, 'Collingwood's Claim', pp. 6-7. Dussen is borrowing Giuseppina D'Oro's terminology. See D'Oro, 'Collingwood on Re-enactment and The Identity of Thought', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 38 (2000), pp. 87-101. See especially p. 87

² Stein Helgeby, 'Action, Duty and Self-Knowledge', p. 87

Collingwood (as Lewis says of Shaw) “in a weak position where the science of life is concerned”.¹

v

Defence 2: ‘question and answer’

‘Question and answer’ helps, first, to make sense of the doctrine of re-enactment and, second, to defend it against these surviving and additional criticisms. When Collingwood refers to ‘re-enacting’ the thoughts of another he is simply struggling to summarise what historical questions aim to achieve, in words that are both specific enough to apply *only* to historical questions, and general enough to apply to *all* historical questions. This is why the dispute between the prescriptive ‘methodological’ interpretation and the descriptive ‘non-methodological’ interpretation is an imaginary one. Re-enactment is *both* an ‘activity’ of the historian, and a definition of historical knowledge, in the sense that it is ‘what the historian is after’. Alan Donagan has already contended, in his 1956 article, that re-enactment is in fact an “element in the goal of historical inquiry”; “part of the end an historian strives to accomplish”.² In *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, Donagan cleared up a further point: the doctrine of re-enactment is not a ‘method’ in itself. It is, as a goal of inquiry, still compatible with the Baconian historical method used to reach it.³ In retrospect, Collingwood scholarship would have been better off had Donagan made more of this second point than he in fact did. He devotes only a paragraph to pointing it out, and does not expand on what he assumes his reader already knows: namely, what “Baconian” means. But although I want to return to these points, I don’t want to return to the defence of the doctrine that Donagan actually presents in the same chapter. Unfortunately for our purposes here, Donagan drops the appeal to ‘question and answer’ for his defence, and instead mounts one more faithful to Collingwood’s own intentions.⁴ The result is, in line with much of what we’ve already heard, only a defence of what re-enactment presupposes.

¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* [1926] Reed Way Dasenbrock (ed.) (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 61

² Donagan, ‘The Verification of Historical Theses’, p. 199-200

³ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 215-16. Gary Browning does not discuss this, but he does emphasise this compatibility of re-enactment with ‘Baconian’ method by using quite consistently ‘rethinking’ and ‘evidence’ in conjunction. See *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 13, 15, 74, for example.

⁴ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 216-22

I'll repeat that I am claiming that it *is* Collingwood's intention to prescribe a form of history in which the historian seeks to re-enact past thoughts. But I am not claiming that it was ever his intention to argue for this by recourse to the principle of question and answer as I will here. My claim is only that 'question and answer' *makes sense* of the necessity for historians to re-enact thought. That is, I am *rescuing* Collingwood's primary intention.

What Donagan noted in his 1956 article, and in *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, has the power, I think, to answer the criticisms I've outlined. Furthermore, there is no need to shoe-horn Collingwood's philosophy of mind into agreement with Wittgenstein-style philosophy of language, as Marnie Hughes-Warrington has done,¹ to sustain its continuing relevance to historians. The philosophy of understanding that Hughes-Warrington discusses may be perfectly adequate for explaining how we understand people in conversations. But what she ignores is that history for Collingwood is not conversation, and making sense of his doctrine of re-enactment does not require pretending that it is. The difference is that conversation is not necessarily investigative: scientific history necessarily *is*. And investigations, if they are to be scientific, must have a clear idea of what they aim to discover. Re-enactment makes sense, and makes sense in Collingwood's own terms, when it is seen as a requirement of properly historical questions.

The good sense of the doctrine of re-enactment is to be demonstrated not by pointing to Collingwood's philosophy of mind, but by reflecting on the metaphysics of scientific history. I mean this is Collingwood's sense. The possibility of re-enactment is an absolute presupposition of the kind of questions to which scientific history provides answers.² Re-enactment of thought means simply 'following reasoning'. This is why the question of whether or not re-enactment is possible is really only an "academic"³ one. We presuppose it so often in everyday activity that somebody who demanded a demonstration that people *can* follow the reasoning of others would just be inviting

¹ See Hughes-Warrington, pp. 61-71

² Donagan has already observed that re-enactment is a presupposition of history. (*Later Philosophy*, pp. 213, 216) It seems to me that it would be more faithful to Collingwood's own terminology to say that it is an *absolute* presupposition, for the reasons that I have outlined here: namely, that it is not a presupposition that can be tested. This is not to say that re-enactment is something that must be presupposed by all historians at all times. Absolute presuppositions are different from 'innate' or *a priori* concepts for exactly that reason. Indeed Donagan discusses the fascinating quirk of Collingwood's 1925 essay, 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History', that he *denies* the possibility of re-enacting past thoughts. See *Later Philosophy*, pp. 216-22

³ *NL*, 2.5-55

ridicule. We do not need a philosophy of thought, ideas, or mind in general. We just need to know what ‘reasoning’ means:

‘REASON’ as the name of a mental function or form of consciousness, rational thinking, is thinking one thing, x , because you think another thing, y ; where y is your ‘reason’ or, as it is sometimes called, your ‘ground’ for thinking x .¹

Reason applies not only to thinking x , but also to deciding to do x . Again, reason means deciding to do x because you think another thing, y ; where y is your ‘reason’ or, as it is sometimes called, your ‘ground’ for doing x .² The ‘thought’ that is aimed at by an historical question is not ‘a thought’ in a simple sense. What historians really aim at are, in Collingwood’s terms, “constellations”³ of thoughts, whether it be the x and the y constellated, or a plurality of ‘reasons’. In practice there are few actions that have one simple ‘ y ’ – there is usually a constellation of ‘ y ’s. They can be disentangled by whatever it is the historian wants to know specifically about his subject’s reasoning.

The terminological advantage to ‘re-enacting’ the thoughts of others over simply ‘understanding’ the thoughts of others is that it distinguishes between knowing ‘that’ another person thinks x , and knowing ‘what’ he thinks in the sense of actually following his reasoning between x and y . One ‘re-enacts’ the reasoning. In political argument, for example, there is a difference between (on the one hand) knowing ‘that’ my opponent ‘is a Marxist’ and that he therefore ‘thinks Marxist thoughts’, and (on the other) knowing his reasoning – his ‘ y ’s and his ‘ x ’s – on a specific point. It is quite obvious, when put like this, that ‘following his reasoning’ implies thinking through a line of reasoning that is in some sense ‘the same’ as his. If this is what Collingwood means, then it is not particularly contentious in itself. Obviously this is possible. If it weren’t then it would be impossible to see, in an argument, where my opponent had gone wrong in his reasoning. This is simply to say that before I can identify a logical leap I must first ‘follow’ the logic.

If we could not re-enact thoughts, or if we attempted to do without the presupposition that we can follow other people’s reasoning, then all disputes – even philosophical ones – would be essentially rhetorical, or “eristical”, in the sense that they would be show debates, displaying a barrage of ‘ x ’s. Instead of following another’s

¹ *NL*, 14.1

² See *NL*, 14.3

³ See *EM*, p. 66

reasoning it would be good enough to say to myself something like ‘Well he thinks x . He is, after all, a Marxist’.

We’ve seen that the recruitment from *The Principles of Art* of Collingwood’s distinctions between actions and passions, thoughts and feelings, as if Collingwood’s philosophy of mind underpins his philosophy of history, actually makes his philosophy of history seem dependent on that philosophy of mind. It is not. His distinction between *actio* and *passio* (which he says he takes from Hume¹) simply illustrates a presupposition of historical questions. Historical questions presuppose that the deed was an *actio*, not a *passio*, which is to presuppose that there *is* a y which relates to the x as its ‘reason’, its ‘ground’.

Passio, involuntary conscious processes, such as feelings and reflex actions, are not the subjects of history because, applied to them, the question ‘What did he mean?’ is a nonsense question. In a case of *passio*, there is no y . Because there is no y , x is not really done ‘on purpose’. x just ‘happens’. What somebody ‘meant’ by sneezing, or by getting hot in a greenhouse, or by something that was done *to* him, is literally ‘nothing’.² This is because, I am now saying, there is no reasoning, and no ‘problem’ to which such processes are the ‘solution’. “The activity of feeling or sensation contained no element of self-criticism”, Collingwood says in his *Essay on Metaphysics*; “The business of thinking includes the discovery and correction of its own errors. That is no part of the business of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and experiencing the emotions associated with them.”³ (Collingwood’s technical term for this is ‘criteriological’.) The point here is that where there is no ‘ y ’ to pursue, a necessary condition of an historical question is absent. That is why historical questions that presuppose a problem to which the Giant’s Causeway is a solution – or a problem to which Charles’s fear on the scaffold is a solution – are nonsense questions.

Collingwood explains actions in terms of things that are done, as we say, “on purpose”.⁴ The same thing can be expressed by saying that, where there is a reasoned action, part of the constellation of ‘ y ’s is some ‘problem’ feature in a situation that the agent considers to be in need of rectification. Indeed, this is a necessary presupposition for any action, since thinking only other ‘ y ’s does not make one decide to do x . There has to be a perceived need for ‘something to be done about this’, and the agent must have the

¹ *PA*, p. 177

² See Collingwood’s example of the fear aroused in a child by the perception of a blazing red curtain. *PA*, p. 161

³ *EM*, p. 110

⁴ *IH*, p. 309

determination that it will be he who does it. There is, then, an inherent relationship between the deed and the problem it addresses. This is why Collingwood says, in his *Essay on Metaphysics*, that it is not only those who *write* history that solve problems, but also “people who are said to ‘make history.’”¹ Historical questions, we might say, carry the presupposition that ‘this solves some sort of problem’.

There is, finally, an obvious parallel between the question-and-answer structure of action and the question-and-answer structure of historical inquiry. But that parallel should not be falsely stated. It is a confusion to think that the two processes of question and answer somehow clip together so that someone’s reasoning is made automatically available to an historian once he has grasped his subject’s question.² The sequence of question-and-answer thinking that the historian wants to re-enact is not identical to the question-and-answer sequence of his own investigation. Rather, historical questions presuppose actions intended to ‘solve’. That is all.

vi

Textual foundation

That the doctrine of re-enactment points back to the historical question has not, I think, been widely considered, despite the fact that Alan Donagan interpreted it for Collingwood’s readers so clearly and so accurately in his 1956 article, and pointed out, if only briefly, that the ‘method’ implied by it was still “Baconian”.³ In his 1988 article for *The Monist*, ‘Re-Enactment in Retrospect’, Elazar Weinryb dismisses something similar to the defence I’ve given here as an interpretation with “no textual foundation”.⁴ According to this interpretation, he says, re-enactment, “the very identity of the historian’s thoughts with the agent’s, constitute[s] the final consequence or goal to be achieved by successful explanation”. The interpretation Weinryb is attacking is a little different from what I’m claiming here to be the question-and-answer logic of re-enactment, because what he’s attacking has to do with ‘explanation’. I think we’ve already dealt enough with what ‘explanation’ means for Collingwood’s scientific historian: it just stands for ‘what he

¹ *EM*, p. 65

² I’ve argued below that Dimitris Vardoulakis is guilty of making this mistake. See Dimitris Vardoulakis, “Clumsy Questioners’: Questioning and the Meaning of Meaning in Collingwood”, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* vol. 11, no. 1 (2005), p. 53, specifically what Vardoulakis calls the “logos” of history.

³ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 215-16

⁴ Weinryb, p. 570

wants to know'. Anyway, whether or not the reader thinks Weinryb is attacking something like my interpretation, I'll take his criticism that it lacks "textual foundation", and show that it does not.

Re-enactment is frequently discussed in *The Idea of History* in conjunction with 'what the historian wants to know'. One of Collingwood's criticisms of Kant is that he did not see that the historian "has to re-create them [the events of history] inside his own mind, re-enacting for himself so much of the experience of the men who took part in them as he wishes to understand".¹ The first mention of re-enactment in *The Idea of History*, in the section on Tacitus, even emphasises that re-enactment is necessary not only for historical 'understanding' in some vague sense, but explicitly in relation to history as a *science* – that is, as something that answers questions. "History cannot be scientifically written", Collingwood says, "unless the historian can re-enact in his own mind the experience of the people whose actions he is narrating".² Re-enactment, this means, is necessary for the satisfaction of scientific-historical questions.³ The same point is repeated in §1 of the 'Epilegomena': Actions...

have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought; and what the historian is *looking for* is these processes of thought. All history is the history of thought. But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind.⁴

Re-enactment, then, is necessary for historical thinking because historical questions properly conceived are of such a kind that they can only be satisfied by re-enacted thought. Re-enactment is a characteristic of all history and only history because it is demanded *only* by historical questions, and by *all* properly historical questions. In fact to take the opposite view, as Weinryb does, that "there is no good sense in arguing that the *aim* of historical inquiry is to reproduce the agent's thoughts",⁵ is to miss entirely the 'starting question principle' for why history is a distinct science.

¹ *IH*, p. 97

² *IH*, p. 39

³ See also *IH*, p. 115

⁴ *IH*, p. 215. Passages might be produced which show re-enactment being discussed without any attendant mention of questions or of 'what the historian wants to find out'. But such passages could only show Collingwood assuming that readers will remember that history is and should be a science.

⁵ Weinryb, p. 571

The fact that history is the answering of questions also helps us to strengthen Collingwood's claim that the historical re-enactment of sensations, feelings, and so on, is impossible. I've pointed out that it is actually "immediately given to consciousness"¹ that the flavour of wine, the smell of oranges and mothballs, and the precise feeling of past embarrassments can be recalled. Here, though, I think we would also have to pervert Collingwood's intention, albeit for the health of the conclusion. I am not interested in defending Collingwood's claim that we can never remember or re-enact feelings. That is a point concerned with categorising certain phenomena by how they relate to experience in general – *i.e.* by their 'ontology'. It is philosophy of mind.² I will not offer a defence here because there is little to be gained by it for our purposes. It could serve only as an attempt to support a presupposition of scientific history that could anyway be supported otherwise, if it were even seriously challenged in the first place: namely, the presupposition that one can seek another's reasons for doing *x* without also attempting to re-enact his feelings. My only interest here is in history, and it seems that although we might be able to remember or re-enact our own feelings, or 're-experience' them, whatever it is when we are doing so, we are not doing history. Historical thinking is inferential. Comparing the taste of one wine to another by remembering the flavour of an earlier one is not inference. It is memory.³

But isn't it true that Collingwood holds thinking and feeling – actions and impressions – to be so starkly distinguishable, and the second of each of these pairs so irrelevant to history? It is not true. If we recall again what makes an historical question *historical* we will see quite easily, I think, what Collingwood means, and why he is right. The basic point is that historical questions can only aim at understanding the reasons why So-and-so did or thought *x*. The critic will object that an historian might ask 'Was Charles I afraid?', and in the context of a broader historical question that might be perfectly legitimate. But what this means is that the historian's question is of a kind that will be satisfied by 'fear' as an idea. Fear 'as an idea' is not the same as fear as a feeling. The question does not demand, for its satisfaction, that the historian also *feel* Charles's

¹ *NL*, 4.73

² For a clearer and, I think, more convincing statement than that presented in *The Principles of Art*, see *NL*, ch. V.

³ See *NL*, 5.17

fear upon the scaffold. There is no such thing as an historical question that is answered – that is, *satisfied* – by the achievement of a feeling. Feelings might attend certain discoveries, of course: a wife will most probably be angry and dismayed when her secret investigation into whether her husband is having an affair leads to the conclusion that he is. But the question would not remain unanswered just because she felt nothing. This is why historians can investigate questions to which pertain all sorts of emotional and existential turbulence, and why they can carry out those investigations admirably and conclude properly without ever feeling anything – except professional satisfaction. It is only the historian who ‘feels’ the emotion of satisfaction, and not the question itself.

For Collingwood, historical questions, and the investigations that attempt to answer them, are always quests to re-enact past reasoning. It is a shame that Collingwood attempts to put this ‘the other way round’, by describing re-enactment as a process and character of ‘historical thinking’ and ‘historical knowledge’. It is, more importantly, a feature of historical questions.¹ Historical questions arise when we become aware that we do not know, or are insufficiently clear regarding, the precise reasoning ‘embodied’ in whatever our relic or outward event expressing some deliberate action happens to be, and when we become aware that we should like to ‘know’ that reasoning.

The principle that the aim to re-enact thought is a necessary component of the historical question shows what is wrong with Goldstein’s attack on those such as Donagan,² who apparently think that re-enactment is about ‘explanation’ rather than about historical knowledge in some other sense. “Re-enactment of past thought is part – indeed a central part – of his [Collingwood’s] conception of how the historical past is known or constituted in historical research”, Goldstein writes; “It has nothing to do with explanation at all.”³ Goldstein’s attack, though, is based on a false distinction between what the historian wants to know, and the explanation he is looking for. The specific unknown of an historical question can always be phrased as an ‘explanation’. The

¹ Dussen quotes a passage which makes this quite obvious: “it is necessary to consider not the characteristics of historical method (for the question at issue concerns a supposed limitation in that method as hitherto practised) but the terms of the problem which this method is designed to solve.” It is a little surprising that, having quoted it, Dussen ignores the “terms of the problem” part and goes on to discuss re-enactment as an “aspect” of historical knowledge which is “an essential feature”. See Dussen, *History as a Science*, p. 313

² See Goldstein, ‘Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past’, pp. 241-67. Goldstein’s attack on Donagan specifically begins on pp. 254-5. He has more unnamed targets in his sights, though. “Almost none, I am sure”, Goldstein says in his opening paragraph (p. 241), “doubts for a moment that the well-known dictum about the historian rethinking or re-enacting past thought is intended as a contribution to a theory of historical explanation”.

³ Goldstein, ‘Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past’, p. 244. See also pp. 245, 247, and 250, where Goldstein accidentally attacks one of Collingwood’s own doctrines: “As I understand Collingwood”, he says, “thus far we have been learning what happened, but not why”.

thoughts re-enacted by an historian and the explanation he offers are not different in his narrative, unless he silently changes his implicit question between one and the other. This is why Collingwood says, in his *Essay on Metaphysics*, that the sense of ‘causation’ meant by an historian when he speaks of a cause may be expressed in other terms “according to differences in the kind of motive in question”.¹

viii

‘Methodological individualism’

The question-and-answer defence of re-enactment also relieves Collingwood of the charge of ‘methodological individualism’ often levelled against him.² For some readers, because Collingwood is privileging individuals and their reasoned actions, there could be no histories of states, societies, cultures, institutions, or of ‘concepts’ themselves. Mink discusses this as well, and he has some good examples: “what then becomes of the history of economic and parliamentary institutions, of legal codes, of the relation of warfare and technology, and so on?”, he asks.³ Furthermore, it seems that *Begriffsgeschichte* – the ‘history of concepts’ which is now an international movement⁴ – is not *Geschichte* at all. (Some agreement might be made by renaming it *Begriffserzählung* – the mere ‘tales of concepts’.) Is it true that Collingwoodian history must jettison all of this subject-matter?

It is not true. Again Mink has already attempted a defence of this, albeit one that I think I can put more efficiently. Mink starts by acknowledging a problem which Collingwood “overlooks”:⁵ If the thoughts of individuals are the only things that can be re-enacted, then Collingwood (Mink says) would seem to be wrong about Vico’s great discovery that history can describe the developments of societies, institutions, language, customs, law, government, etc.⁶ What Mink says over the next seven pages is that re-enactable thoughts can go beyond the individual on account of shared absolute presuppositions. “The theory of absolute presuppositions thus provides the link between

¹ *EM*, p. 290. See also Boucher’s interesting discussion of this in *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 115-16

² See Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 206-7. There are apparently good reasons for maintaining Collingwood’s ‘individualism’. See for example *NL*, 21.27 – one of Collingwood’s wonderfully uncompromising statements.

³ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 159

⁴ Quentin Skinner describes *Begriffsgeschichte* as the current preoccupation of German historians. See Skinner, ‘Collingwoodian approach’, p. 175

⁵ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, pp. 174-5

⁶ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 174

individual thought and action on the one hand and human institutions on the other”.¹ Mink demonstrates sophisticated understanding and a skill for handling arguments from a broad range of Collingwood’s writings which I can only envy. I do not think his explanation is inconsistent with anything Collingwood says. But because Mink takes at face value what Collingwood says about ‘subject-matter’, his defence generates more complications than he solves, and does so unnecessarily. The complication in his defence is that Collingwood nowhere says that the rethinking of group reasoning is dependent on that group sharing absolute presuppositions. It ought, in fact, to be possible for people with different absolute presuppositions to reason together and to decide on at least some collective actions. On Mink’s account, the historian has to establish a group’s shared absolute presuppositions before he can attempt to re-enact ‘their’ thought as a group.

Dussen also bravely attempts to defend Collingwood against the charge of ‘methodological individualism’. His defence, different from Mink’s, is still not quite convincing. Dussen shows that Collingwood does in fact refer to the English mind, the Chinese mind, the Greek and Roman spirit, and that he does concede that ideas can be shared in traditions, and so on.² But this does not defend Collingwood against the charge that his doctrine of re-enactment is ‘methodologically individualistic’. Indeed, it might show only that he is not consistently set against the language of corporate minds, or that he does not follow his own prescriptions for how history should be written.

The better defence, in light of what an historical question has to be, would be this. The question is, ‘Is it ‘nonsense’ to ask what ‘their’ reasoning was?’ Is it nonsense, for example, to ask ‘Why did that group of Scouts move their tent to the other side of the hedge?’ If such questions were, by following Collingwood’s reasoning, ‘nonsense’, then it would be true that ‘methodological individualism’ follows from Collingwood’s reasoning. But it is not a consequence of Collingwood’s reasoning that such questions are nonsense, because he nowhere says that the presupposition that *res gestae*, ‘things done’, can be done by groups of people, is false – and he is obviously right not to claim this. Indeed, according to what Collingwood writes in *The New Leviathan*, “the will to civilization is... the sheer exercise of will, joining with these others to do something about the situation in which you find yourselves”.³ The problem-solving logic of action clarifies the point. Whatever philosophy of mind we take to best represent the processes of thinking and action, we can still agree that people can come together in recognition of

¹ Mink, *Mind, History and Dialectic*, p. 178

² See Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 324-6

³ *NL*, 37.18

a shared problem, discuss reasonable courses of action, and execute solutions based on collective reasoning. “Social activity”, Collingwood writes, “is a sharing of activity between different agents, the activity shared still figuring in the consciousness of those agents as a single, undivided activity; not a case of ‘I do this and you do that’, but a case of ‘we do *this*’”.¹ If we can agree on that, then we can agree that historians can ask questions pursuing varying details of the content of that reasoning.

It is the alternative that is the incomplete historical question: asking not why a collective did such-and-such, or whether they were right, but merely which individuals said what in the conversation or debate. A question such as ‘Why did those Scouts move their tent to the other side of the hedge?’ is a question that conforms to all of Collingwood’s demands for historical questions.² The objection of a ‘methodological individualist’ would be that group reasoning and group action are only the aggregates of many individuals reasoning and acting. It seems that this is an important consideration. But it is not, because an historical question about something done by a group is complete as long as what the historian wants to know – that is, as long as what would ‘satisfy’ his question – would be correlatively ‘shared’: something about what ‘their’ reasoning was, and why they did what they did. The historian might of course come to be dissatisfied by general terms, and he might want to know how one particular Scout sought to influence the eventual decision. But although this would still be an historical question, it would be a different one.

¹ *NL*, 16.41

² Though one might also have to ask ‘and were they right to do so?’ (see Parts V & VI, below)

'Trans-history'

There has been some discussion of whether the doctrine of re-enactment presupposes a transcendent Platonic 'plane of ideas'. Collingwood brought this upon himself, probably, by writing in his *Autobiography* that "Historical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought incapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs".¹ H. A. Hodges, for instance, thinks re-enactment "involves attributing to acts of thought a certain independence of date, a certain super-temporal identity", and he adds the following:

Collingwood in *The Idea of History* does not press on very far into the metaphysical consequences of this; but it is clear that that way lies the doctrine of the ultimate unity of all minds in the One Mind, which he undoubtedly held when he wrote *Speculum Mentis*, and never expressly repudiated.²

A rare example of someone embracing Collingwood for precisely this perceived feature is David Bates, whose 'Rediscovering Collingwood's Spiritual History'³ is an attempt to explain how Collingwood's theory of thought is built on theological principles.⁴ Bates calls Collingwood's theory of thought 'Platonic', or 'transcendent', based on this theory that ideas exist outside of the earthly flux of time and space, and in a mode of existence which is not enjoyed by feeling. Indeed for David Bates this is, for Collingwood, the ultimate reality of ideas. For Collingwood the idea that we must re-enact all derive (according to Bates) from the 'One Great Idea' that expresses itself through individual actors.⁵

Now, although Collingwood says there is something 'universal' about all action,⁶ he stops short of what Bates reads into him, namely, positing thoughts as existing on another (eternal) plane, as if waiting to be apprehended. In fact Collingwood calls this kind of knowledge, which he identifies with Bosanquet, Cook Wilson, Joseph and Inge, a

¹ *A*, pp. 113-14

² H. A. Hodges, *The Philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 338

³ Bates, pp. 29-55

⁴ In a sense Collingwood does believe his philosophy is based on theological principles, because all science is based on Christian presuppositions. (See *EM*, pp. 185-227) This is not, though, what Bates means.

⁵ Bates, pp. 29-55

⁶ See *IH*, p. 309

“complete misunderstanding of history”.¹ Meanwhile Peter Lewis argues the reverse, insisting that Collingwood, like Wittgenstein, is saying that all thought, all meaning, is contextual.²

It seems to me that, in view of the logic of question and answer, this debate about whether thoughts are ‘transcendent’, as Hodges and Bates contend, or ‘contextual’ as according to Lewis, does not arise. Understanding thoughts does not require a transcendental plane where thoughts exist, as Bates excitedly declares, and neither does it demand imaginary transference ‘into the context’ as Lewis says. It requires simply, as we’ve already seen, being able to follow other people’s reasoning.³

x

‘Intuitivism’

We’re now in a better position to make sense of some commentators’ claims that re-enactment is an historical method relying ultimately on ‘intuition’, and we’re in a better position to see what is wrong with that criticism. The claim is that, although Collingwood aims at prescribing a methodology for the re-enactment of past thought, he ultimately relies most on the historian’s ‘intuition’ to achieve it. Jonathan Cohen, in his ‘Survey of Work in the Philosophy of History, 1946-1950’, describes Collingwood’s “quasi-Spinozist *scientia intuitiva*”⁴; Hayden White, in an article on Collingwood and Toynbee, says that Collingwood resolves “historical knowledge into intuition”⁵; and Arthur Marwick, in his *Nature of History*, says of Collingwood’s conception of history that it “turned out to depend solely on the historian’s intuition”.⁶ These commentators⁷ read

¹ *IH*, p. 143. The full passage runs: “This complete misunderstanding of history has been restated and emphasized in later times by Dr. Inge, who follows Bosanquet in conceiving the proper object of knowledge Platonically as a timeless world of pure universality. It is reflected, too, in treatises on logic like those of Cook Wilson and Joseph, where the special problems of historical thinking are passed over in silence.”

² See Peter Lewis, ‘Collingwood and Wittgenstein: Struggling with Darkness,’ *Collingwood Studies V: Explorations* (1998), pp. 28-39

³ By ‘reasoning’ I am again following Collingwood’s meaning as explained in *NL*, 14.1: “thinking one thing, *x*, because you think another thing, *y*; where *y* is your ‘reason’ or, as it is sometimes called, your ‘ground’ for thinking *x*”.

⁴ J. Cohen, ‘Survey of Work in the Philosophy of History, 1946-1950’, *Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 2, no. 7 (1952), p. 177

⁵ Hayden White, ‘Collingwood and Toynbee: Transitions in English Historical Thought’, *English Miscellany* 8 (1956), p. 88

⁶ Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 83

⁷ Nielsen cites others. See Nielsen, p. 4. For a more comprehensive overview see Dussen, *History as a Science*, pp. 93-6

Collingwood's answer to the question, 'What does the historian do when he is *really* re-enacting' – i.e. when he is *correctly* attributing thought to a past agent – 'which he does not do when it gets it wrong?', to be 'He correctly intuits'. Nielsen calls this the 'methodological intuitivist' interpretation, and adds that she thinks this interpretation "justified". By identifying in Collingwood's philosophy of history the ultimate reliance on intuition, these commentators seem to be claiming that Collingwood gives up on the 'scientific' method for historical interpretation. A return to the fundamental question-and-answer principle of history shows why this 'intuitivist' charge is wrong.

In *The Principles of History*, Collingwood describes the processes through which the historian must go:

First, he must satisfy himself that the copy [of Henry I's charter], as far as it goes, is a true one... Secondly, he must satisfy himself that the original was genuine... Thirdly, being now satisfied that what he has before him faithfully represents a genuine original, he must read it, and find out what it says. Fourthly, having settled in his own mind what it says, he must decide what it means, that is to say, what Henry I was 'driving at' when he issued that charter: how the king envisaged the situation he was dealing with, and how he intended that it should be altered.¹

Now, what is the difference between the third step, finding out what something says, and the fourth step, deciding what it means? Finding out what something says, Collingwood adds, is "of exactly the same kind as reading a work of fiction or a warning to trespassers. Investigations concerning the nature of this process are carried out by the science of language, which is not philology but aesthetic".² Collingwood repeats this claim about the 'aesthetic' nature of reading several times in this part of *The Principles of History*: "It occurs in every case of historical thinking... [but] in itself, it is simply an aesthetic activity, which is why a science of aesthetic is an indispensable precondition to any science of historical method", he says.³ What kind of process it really is, he writes, "I have tried to explain at some length elsewhere; and as this [*The Principles of History*] is not a book about aesthetic it would not be proper to repeat it here".⁴ In a note the editor, W. H. Dray, directs the reader to the contemporaneous *Principles of Art*, and specifically to

¹ PH, p. 51

² PH, p. 52

³ PH, p. 52

⁴ PH, p. 54

chapter eleven, which is called 'Language'.¹ There Collingwood explains how understanding works in conversation, and he adds that whatever he says about speech here holds true for all language. Here is what he says:

The person to whom speech is addressed... too, is a speaker, and is accustomed to make his emotions known to himself by speaking to himself. Each of the two persons concerned is conscious of the other's personality as correlative to his own... The hearer, therefore, conscious that he is being addressed by another person like himself (without that original consciousness the so-called communication of emotion by language could never take place), takes what he hears exactly as if it were speech of his own: he speaks to himself with the words that he hears addressed to him, and thus constructs in himself the idea which those words express. At the same time, being conscious of the speaker as a person other than himself, he attributes that idea to this other person. Understanding what some one says to you is thus attributing to him the idea which his words arouse in yourself; and this implies treating them as words of your own.²

It is likely, I think, that some readers have noted Collingwood's rudimentary account of understanding presented in *The Principles of Art*, noted his insistence that it is an 'aesthetic' process, and taken this 'aesthetic' process to apply directly to Collingwood's account of understanding in history. They have implicitly concluded that, although Collingwood explicitly describes two consecutive steps, (1) finding out what something says and (2) deciding what it means, he actually implicitly thinks they are the same. Thus, historical understanding for Collingwood is intuitive and aesthetic, not scientific.

But what Collingwood means by calling this process 'aesthetic' is that it only aims at being, as Marnie Hughes-Warrington puts it, "internally, not externally coherent".³ By 'finding out what it says' Collingwood just means 'reading'. It would be a misunderstanding to think, though, that Collingwood is talking about scientific history here. Collingwood says not only that the historian must read, but also that he "must decide what it means".⁴

¹ *PH*, p. 54, note 20

² *PA*, p. 250

³ Hughes-Warrington, p. 136. The distinction is made again on p. 139.

⁴ *PH*, p. 51

It might be thought that Collingwood's distinction is between (1) deciding what the public meaning of the words is, and (2) deciding what the agent's intention is. This would be disastrously wrong. The potential disaster is a massive diversion into "academic"¹ philosophy of language and literary theory. By the standards of today's philosophy of language, Collingwood will quickly appear to be out of his depth, and thus useless to today's debates.

The crucial distinction is not between 'saying' and 'meaning', but between 'reading' and 'deciding'. It is this difference that shows why 'finding out what it says' is not the same as '*deciding* what it means' – nothing to do with some other difference between 'saying' and 'meaning'. The second step, 'deciding what it means', signifies an historical investigation. The question is, as we've heard, 'What does he mean by it?'; the conclusion that satisfies the question is 'He meant this'; the historian's process of investigation is aimed at coming finally to that decision. It involves a consciousness of alternatives, the consultation of evidence, deliberate choice, and an asserted conclusion. The first step, by contrast, is just reading. Reading, like conversation, does not presuppose an investigation. One can read and understand without there being a purposive investigation from (as I've put it) 'confusion to conclusion'. History, Collingwood has already said, is inferential. It is not aesthetic.

Outside of a purposive investigation of 'what he meant', one might say that there is no time lag between reading a text and understanding it. That is what literary theorists are appealing to when they speak of the impossibility of approaching texts without certain conceptual 'frameworks'. But we are talking not about 'understanding' in some everyday sense here, as Collingwood is in *The Principles of Art*: we are talking about constructing answers to satisfy specific historical unknowns. And on this account, eliding Collingwood's distinction means claiming that the historian can answer his question about the meaning of an act, utterance, or text in the same way that he 'reads' it: through an aesthetic process, without inference and without evidence – a process that looks something like intuition. Now this would obviously be daft. Yet according to the commentators we've heard, Collingwood falls foul of precisely this – the very thing for which he criticises Croce.² If what is meant by 'intuition' is more aesthetic than it is inferential; and if intuition is closer to the process of reading than it is to the process of inquiry; then scientific history demands more than intuition. It demands decision.

¹ *NL*, 2.55

² See Nielsen, pp. 8-9

I have said that, according to what Collingwood says about historical knowledge, historical questions are essentially ‘hermeneutic’ questions. All I mean by this is that they are questions about what somebody ‘meant’ by saying something or by doing something.

In a recent article for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Dimitris Vardoulakis argues that “Collingwood should be read as a hermeneutic philosopher”.¹ Vardoulakis uses his amusingly-titled article, “Clumsy Questioners’: Questioning and the Meaning of Meaning in Collingwood’, to present what he takes to be Collingwood’s hermeneutic theory. What Vardoulakis presents is a sophisticated set of arguments about expression, understanding, subjectivity, experience and the aesthetic, and about language. And to do so he draws upon three important works in twentieth-century philosophy, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Hans Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, and Collingwood’s own *Principles of Art*.

It would be a mistake, however, to take what Vardoulakis discusses as pertaining to Collingwood’s philosophy of history. This, I know, sounds a little strange, because it is now customary to treat an author’s philosophy of historical method – especially when that author is concerned with the interpretation of meanings – as inseparable from what he says about language and expression in general. Because hermeneuticians discuss both, contemporary philosophy is in the habit of describing both as ‘hermeneutics’. But in Collingwood’s case the two are to be separated. On the one hand there is the logic of historical method, which concerns the questions answered by historians and the ways in which they answer them; and on the other there is the theory of language as explicated in *The Principles of Art*. The two must not be falsely related.² We’ve just seen one form the false relation can take. Here is another.

For Collingwood, in order to find out what someone meant you must reconstruct his question. The question of what somebody’s question (or problem) was is itself “an historical question, and therefore”, he writes in his *Autobiography*, “cannot be settled except by historical methods”.³ By ‘historical methods’ Collingwood means simply question, evidence, provisional conclusion. That is actually the essential process by which the meanings of other people’s actions are to be grasped.

¹ Vardoulakis, p. 40

² As I think they are by Vardoulakis. See Vardoulakis, p. 53

³ *A*, p. 39

For much of his article, Vardoulakis does not really say anything deliberately to contradict this. His concern is to show that, far from what he is usually thought to say, Collingwood actually formulates a theory of meaning which has expressions filled with the full range of human experience – not only consisting of propositions. If Vardoulakis had continued to present Collingwood’s theory of language as it is presented in *The Principles of Art* – as an account of a kind of action, rather than something with methodological relevance to what historians do – then there would have been no confusion. But he chooses to present what he says as Collingwood’s ‘hermeneutic’ theory. A hermeneutic theory is an account of how we can or should get at the meanings of things. It comes from ἑρμηνεύω, meaning roughly to interpret or to translate. But it can also be used to denote ‘a theory of meaning’ – and this blurs the distinction between a theory of how people intend the things they say and do, and a theory of how other people grasp those intentions. This is Vardoulakis’s intention when he says that “Collingwood’s conception of a meaning is hermeneutical”.¹ The question to which that “conception” is intended as an answer is then allowed to change: from ‘What happens when we express?’ it becomes ‘How are we to understand?’ Thus Collingwood’s theory of language as laid out in *The Principles of Art* becomes, as presented by Vardoulakis, a theory of interpretation. This is why, at the end of his article, Vardoulakis begins to present this ‘hermeneutic’ as the centre of Collingwood’s conception of *history* as well.² Thus, what Collingwood says in *The Principles of Art* is now being presented as an alternative to the method of question and answer. Furthermore it is an alternative that is more detailed as a process, more conceptually complex, and more conducive to identifying the continuities with Heidegger and Gadamer that Vardoulakis is pleased to find. It is because Vardoulakis makes this move at the end of his article that it is important to say more about why *The Principles of Art* has very little to do with history.

Vardoulakis’s case is, at first glance, a convincing one – partly because he rightly focuses upon the logic of question and answer. What he says, though, is that “in a hermeneutical context... the logic of question and answer is the *logos* of the understanding”.³ What he means by this is that ‘question and answer’ is Collingwood’s version of how *Dasein* puts into words (as discourse) the “totality-of-significations of intelligibility”.⁴ ‘Question and answer’, for Vardoulakis, is “the language that finds

¹ Vardoulakis, p. 58

² Vardoulakis, pp. 57-9

³ Vardoulakis, p. 53

⁴ Vardoulakis, pp. 52-3

meaning in the world and constitutes our self-understanding, the ‘conversation that we ourselves are.’”¹ Furthermore, according to Vardoulakis, ‘meaning’ in Collingwood contains emotions and “experiences” – so meaning is far from the ‘propositional’ meaning of answers to questions that Collingwood is usually thought to have stuck to. There are, further, “no unexpressed emotions”: so meaning is infinite, he says. Language is not an instrument used to communicate the conversations we have: it *is* the conversations we have. Language is not an instrument used to communicate our experience of the world: it *is* the world. Because of this we must, according to Vardoulakis’s Collingwood, immerse ourselves in the discourses of past thinkers. This is the only practical advice Collingwood’s hermeneutic philosophy, according to Vardoulakis, seems to offer. Our experience of others’ meaning can only ever be “aesthetic”.²

Let us remind ourselves of two fundamental principles of Collingwood’s philosophy of history. First, history is (or can be) a science, and sciences answer specific questions systematically by using evidence. In their conclusions, sciences point to that evidence. Secondly, thinking historically requires re-enacting thought. Only thought is re-enacted in history, because it is only thought that historical questions aim at.

At best, Vardoulakis has identified a contradiction in Collingwood. Either understanding what others meant involves finding out what it was like for the agent, or it involves merely answering specific questions; either it is aesthetic, or it is inferential.

Of course, Collingwood has not contradicted himself. Vardoulakis is mistaken to think that what Collingwood says in *The Principles of Art* amounts to a hermeneutic theory. In the first place, historians pose and try to answer specific questions. They do not try to find out ‘what it was like’ to hold a certain world-view, or what it was like to be immersed in a discourse. Historians try to answer historical questions: they do not try to experience other people’s feelings. In the second place, even if Collingwood does mean to say, in *The Principles of Art*, that meaning includes emotions, this only shows that such a theory of meaning does not correspond with what he thinks historians pursue. Historical questions separate what they want from what they don’t want: because they pursue people’s reasoning, historical questions are satisfied by thoughts re-thought without feelings re-felt.

Vardoulakis’s mistake owes to a presupposition that a theory of action is correlative with a theory of interpretation – or that it at least indicates, where it is

¹ Vardoulakis, p. 53. Vardoulakis is quoting Gadamer.

² Vardoulakis, pp. 55-56

missing, what a theory of interpretation ought to contain. In his terminology he also presupposes that a 'hermeneutic' theory answers both questions simultaneously: the question of meaning formation, and meaning understanding. But the chapters towards the end of *The Principles of Art* describe a theory of expression, and theories of expression are not theories of historical interpretation waiting to be inverted. Collingwood is actually a very useful figure in the history of philosophy for making precisely this point. Historical investigation is not simply expression done backwards. Thus, although Collingwood's discussion of language in *The Principles of Art* is very interesting in its own right – as is Vardoulakis's discussion of it – it actually doesn't tell us anything about what historians should do, or what the wider purpose is of them doing it.

Part V

The Question-and-Answer Logic of the History of Ideas

- xi. Transitions: from history ‘generically’ to the history of ideas
- xii. Collingwood and the history of ideas today
- xiii. Skinner and Collingwood
- xiv. Context
- xv. Questions and problems
- xvi. Context as evidence
- xvii. The ‘*rapprochement*’ between history and philosophy
- xviii. Skinner’s alleged attack
- xix. Skinner’s real attack
- xx. Collingwood’s reasoning

i

Transitions: from history ‘generically’ to the history of ideas

So far we’ve examined arguments of Collingwood’s that were intended for thinking about history, as I’ve put it, ‘generically’. I have tried to deal with them in such a way that their relevance to history in general has been maintained, though it has probably been obvious to the reader what the implications have been for the history of ideas specifically.

I’ve sought to emphasise a principle which in Collingwood’s thinking is implicit and irregularly expressed, but crucial: historical inference, method, and knowledge are what they are, and have the features that they do, because of the peculiar and shared features of historical questions (III: viii). All scientific knowledge is the fruit of question answering (II: i). The process of scientific knowing is a process of answering questions, and the knowledge itself is those questions answered. There are some questions that arise with certain features that make them what we can call ‘historical’ (III: ix-xiii). Those features determine the correct way of answering them which, because the question is of a different kind, is distinct from the correct way of answering natural-scientific questions. Those features which we call historical make the answering process ‘history’ as a form of inquiry, and the conclusion of that inquiry ‘history *a parte objecti*? (III: ix).

Now, if the history of ideas, as a specific discipline, is a ‘science’, it must pose and answer questions – questions that are not ‘nonsense’, and questions which are, at least in

principle, answerable. And if the history of ideas is a *distinct* science from history ‘generically’, then it must be able to outline those features of its characteristic questions which distinguish them from what we’ve hitherto called historical questions. Those distinct questions (of which at present we are only supposing the existence) we could give a distinct classificatory title: perhaps ‘history-of-ideas questions’, or ‘idea-history questions’.

The attentive reader would see instantly what would be wrong here. In both formulations the case for distinctness appeals to the distinct object *of which* its questions are asked. But as we’ve seen (III: vii-viii), questions about a distinct class of objects are not necessarily homogeneous formally. It is possible, though nonsensical, to pose an historical question about an inappropriate object: ‘Why was this built here?’ is a good question where ‘this’ means Hadrian’s Wall, but a nonsense one where ‘this’ is the Giant’s Causeway. The presupposition that someone meant something by it – that someone was trying to solve a problem or a constellation of problems by building it – is sound in the first case, but false in the second.

Furthermore, ‘ideas’ are not a distinct class of objects within history. As we’ve seen, all historical thinking demands the re-enactment of ideas, since all historical questions arise when the specific unknown is somebody’s reasoning. Although historians working on the Battle of Trafalgar have to deal with a great deal of logistics and details about movements and timings and so on, their specific unknown, if (for Collingwood) they are working properly as historians, is someone’s reasoning, and not those logistics themselves.

The history of thought, then, is not distinct from history – at least, not formally. Its characteristic questions, inference, and forms of knowledge produced, are not different in form from those of other historians. Its questions are satisfied by the same sorts of things; they “expect”¹ the same kind of answer. This brings us to what is more or less the *status quo*. Most historians of ideas, of philosophy, or of political thought, are ‘historians’ in their own minds anyway, regardless of whatever else they do. So if all historians are, when properly conceived, historians of ideas, why are the historians of ideas who call themselves such distinguished institutionally?

They are distinguished for institutional convenience. And this convenience owes to two things: firstly, their ‘material’, and secondly, where their questions arise. Both factors are ultimately rooted in the kinds of problem-solving which historians of ideas

¹ *EM*, pp. 73-4

take as their specific unknowns and try to ‘know’. Those problems tend to be argument problems rather than logistical problems, which is why their solutions take the form of texts, pamphlets, speeches and so on. That is what I mean by saying the distinct ‘material’ lends itself to institutional convenience. The ‘relics’ of the history of ideas are still *res gestae*, of course – they are *things done* with words. Secondly the historical problems solved by historians of ideas tend to arise not only out of the institutionally ‘historical’ kind of historical thinking, but out of distinct modes of thinking. If historians of political thought situate themselves in politics departments it is not because they are appalled that people in history departments are cynically uninterested in the thinking behind political actions, but because the questions they try to answer frequently arise out of political thinking itself. If historians of philosophy situate themselves in philosophy departments it is not because historians are unphilosophical philistines, but because philosophers produce a lot of historical questions. ‘Has Kant already shown us how to solve this?’ is an example of an historical question which philosophers are more likely to ask than any (other) kind of historian, since it is of more relevance to what philosophers are doing anyway.

It is from this fact – the fact that some historical questions are centred on other people’s attempted solutions to political questions – that the history of political thought makes sense as a defined field, albeit one with ‘crumbly edges’, and one with no method that is uniquely its own. However, the institutional distinctness of a field encourages the view that that distinctness rests upon methodological distinctness, and that distinctness in turn is achievable only by forgetting Collingwood’s principle of the starting question and relapsing into the assumption that different object makes for different method. You very quickly end up with something like the current state of affairs, which on a Collingwoodian view looks not only clumsy, but also likely to give rise to misconceptions of what historians are doing, and how they are to do it: namely, that conception according to which normal historians deal with ‘what happened’, while historians of ideas deal with the important ideas of great thinkers; the conception according to which the correct methodological philosophy of the latter requires some thorough analysis of what texts, meanings, and speech acts are as objects.

In fact, though, the differences between these methodological debates and their cousins over in history departments ought not to be distinct from each other at all, except for where the ins and outs of ‘how you would show this’ could be of only very minor interest to historians not asking about people’s solutions to argument problems. Certainly if done properly they ought to ‘fit together’.

A further reason for the distinctness of these debates about how to do history of ideas is, though, that they actually presuppose some of Collingwood's arguments about history 'generically'. Most obviously, historians of ideas presuppose that what they do is 'about ideas', 'about thought', and they might even be very relaxed about the 'constructionist' claim (which might discomfit naval historians among others) that these past ideas only exist for as long as they continue to be thought and discussed in the present. Historians of ideas presuppose further that working out 'what he meant' is a staple of the discipline; they presuppose that the formulation of rules or laws is foreign, or at least not conducive, to their purposes; and they presuppose their inquiry's satisfaction with unique, individual thought constellations. I might remind the reader that I am talking about working historians of ideas, and probably professionals. The discipline's initiates, undergraduates, might well have to be taught to presuppose these things.

In their roles as researchers, historians of ideas also think very little of 'scissors and paste'. Reproducing the narratives of other historians of ideas at length with nothing to say about them yourself is frowned upon. It fails the 'contribution', or 'novelty' test. But as well as this, just as 'scissors and paste' is a bad way to answer questions in history generically, so it is a terrible way of answering the kinds of questions about arguments that historians of ideas might be asking. This is because the archetypal historical question arises, 'What did So-and-so mean by this?' There are two ways Collingwood's point about the testimonies of authorities can be manifested here. Firstly I might simply read and repeat the statement of an authoritative commentator, say Quentin Skinner, that 'what Hobbes means is...' – and what would follow would be Skinner's version of what Hobbes meant, which would in fact be my own version of Skinner's account. I think it is fair to say that for many people the fact that I have obviously read Skinner, know what he says, and have repeated it in my own work, would itself give me some kind of credibility as an historian. But in view of what Collingwood says about scientific history, it is obvious why I am not 'thinking historically' when I think that the question is best answered by repeating someone else's answer. It is simply 'scissors and paste'.

But why use a secondary authority at all, in a case such as this? If I want to know what something means, surely (common sense would suggest) I cannot do better than to read the text, or look at the thing? As we've seen it is not, for Collingwood, sufficient as 'historical knowing' simply to read the text as if that is the same thing as finding out what So-and-so *meant* by it. Simply 'reading' something, finding out 'what it says', Collingwood

calls an ‘aesthetic’ process, which is not to be confused with ‘deciding what it means’ (IV: x). Where the first is, in a sense, ‘immediate’, the second is an inferential process from confusion to conclusion. Scientific historical method has to be inferential. If the two are conflated, then the interpretation of texts (including archaeological ‘texts’) appear falsely to be unproblematic. Here is an amusing passage on this from the *Autobiography* in which, the reader will notice, archaeology is explicitly compared to textual analysis:

“Sblood!” says Hamlet, ‘do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?’ Those eminent philosophers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, think *tout bonnement* that they can discover what the *Parmenides* is about by merely reading it; but if you took them to the south gate of Housesteads and said, ‘Please distinguish the various periods of construction here, and explain what purpose the builders of each period had in mind’, they would protest ‘Believe me, I cannot’. Do they think the *Parmenides* is easier to understand than a rotten little Roman fort? ‘Sblood!’¹

Historians of ideas, I think it is safe to say, presuppose that working out ‘what he meant’ requires more than just ‘reading’ in the sense I’ve discussed.

But there is much of what we’ve heard already that historians of ideas do not presuppose. Firstly we had what W. H. Dray has called Collingwood’s ‘what-why paradox’. Collingwood’s own examples for ‘knowing what was done’ and ‘knowing why it was done’ take the form of actions more physical than textual or rhetorical. As applied to these latter kinds of action, Collingwood’s claim is *prima facie* just wrong, and seems to be an endorsement of audience naivety. If knowing *why* Hobbes said what he said means simply knowing *what* he said, then the correct method for study by an historian of political thought seems to be reduced to precisely what Collingwood warns against: ‘Just read *Leviathan* and you’ll know why Hobbes wrote it’. Or, worse, it seems to pervert for no good reason a basic assumption shared by historians of political thought, as well as by political commentators: namely, that sometimes people say something in a certain way in order to hide their real reason for saying it, or in order to smuggle into it a message in such a way that they cannot be accused of actually having said it at all. The ‘what-why’ paradox, then, needs some further explanation if it is to make sense for historians of ideas.

I’ve already explained (III: xv) that what Collingwood means here is that the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ questions are, for historians, the same, so long as the ‘what’ question

¹ *A*, pp. 39-40

is properly historical. What Nelson did was to try to break the Franco-Spanish line. The reason *why* he sailed *Victory* at a right-angle was that he was trying to break the Franco-Spanish line. As historical facts – that is, as conclusions to historical questions – the two are the same. The misunderstanding, which Dray expresses very clearly, owes to thinking that ‘what was done’ in history can be the ‘sailing at a right-angle’, which is not the sort of thing Collingwood intends by an *historical* fact, at least not a complete one, but might very well serve as a term in an historical question.

This is the reason why the strangeness of the what-why paradox is exacerbated by being applied to the history of ideas specifically. Knowing what Hobbes says and knowing *why* he says it are even more obviously different things. Collingwood, of course, has history generically in mind when he discusses ‘what-why’, and is not thinking of speech acts. But if all history is the history of ideas, and if *res gestae* are supposed to include acts of speech or writing, as I am sure Collingwood meant for them to, then it seems the ‘paradox’ is only becoming more and more problematic.

It can, though, be defended by resisting the translation of ‘what he did’ into ‘what he said’, and instead translating it as ‘what he did by saying *x*’. Knowing what Hobbes did by saying *x* means knowing why Hobbes said *x*, where (and only where) the specific unknown signified by the ‘why’ question is the same as that signified by the question ‘What did he do?’ Knowing merely ‘what he says’ is, as Collingwood says, a mere precondition.

It will be objected that actually Hobbes did many things at once by saying *x*. This might be perfectly true, but the historian is entitled to ask about as few or as many ‘*y*’s, as many reasons, as he wishes, and the ‘why’ explanation he produces – which is to say, the narrative of ‘what Hobbes did’ that he proposes as his answer – is to be judged by whether it answers the historian’s original question, and not by whether it answers further possible ‘why’s and further possible descriptions of ‘what Hobbes did’ which pertain not to his question, but to further possible questions that he is not logically compelled to ask.

But there are other of Collingwood's arguments concerning history which I have held back until now. These are points that relate more specifically, both in their contexts in Collingwood's work and in the present day, to the history of philosophy. The most obvious example is probably Collingwood's contention that in the history of philosophy there are no eternal questions. Collingwood's argument for this is explained by reference to political theory in *An Autobiography*,¹ but it is also an argument which remains in circulation in today's debates, since Quentin Skinner re-launched it in his seminal 1969 article, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas'.

I have held these specific points back until now because, in the first place, in a study like this it is better to go from the general to the specific – rather than to attempt to move in the opposite direction; and, in the second, because the 'generic' points are needed for the specific ones to make sense. For example, we'll deal here with what Collingwood calls his '*rapprochement*' between history and philosophy. What he says about this *rapprochement* presupposes the doctrine of re-enactment, so now that we've dealt with that we're in a better position to examine the *rapprochement*. Similarly, making sense of Collingwood's apparently contradictory position on the relevance of context to understanding in history requires some existing knowledge of what he says about 'question and answer', as both the method for inquiry, and as the 'second rule' for understanding what someone meant by something by reconstructing his question.

Now, on each of the points dealt with in this study the question arises, on what grounds Collingwood is still relevant to contemporary thinking on that point. The question divides naturally into two: firstly, what does Collingwood say that can now be reasserted as a valuable contribution in current disputes? And, secondly, what does he say that nobody is talking about anymore, but which nevertheless seems to be right?

In order to demonstrate the continuing value of Collingwood's arguments in this chapter to the debates of today I'll point to the relationship between two of Collingwood's 'big' arguments and the work of the figure at the centre of today's debates, Quentin Skinner. Skinner's best-known and most provocative claim, which has earned him the label 'contextualist', is logically fixed to a Collingwoodian anchor. In order to understand a text, Skinner says in 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas',

¹ *A*, pp. 61-3

the historian must know something about its context, and he must not make the mistake of thinking that great texts are typically attempts to deal with the supposed eternal or ‘perennial’ questions of their subject. Skinner re-fashioned Collingwood’s point about eternal questions well in 1969, and he has been under constant attack ever since. But despite the fact that Skinner at times points to Collingwood’s formative influence, he nevertheless neglects to adopt the good available defences that are easily derivable from the basics of his work.

In answer to the second question – what Collingwood is right about which nobody is discussing anymore – it is my view that both Collingwood’s *rapprochement* between history and philosophy, and his answers to the question of what history is for (for our purposes, what the history of philosophy is for), ought to be revisited. The former concerns whether historians of ideas ought to ask whether the authors they study were *right*. Skinner appears, for various reasons, to answer in the negative, and thus destroy Collingwood’s *rapprochement*. The question itself – whether we ought to ask not only ‘what he meant’ but also whether he was right – I have given a thorough treatment below (vii-x), while the question of what history/the history of ideas is *for* is the subject of Part VI.

iii

Skinner and Collingwood

I’ve chosen Quentin Skinner for special examination here because of his central position in current argument, in the first place; and, in the second, because he has in his own words “explicitly pointed to Collingwood as a major intellectual influence”, especially in view of “the fact that Collingwood is unquestionably the leading anti-positivist Idealist in recent English philosophy”.¹ Skinner has repeated this less often in recent times than he did in his early writings² – not, I think, because it has become less true, but because he never likes to repeat himself without at the same time saying something slightly different.

¹ Skinner, ‘Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action,’ pp. 283-4

² Richard Tuck has already surveyed the impact of Collingwood on those writing intellectual history in the 1960s; of course he deals with Skinner, and I think he corroborates his story. See Tuck, ‘The Contribution of History’, pp. 72-89

But it seems to me that Skinner is justified in making this claim about the influence of Collingwood not only on biographic grounds, but also on logical ones. By this I mean to say that Skinner contradicts Collingwood's principles in only one area, and that area is nothing to do with context or re-enacting thoughts.¹ Despite the apparently revolutionary effect on 'contextualist' thinking of philosophy of language, Skinner's investigation of historical method actually remains within what we could call 'Collingwoodian parameters'. It is true though that Skinner sometimes likes to present himself as having in some way displaced Collingwood – or, in Robert Lamb's word, "usurped" thinkers like him.² Skinner's mildly self-contradictory³ attitude to the doctrine of re-enactment, for instance, is an obvious attempt to cut himself loose from Collingwood's 'idealist' moorings. But 'Cambridge School' historians have also been glad to identify themselves as Collingwood's heirs. Collingwood deals, from an anti-positivist position, with ostensibly similar questions about the philosophy, or methodology, of the history of ideas, particularly regarding the nature of interpretation and understanding through dismissing the supposedly 'eternal' questions of philosophy and reconstructing authors' actual problems. Collingwood is the best-known Anglophone philosopher of history of the 'pre-linguistic' decades; and in some ways he is the philosopher of history *par excellence*, with always one hand in practical history, and the other in theory which, in his case, was based on a very broad knowledge of the history of the philosophy of history.

But Cambridge School authors have also sought to distance themselves from Collingwood's reputation. Collingwood had not said enough for their liking about the importance of locating thinking in its social or (especially) in its *linguistic* context. In fact, Collingwood says a little too much about why the content of re-enacted thought is *non-contextual*. He seems, as we'll see below, to attack the very need to consult 'context' that the Cambridge School is now presenting as its main doctrine. All of this, Skinner might have said (but didn't), is probably a consequence of Collingwood's underdeveloped philosophy of language, which permits a theory of thought and action that overlooks the importance of socio-linguistic context in the formation, development, and historical understanding of ideas.

¹ It is in fact his attack on Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy – see below.

² ...though this is the story often told by both supporters and critics of Skinner. See for instance Robert Lamb's 'Critique', p. 8

³ "My aspiration is not of course to enter into the thought-processes of long-dead thinkers", he says; "it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way". Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 3

Like Collingwood, Skinner is a practising historian, writing philosophy – and more specifically philosophy *of* history, and he cites Collingwood several times in volume one of his *Visions of Politics*, the 2002 volume that ‘regards method’.¹ There Collingwood is invoked above all for the discovery of a common historical error, the proposition which has provoked a great deal of commotion among Skinner’s own critics: that in philosophy there are no perennial problems, “only individual answers to individual questions, and potentially as many different questions as there are questioners”.² Skinner is right to attribute this to Collingwood,³ (though Collingwood’s term is “eternal” problems).⁴ And Skinner is also right to echo what Collingwood thinks follows from it. “Rather than looking for directly applicable ‘lessons’ in the history of philosophy”, he says, “we shall do better to learn to do our own thinking for ourselves”.⁵

By reconstructing authors’ questions, it becomes clear that different philosophies are not different attempts to answer the same questions.⁶ The following passage is from the chapter of *An Autobiography* called ‘The History of Philosophy’. Its relation to what is discussed in the chapter ‘Question and Answer’ is, though, quite clear. I’m afraid I must again paste the argument almost in full, though I have abridged it where possible:

This way of treating other people’s thoughts, though formally deducible from my ‘logic of question and answer’, had been my habit long before I began

¹ Its chapters, when still recognisable from earlier articles and essays from the late 1960s 70s and 80s, have been significantly revised.

² Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 88

³ See *A*, pp. 60-1. Collingwood writes “Was it really true, I asked myself, that the problems of philosophy were, even in the loosest sense of that word, eternal? Was it really true that different philosophies were different attempts to answer the same questions? I soon discovered that it was not true; it was merely a vulgar error, consequent on a kind of historical myopia which, deceived by superficial resemblances, failed to detect profound differences. The first point at which I saw a perfectly clear gleam of daylight was in political theory.”

⁴ The terminological difference is not so significant as long as Skinner’s ‘perennial’ is taken to mean the same thing. Lamb rightly points out in his ‘Critique’ (pp. 14-15) that Collingwood uses ‘eternal’ instead, and explains why he thinks the idea of ‘perennial problems’ is more defensible as long as ‘perennial’ is taken in its usual sense of “something that lasts for a very long time”. Lamb is appealing to the continuing identity of problems through change. His point here is, I think, the same as Collingwood’s. Here is what Collingwood writes in his *Autobiography*: “If ‘eternal’ is used in its vulgar and inaccurate sense, as equivalent to ‘lasting for a considerable time’, the phrase ‘eternal problem’ may be used to designate collectively a series of problems connected by a process of historical change, such that their continuity is discernible even by the presumably rather unintelligent eye of the person who thus misuses the world, but the differences between them not so discernible.” (*A*, p. 68, footnote 1) If, in light of ‘re-enactment’, we were to push the metaphor *ad absurdum* and speak of ‘deciduous problems’, dormant in winter and re-enlivened in spring, then our overlapping scale of botanic analogies would be complete.

⁵ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 88. Compare with *A*, pp. 118-19. As for Collingwood, for Skinner part of what man learns from doing history is that he is free. However, Skinner also thinks this to be an unpromising line of thought, and that it is best not to make any effort to explain or develop it. See Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 24

⁶ See also *EM*, p. 72 for a parallel attack on the ‘eternal’ or ‘crucial’ or ‘central’ problems in metaphysics.

working that logic out. To think in that way about philosophies not your own, as I have hinted, is to think about them historically... History did not mean knowing what events followed what. It meant getting inside other people's heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they tackled it was the right way...

It was a doctrine of 'realism' (and this is why Pritchard was so cross with me) that in this sense of the word history there was no history of philosophy. The 'realists' thought that the problems with which philosophy is concerned are unchanging. They thought that Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics, the Schoolmen, the Cartesians, &c., had all asked themselves the same set of questions, and had given different answers to them...

Was it really true, I asked myself, that the problems of philosophy were, even in the loosest sense of that word, eternal? Was it really true that different philosophies were different attempts to answer the same questions? I soon discovered that it was not true; it was merely a vulgar error, consequent on a kind of historical myopia which, deceived by superficial resemblances, failed to detect profound differences. The first point at which I saw a perfectly clear gleam of daylight was in political theory. Take Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*, so far as they are concerned with politics. Obviously the political theories they set forth are not the same. But do they represent two different theories of the same thing? Can you say that the *Republic* gives one account of 'the nature of the State' and the *Leviathan* another? No; because Plato's 'State' is the Greek *πόλις*, and Hobbes's is the absolutist State of the seventeenth century... You can call the two things the same if you insist; but if you do you must admit that the thing has got *diablement changé en route*... What even the best and wisest of those who are engaged in politics are trying to do has altered...¹

There is something wrong with Collingwood's illustration which should be explicated right away. Collingwood appeals to the difference between what Plato and Hobbes are referring to as the 'State', rather than to the questions to which these two texts are answers. Although it is quite true that the analyses of the state that allow Plato and Hobbes to get ahead in their thinking reveal different conceptions of the state, it is much more important that *The Republic* is an attempt to answer the question 'What is justice?', while *Leviathan* is intended as the answer to a question concerning why men ought to obey the established sovereign power – as well as to answer much else besides.

¹ *A*, pp. 60-1. Collingwood has some amusing analogies for the above error, which I'll only refer to in order to avoid trying the reader's patience any further: see *A*, pp. 64-5.

Collingwood's illustration might be misleading as a consequence of his attempt to take a short-cut to a further point he wants to make: that by treating texts in his way – that is, by reconstructing questions – we come to realise that the connexion between one past theory of the state and another later one is not a connexion by universal definition, but by a sameness of historical process: “and the difference is the difference between one thing which in the course of that process has turned into something else, and the other thing into which it has turned”.¹ The history of political theory, then, Collingwood can show, is “not the history of different answers given to one and the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it”.² The moral Skinner takes from this – as we'll see shortly – is that ‘their’ questions are *not* ours, and therefore we should not, as historians, ask whether their answers were true.

The debate over perennial questions is as healthy as ever, and I have nothing to add to it that has not already been said. Our concern here is, anyway, Collingwood and his claims about history that are, in view of ‘question and answer’, more sensible than they have often been taken to be. His position on eternal questions is not so complicated that it needs re-explaining. It is perfectly obvious to the most casual reader how it relates to the logic of question and answer.³ What is more interesting for our purposes is what follows from the rejection of eternal, or ‘perennial’, problems.

v

Context

What follows from the rejection of eternal problems, as Collingwood realised, is that knowing what an author meant requires working out the actual question which his text was (and *is*) intended as an answer.⁴ This is also what Collingwood means when he says: “If you cannot tell what a proposition means unless you know what question it is meant to answer, you will mistake its meaning if you make a mistake about that question”.⁵ The historian reconstructs this question by using evidence, and he

¹ *A*, p. 62

² *A*, p. 62

³ See *A*, pp. 60-4, followed by p. 39

⁴ See Skinner, *Regarding Method*, pp. 83, 115-16. Skinner refers to *An Autobiography*.

⁵ *A*, p. 33

presupposes that what he needs in his head is a question that is the same as that broached by the original author.¹ That identity of ‘problem’ is his presupposed aim.

Skinner never contradicts this principle of the historian trying to share his author’s questions. The errors of bad historical practice he identifies as plaguing the history of ideas can all be reduced to it, because they are all forms of introducing false or inappropriate questions – or, in his terms, of ‘contaminating’ the understanding of past texts “by the unconscious application of paradigms the familiarity of which, to the historian, disguises an essential inapplicability to the past”.² This is especially likely if we take political thought to be constituted by questions which might only be characteristic of contemporary or recent debates; or if we assess a past author according to the extent to which he reminds us of ourselves³; or if we upbraid him for failing to mention a doctrine which we now regard as not omissible, or for failing to contribute to a debate we now think of as, again, constitutive of political writing *per se*. My point is merely that what is wrong with anachronisms like this is that we understand the terms of the question differently. So here in ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’ we have Skinner elaborating on Collingwood’s basic point with examples of how this mistake actually occurs in the work of historians.

In order to really understand a text, for Skinner, you must know what an author thought he was ‘doing’ *with* it, and *in* it. And in order to know what he was ‘doing’ it is necessary, Skinner says, to know something of the situation in which he saw himself – the context without which the author’s intentions make no sense.⁴ We might be able to understand something about what an author thought he was doing by examining a text in isolation but, unless we consider the relevant features of the text’s context, we cannot grasp what he was doing. Our understanding of that text, in short, will be impoverished.

Skinner came under instant fire for this in the early 1970s in articles by literary theorists like Anthony Savile and S. H. Olsen,⁵ who maintained that the fundamental

¹ Perhaps surprisingly at least one of Skinner’s critics, John Keane, considers this sufficient grounds for attack. The injunction to re-enact a past author’s *actual* thought behind an utterance reveals in Skinner’s thinking, Keane claims, a “long-since abandoned” form of “objectivism” and “positivism”. See John Keane, ‘More theses on the philosophy of history’, in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context*, pp. 204-17. See especially pp. 205-6. If by “objectivism” Keane means a historian’s wish to construct as accurate an answer as possible to the question of what the author meant by saying *this*, or of what question he was trying to answer, then the sensible historian’s advice would probably be to plead guilty.

² Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 59

³ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p.63

⁴ Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory* vol. 8 (1969), pp. 48-9

⁵ Skinner, ‘Hermeneutics and the Role of History’, *New Literary History* vol. 7 (1975), p. 217. See Anthony Savile, ‘The Place of Intention in the Concept of Art’, in Harold Osborne (ed.), *Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 158-76. (Skinner points particularly to pp. 170-1.) See Skinner, ‘Some Problems in

guide to an author's intentions in writing is provided by the text itself – or at least that is how historians of ideas ought to approach texts. A 'separate' study of an author's context such as Skinner insists upon cannot, they say, enable the historian to understand anything of the text which he could not get from studying the text itself.

Mark Bevir has spent much of the last twenty years also trying to “counter the claim that historians must study the linguistic context of a text if they are to recover the meaning of that text”,¹ and his most focused attack on what he used to call “soft linguistic contextualists” – whom he has now re-branded “conventionalists”, and recently decided are a breed of “modernists” – is to be found in ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’ of 1992.² For Bevir, Skinner’s insistence that historians *must* study context (rather than that they *may*) is logically invalid. Although ‘study the linguistic context of an utterance’ is a “useful heuristic maxim”, Bevir says, doing so “is not necessary or sufficient for understanding”.³ Understanding, he adds, “does not presuppose prior knowledge of the relevant linguistic context”, and in fact “there is no definite procedure that historians must follow in order to recover intentions”.⁴ It follows that...

if historians can come to understand a text even when they have a faulty view of the conventions that apply to that text, then clearly they need not necessarily study the linguistic context of texts.⁵

Skinner is therefore wrong, Bevir thinks, to present his “methods as logics of discovery” – that is, as pre-requisites of understanding or knowledge – because “no method can be a prerequisite of good history whether it be contextualism, conventionalism, or something else”.⁶ Furthermore, Bevir adds, it cannot even be necessary to know the context of the arguments that ‘contextualists’ also insist upon, because authors are not always out to contribute to contemporary arguments. (His example is Annie Besant’s *Four Great Religions*.) So whether they are writing without

the Analysis of Political Thought and Action’, p. 217. Stein Hangom Olsen, ‘Authorial Intention’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13, pp. 219-31. Skinner points particularly to p. 229.

¹ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, *History and Theory* vol. 31(1992), p. 278

² Bevir’s argument in ‘The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation’ eight years later is broadly the same, and the chapter on ‘Meaning’ in his *Logic of the History of Ideas* is obviously another revised version of the same thing. See Mark Bevir, ‘The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation’, *Human Studies* vol. 23, no. 4 (2000), pp. 395-411; Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1999)

³ Bevir, ‘The Role of Contexts’, p. 395; ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 276

⁴ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 297

⁵ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 290

⁶ Bevir, ‘The Role of Contexts’, p. 399

reference to other texts, or whether they are openly and explicitly responding to other texts, in neither case is it necessary “to locate the text within a linguistic context in order to secure uptake of the author’s intention in writing that text”.¹ We *can* sometimes understand an author’s intention in writing a text, Bevir concludes, even though we know nothing of the contemporary context.

There is, though, a fundamental sense in which knowledge of the context is not only a ‘prerequisite’ for understanding, or a mere “heuristic maxim” as Bevir thinks it is: it is actually inherent to knowing what an author thought he was saying in a text and what he thought he was doing by writing it and distributing it in the first place. Without knowing something of the ‘context’ in the sense I intend by this, no utterance can be understood, and Annie Besant’s *Four Great Religions* would be a complete mystery to historians of ideas. I am referring to reconstructing the question, or the problem.

I don’t know whether Bevir realises that the principle he is attacking is also Collingwood’s. (I think probably not.²) But this is anyway where Skinner might use Collingwood’s ‘second rule’ about reconstructing authors’ questions, and connect it to the context within which agents do things with words. Skinner does not do this, though, and I think the reason is that Collingwood seems at first blush to offer Skinner very little about ‘context’ explicitly, and I am sure Skinner has not failed to notice this. *An Autobiography* says nothing about ‘context’, and although Collingwood does discuss it in *The Idea of History*, he actually appears openly hostile to it. Here is a passage from *The Idea of History* which a critic sympathetic to Collingwood could even level *against* Skinner:

It has been said that anything torn from its context is thereby mutilated and falsified; and that, in consequence, to know any one thing, we must know its context, which implies knowing the whole universe. I do not propose to discuss this doctrine in its whole bearing, but only to remind the reader of its connexion with the view that reality is immediate experience, and its corollary that thought, which inevitably tears things out of their context, can never be true. On such a doctrine Euclid’s act of thinking on a given occasion that these angles are equal would be what it was only in relation to the total context of his then experience,

¹ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 291

² For more on what is wrong with Bevir’s criticisms of Skinner, see my article (Christopher Fear), ‘The question-and-answer logic of historical context’, *History of the Human Sciences* vol. 26, no. 3 (2013), pp. 68-81. See especially pp. 77-9

including such things as his being in a good temper and having a slave standing behind his right shoulder.¹

I don't quote this passage with the intention of endorsing Collingwood's straw-man arguments ("...which implies knowing the whole universe"), but rather with that of showing that there would appear to be a significant divergence between these two authors. It is obvious how one might use these apparently anti-contextual sentiments to undermine Skinner's claim to Collingwood's legacy, or even to attack his claims about the importance of understanding through context outright. It is not so obvious how Collingwood might actually support 'contextualism'.

But it would be a mistake to think that Collingwood is attacking in these passages 'context' in something like the form now appealed to by Skinner. The kind of context Collingwood rejects the need for is the 're-experiencing' of the author's context, that is, reconstructing the *experiential* context: the feelings the author had at the time of writing, the light by which he wrote, the pen in hand, or – as here – the slave standing behind his shoulder. None of this is relevant to historical understanding, for Collingwood, because although this kind of context *is* part of the author's situation 'as he sees it', it is not the situation pertaining to the problem or question he is trying to solve or answer.

But secondly, and more importantly, context *is*, for Collingwood, not only relevant to understanding, but *integral* to it when what is meant by 'context' is (a) the terms of the problem the author saw himself as facing, and/or (b) the medium of expressing the solution.

v

Questions and problems

No work of philosophy, Collingwood says, can be understood until the reader knows the question to which the text is intended as an answer.² 'Knowing' the agent's context in this sense – that is, as the features pertaining to the problem – is part of what it means to see the agent's situation as he himself saw it.³

¹ *IH*, p. 298. See also p. 303

² *A*, pp. 31, 55

³ *A*, 58, 31-9. See also *EM*, p. 21, where Collingwood writes "Among these there are some [thoughts] which stand in a particular relation to the thought he has stated: they are not merely its context, they are its presuppositions."

For works of philosophy the concept of a ‘question’ is more or less self-explanatory. For the actions of architects or of naval strategists, though – or of the kinds of rhetorical performers about whom Skinner writes – we should take Collingwood’s ‘questions’ more comprehensively, as ‘problems’, the ‘situation’ in which intervention is thought by the agent to be desirable.¹ Naval commanders, architects and rhetoricians ‘solve’ in a more general sense. Their ‘problems’, their ‘difficulties’, are things like large French fleets likely to invade their homeland if allowed to resupply at Naples; or a queen and public that expects a grand but sombre memorial to a world-class statesman, and a competition to be the man who designed it; or, for parliamentarians and rhetoricians, an audience or populace that needs to have its mind changed about something.

Questions and problems are by no means simple. “A highly detailed and particularized proposition must be the answer”, Collingwood adds, “not to a vague and generalized question, but to a question as detailed and particularized as itself”.² And he continues:

People will speak of a savage as ‘confronted by the eternal problem of obtaining food’. But what really confronts him is the problem, quite transitory like all things human, of spearing this fish, or digging up this root, or finding blackberries in this wood.³

In order to understand Nelson’s orders at the Battle of Trafalgar, then, the naval historian has to grasp the terms of Nelson’s problem much more sophisticatedly than would be implied by saying that his problem was ‘Villeneuve’ – or, more abstractly still, ‘Napoleon’. Indeed, in order to ‘understand’ any single manoeuvre executed during that battle we have to see the correlative problem to which it was a solution, and in as much logical, logistical detail as the captain responsible for solving it would have seen it. The same goes for Hobbes, whose context in this sense is far more than ‘the Civil War’. Hobbes’ ‘question’ would in fact require for its explication a work at least as detailed and particularized as the *Leviathan* itself (and, I suspect, that several times over). Hobbes’s complex problem ‘arises’ out of the situation of his social and political milieu, his private

¹ Skinner is loyal to this principle. The prefaces to his *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* contain explicit statements that we must see authors’ problems as they saw them. “In order to see them [texts] as answers to specific questions”, he says, “we need to know something about the society in which they were written”; “political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist”. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. xiii, xi

² *A*, p. 32

³ *A*, pp. 32-33

readings and conversations, perhaps also private feuds over some point or other that he wanted to settle along the way, and so on. Each might add ‘terms’ to the problem that *Leviathan* is meant to solve, and each is potentially historically investigable. Skinner’s own *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* is meant to show, for example, that part of the problem to which *Leviathan* is a solution is the problem of reason alone being deficient for demonstrating truth to readers.¹ The rhetorical eloquence of *Leviathan* is, Skinner shows, partly a deliberate solution to this problem. This therefore indicates a more basic problem in Hobbes’s mind, which there is no real need for him to explicate: namely, ‘at present, not enough people recognise certain important political truths’ – truths, that is, of *scientia civilis*. Perhaps the more historically remote a problem becomes, the more work historians have to do to explain to their readers all the important ways in which the terms of that question differ from what they might have assumed. This is one reason why historians of ideas never, in fact, seek to understand a text in its entirety. The notion that they do this is something of a dummy premise in “academic”² methodological arguments. Historians of ideas try rather to answer much more specific questions about a specific aspect of a text or an author’s work more widely.

The point is that studying the context in this sense is more than a mere “heuristic maxim”, because it is a necessary condition of understanding a solution that one know something, and perhaps that one know rather a lot, about the problem to which it is intended *as* a solution. It is a necessary condition not because it is empirically the case that when it is eschewed – that is, when one does *not* know the question – one does not understand its solution. Rather it is a necessary condition by definition. Because historians want to know the reason, or some of the reasons, for agents deciding to do *x*, they cannot answer their questions without knowing the ‘problem’ which it was supposed *x* would rectify.

Bevir thinks that if an author is writing with another particular author in mind – against him, in support of him, or whatever – then he will usually say so explicitly, and there is therefore no need for Skinner’s separate studies aimed at yielding “prior theories”.³ Paying renewed attention to Collingwood reminds us that there are always terms of an author’s complex ‘problem’ that authors simply assume their readers will share. Indeed it might not even have occurred to them that it is possible to live in this

¹ Skinner *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 2-4

² *NL*, 2.55

³ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 291

world without assuming the very things they therefore quite reasonably leave unsaid. Collingwood writes:

writers (at any rate good writers) always write for their contemporaries, and in particular for those who are 'likely to be interested', which means those who are already asking the question to which an answer is being offered; and consequently a writer very seldom explains what the question is that he is trying to answer.¹

vi

Context as evidence

Let us grant that the 'context' of a text, in the basic question-and-answer sense I have just outlined, might be fully comprehensible from studying only the text itself; and let us grant that there really are such texts: they were intended by the author to be fully understandable on their own terms, and more or less are. Do historians, then, ever need to study anything but the text itself, or should they, as Savile and Olsen insisted in their ripostes, treat all texts as the works of authors who ought to have written everything into them that would be required for their correct interpretation?

This question can be very easily solved – or actually, I think, *dissolved* – by remembering a second facet of Collingwood's logic of question and answer. Good historical method, like all other good scientific method, begins always with a question, and in order to answer their questions historians must use evidence. "Anything is evidence which can be used as evidence", Collingwood writes in *The Principles of History*, "and no one can tell what is going to serve him as evidence for answering a certain question until he has formulated the question".²

What the 'Skinnerite' historian wants to know is what his authors thought they were doing when they wrote their texts. That is the question he brings to his study. In order to construct conclusions to a question like this, the historian has to use evidence. This is what Collingwood means as well, when he writes in his *Autobiography* that "the

¹ *A*, p. 39

² *PH*, p. 38

question ‘To what question did So-and-so intend this proposition for an answer?’ is an historical question, and therefore cannot be settled except by historical methods”.¹

The text itself is obviously part of that evidence, and usually the first port of call. But to prejudge it as the *only* evidence relevant to constructing an answer, without finding out what other evidence there might be among what Skinner calls a “range of extratextual aids”² that could help to refine the historian’s conclusion, could only be considered careless. Yet this is what it actually means to disregard ‘context’ in this slightly different sense of ‘what is going on around the text’ or ‘outside’ the text. It is to prejudge evidence yet unseen. Skinner concedes that there are some texts that are ‘autonomous’, and might contain everything that the historian needs to understand the author’s intentions. But this is only to say that evidence useful to answering that question outside of what is offered wholly within the text is yet to be found. He points out, obviously rightly, that nothing is to be gained from assuming this that is not already covered by a ‘contextual’ approach which makes sure that such an assumption *is* correct. This is because the study of ‘context’ that Skinner is appealing to, as the historian encounters it, is not the study of a fundamentally different kind of evidence – it is just looking for more evidence to help him answer his question. The mistake Skinner’s targets are making is mapping onto the text/extra-text distinction the obsolete historian’s distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources. As Collingwood rightly points out in *The Principles of History*, the court of truth in history is other historians, who compare one’s constructions with all available evidence,³ and no longer make such a distinction. It is, then, quite clear what is lost by those historians who disregard extra-textual evidence, or consider it ‘secondary’, but not at all clear what they gain, other than the increased risk that other historians can easily find evidence to falsify their conclusions.

When Skinner says that it is a necessary condition of answering a question of intention that one first ‘study’ the conventions of a time, he is not saying that historians, to do their work properly, begin with a complete and quite separate study of those conventions in order to produce a body of knowledge which can then be taken to the reading table, as one might prepare a body of notes before an important negotiation. When he advises a study of the prevailing conventions, he is calling, in Bevir’s view, for

¹ *A*, p. 39

² Skinner, ‘Hermeneutics and the Role of History’, p. 228

³ In *The Idea of History* Collingwood writes: “the historian’s picture stands in a peculiar relation to something called evidence. The only way in which the historian or any one else can judge, even tentatively, of its truth is by considering this relation; and, in practice, what we mean by asking whether an historical statement is true is whether it can be justified by an appeal to the evidence: for a truth unable to be so justified is to the historian a thing of no interest.” *IH*, p. 246

the formulation of a “prior theory that covers the conventions in terms of which the author expressed his illocutionary intentions in writing that text”.¹ This “prior theory” is, then, supposed to be something like an historian’s substitute for the ‘socio-cultural background’ he cannot otherwise share with the subjects of his study.

But this is not what Skinner is endorsing. The ‘study of context’ is not a substitute socio-cultural background for the historian’s reading. It is rather – and this is all Skinner means – that the historian’s investigation of context leads *from* his question about what an utterance means to some idea about what the author’s question or problem was. This is because his first question about an utterance, necessary to understanding in the sense in which he pursues it, is ‘What is this an answer to?’ or, ‘What was this supposed to solve?’ A study aimed at elucidating the question in sufficient detail *is* a study of context, but it cannot take place before the historian has even formulated his starting, or ‘primary’, question. Skinner’s only mistake is inaccurately calling the study of context a “separate form of study”. It is not separate at all: it serves the original historical question. Indeed Skinner acknowledges this too in volume one of his *Foundations*: “When we attempt in this way to locate a text within its appropriate context”, he says, “we are not merely providing historical ‘background’ for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself”.²

vii

The ‘rapprochement’ between history and philosophy

If, as Collingwood and Skinner say they do, the theories and pronouncements of the classic authors in the history of political thought provide answers to questions that are not ours, that are not eternal or perennial, but that are in fact limited to the problems of their own time; and if the purpose of the history of ideas is to illuminate those answers in light of those historical contexts, then can it still be legitimate to ask – as Collingwood insists historians *must* ask – not only, ‘What was our author’s answer?’ but also, ‘Was he right?’? “History did not mean knowing what events followed what”, he writes in his *Autobiography*, “it meant getting inside other people’s heads, looking at their situation through their eyes, and thinking for yourself whether the way in which they

¹ Bevir, ‘The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism’, p. 289

² Skinner, *The Renaissance*, p. xiv

tackled it was the right way”.¹ “What is required, if I am to know Plato’s philosophy”, he says in *The Idea of History*, “is both to re-think it in my own mind and also to think other things in the light of which I can judge it”.² Withholding these value judgements in history is not only unnecessary, he says, it is “crippling”.³ And he adds, by way of rhetorical force (again in *An Autobiography*), that “everybody who has learnt to think historically knows it already; and no amount of argument could teach it to a person who had not learnt to think historically”.⁴

Today Skinner preaches the exact opposite of this, and seems to have invited the criticism that he reduces the discipline to a “conducted tour of a graveyard”.⁵ Skinner has, I think, attacked a basic principle of what Collingwood considered his life’s work, a “*rapprochement* between philosophy and history”, and he has – if Collingwood’s argument is right – fallen for one of the errors as Collingwood’s ‘realist’ contemporaries in the 1920s and 1930s: he has made the past “dead”, and studying past philosophy “worthless”.⁶

The result of Skinner’s claim and others like it has been to split the discipline of the history of ideas into two distinct ‘approaches’ to the same material. There is a kind of division of labour between historians on the one side, and philosophers on the other. The historians ask, ‘What did our author actually think he was saying or doing?’, and their suggested answers are subjected to the normal rules of historical research. On the other side there is the ‘philosophical’ approach, which is used in a “non-historical” way⁷ for two purposes: First, to use a past author’s ideas selectively, often as a proxy or supporting authority, for ‘throwing light’ on a contemporary problem that we might openly acknowledge was not a problem he faced, but that he can nevertheless be made useful for solving. And secondly, they put historical context aside for the purpose of helping to teach the great texts to undergraduates who are encountering them for the first time, and who can only be made to engage by encouraging them to ‘argue’ with the

¹ *A*, p. 58. See also *IH*, pp. 215-16

² *IH*, p. 301

³ *IH*, p. 132

⁴ *A*, p. 70

⁵ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 125

⁶ *EPM*, p. 212

⁷ Kenneth Minogue, ‘Method in intellectual history: Quentin Skinner’s *Foundations*’, in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 176-193. See 178.

old ideas of dead authors. For whichever of these two purposes it is employed, this ‘philosophical’ approach does not proclaim itself to be historically sensitive.¹

Collingwood’s death predated by almost thirty years the bipartite split in the history of ideas I have just described, yet his attempt to bring about a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history presupposes something just like it. To Collingwood a *rapprochement* between philosophy and history was of no small importance. He describes it as his “life’s work”²; it certainly goes back at least as far as 1926³; and it may even have constituted a reason for writing *The New Leviathan*.⁴ This is partly because that term, “*rapprochement* between philosophy and history”, covers a lot of what Collingwood thinks are interrelated points and inquiries. It means recognizing that philosophical questions change through time and their answers change with them, which means that philosophers, to be able to understand properly the texts they are studying, have to become better historians. It also means, to Collingwood, the need for historians to become better philosophers, so that they may address the philosophical assumptions behind their own practice. It also means explaining why history affords self-knowledge of the mind⁵; and it therefore means showing philosophically why the study of the history of

¹ See also Hampsher-Monk, ‘Politics, political theory and its history’, in D. Castiglione & I. W. Hampsher-Monk (eds), *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, pp. 38-39

² *A*, p. 77

³ See the closing section of L26, section 77, which concludes with the following startling passage: “And therefore history is the immediate and direct source of all philosophical problems. Destroy history, and you destroy the nourishment on which philosophy feeds; foster and develop a sound historical consciousness, and you have under your hand all, except its own methods, that philosophy needs. All philosophy is the philosophy of history.” L26, *IH*, pp. 359-425. This passage p. 425

⁴ See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, p. 37. See especially Boucher’s insightful discussion of the *rapprochement* as a whole, or the “resolution” of philosophy into history on pp. 37-51.

⁵ *A*, pp. 107-19. For some of Collingwood’s commentators the *rapprochement* refers to the eventual ‘resolution’ or ‘liquidation’ of philosophy and history into the same thing: ‘history’. In an interesting article for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Kenneth McIntyre describes how, in Collingwood’s thinking, history resolves the dualism which science posits between the universal and particular, and allows the emergence of philosophy. See Kenneth McIntyre, ‘History or Philosophy? Collingwood on Understanding Human Activity’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2005). McIntyre’s interpretation of the *rapprochement* is very interesting, partly because he argues that what actually happens is that history is liquidated by philosophy, rather than the other way round. (pp. 83-5) But it is clear that the conception of history McIntyre describes as overcoming science and making way for philosophy is *not* ‘history as a science’. Indeed, his consistent use of ‘science’ as shorthand for ‘natural science’ indicates that McIntyre thinks that what is most valuable about Collingwood’s philosophy of history is that it offers a critique of scientific thinking. (pp. 61-4) “History consists of a body of concrete facts from which science abstracts its objects”, McIntyre says; and later, “historical experience overcomes the dualism which science posits between the universal and the particular by comprehending the distinct character and integral relation of both”. (See for example pp. 61-93, particularly p. 62) The conceptions of history McIntyre is talking about are what I have called (by following Dussen) the ‘first’, where the object of history is “fact as such”; and the ‘second’, the conception of history as becoming. It is history as becoming that unites the particular facts of the first conception, by relating them to the universal becoming. There is nothing wrong with McIntyre’s focus. As I’ve said, the forms of history which he is privileging are not those that became obsolete in Collingwood’s later thought: they both survive in it. But the form of history in which we are most interested here, history as a science, is not discussed by McIntyre. The *rapprochement* between philosophy and history *as a science* remains, then, in need of some illustration.

thought (which for Collingwood is what *all* history is¹) is essential for the maintenance of progress and civilization.²

The ‘doctrine’ of Collingwood’s *rapprochement* between philosophy and history to which I would like to pay particular and exclusive attention here concerns history as a science, and it is the contention that historians must ask not only ‘what he thought’ (or did), but also ‘Was he right?’ As I’ve said, the point is contemporarily important because it is also the one that seems directly threatened by a fundamental thesis that the ‘contextualists’ nailed to the church door at the dawning of their Reformation. For simplicity I will refer to this doctrine as ‘the’ *rapprochement*, though I realise that the *rapprochement* includes much else besides that is connected. What is threatened is the claim that the historian should not, or *cannot*, ask what So-and-so’s theory was without asking whether it was true. The ‘contextualist’ thesis conversely is that the historical question, ‘What was So-and-so’s theory?’ can, and perhaps should, be kept separate from the philosophical question, ‘Was it true?’ Indeed, according to Skinner, the second question requires a kind of deliberate historical *naivety*,³ has nothing to do with historical understanding, and is not part of the historian’s task.⁴

This non-agreement begins in fact with the fundamental agreement that we’ve already seen: that there are no eternal (or ‘perennial’) questions in philosophy, and historians must reconstruct their authors’ questions, or problems, in order to understand as they did the solutions they offered. The failure to realise this is, Collingwood says, characteristic of his ‘realist’ contemporaries.⁵ But Collingwood’s attack on ‘realism’ goes further. Because ‘realists’ think philosophers deal with eternal questions,

the question, ‘what was Aristotle’s theory of duty?’ would be an ‘historical’ question. And it would be wholly separate from the philosophical question, ‘was it true?’ Thus the ‘history’ of philosophy [for ‘realists’] was an inquiry which had nothing to do with the question whether Plato’s theory of Ideas (for example) was true or false, but only with the question what it was.⁶

¹ *A*, pp. 109-10

² See *IH*, pp. 334, and *A*, pp. 90-92, 115

³ Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding’, p. 50

⁴ Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning & Context*, p. 257. Also in *Regarding Method*, p. 53

⁵ The term ‘realist’ is used by Collingwood (always with single quotation marks) to indicate the self-identification of John Cook Wilson, H. A. Pritchard, H. W. B. Joseph, and Collingwood’s own tutor E. F. Carritt. See *A*, pp. 18-22. He also refers to “the parallel and more or less allied school at Cambridge” of G. E. Moore. See *A*, p. 22

⁶ *A*, 59

This for Collingwood is tantamount to an emasculation of the history of philosophy.¹ What he proposes instead is that the historical question and the philosophical question are *not* in fact separate, and that they can and should be brought together under the term “historical questions”.² This means that historians can and should describe past theories *and* say and explain why they were wrong or right. Examples of this *rapprochement* principle are easy to come by in Collingwood’s own treatment of past philosophy. *The Idea of History* provides not only descriptions, but also critical assessments of each of the thinkers discussed. *The New Leviathan* contains more colourful examples, such as “Plato is the man who planted on the European world the crazy idea that education ought to be professionalized”.³ In many cases, this included, Collingwood’s wording strikes the reader as a deliberate affront to the orthodox conceit of the historian’s impartiality.

The question of whether historians should or should not ask of their authors ‘Was he right?’ is obviously an important one to settle, because here we have one of today’s leading historians of ideas apparently seeking to proscribe a practice without which Collingwood thinks history would be “worthless”.⁴

In recent years Skinner has reformulated some of his positions and is said to have taken a genealogical turn which, far from distancing him further from the old archaeologist Collingwood, is thought by some to have brought these two sides back together.⁵ But firstly this might not make any difference: the fact that the pieces are being stuck back together is not proof that the vase was never smashed. My question is whether Skinner *has* destroyed Collingwood’s *rapprochement*. The question of whether he is still grinding the pieces under his heel or attempting to scoop them up and repair the damage is a different question. But secondly, this apparently Nietzsche-inspired adjustment of Skinner’s earlier position still seems to be something different from the *rapprochement* as Collingwood describes it. There might now be a desire to take up a ‘critical’ stance towards what we have inherited from earlier thinkers, but there is still no commitment to asking, by historical necessity, ‘Was it true?’

¹ *A*, p. 72-6

² *A*, p. 72

³ *NL*, 37.4. See also Collingwood’s dismissal of Dilthey (*IH*, p. 173); his treatment of Hume (*IH*, p. 76); and his declaration that Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is “the world’s greatest store of political wisdom” (*NL*, p. lx).

⁴ *EM*, p. 212

⁵ See Melissa Lane, ‘Doing Our Own Thinking for Ourselves’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 73, no. 1 (2012), pp. 71-72. See also Lamb, ‘Recent Developments’, pp. 246-65, particularly 256-8.

Skinner's alleged attack

There were apparent warnings against the 'truth question' right from the start of Skinner's career. In 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', he points to two "vital implications" of what he discusses: firstly that "the classic texts cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own"; and secondly that "there is in consequence simply no hope of seeking the point of studying the history of ideas in the attempt to learn directly from the classic authors by focusing on their attempted answers to supposedly timeless questions".¹ We cannot hope to learn directly from Plato's answers, Skinner writes:

For if we are to learn from Plato, it is not enough that the discussion should seem, at a very abstract level, to pose a question relevant to us... to our own culture and period. As soon as we begin to study Plato's arguments, however, the sense in which the issue of participation is the same for himself and ourselves dissolves into absurdity... All I wish to insist is that whenever it is claimed that the point of the historical study of such questions is that we may learn directly from the *answers*, it will be found that what counts as an answer will usually look, in a different culture or period, so different in itself that it can hardly be in the least useful even to go on thinking of the relevant question as being "the same" in the required sense after all. More crudely: we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.²

This certainly looks like an attack on the historian who wants to ask 'and was Plato right?', so it looks like an attack on Collingwood's *rapprochement*. But is it? Charles Taylor was still unsure in 1988, so he used his chapter in James Tully's edited collection of essays, *Meaning and Context*, to ask the question directly: "What", he asks Skinner, "is the truth value of the theories the texts expound?"³

Other critics are more certain that Skinner is attacking the legitimacy of asking the truth question, but for what I think turn out to be two false reasons. Firstly, they

¹ Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', p. 50

² Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', p. 51-2

³ Charles Taylor, 'The hermeneutics of conflict', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, p. 219. Taylor admits that he is "uncertain whether Skinner wants to bracket the question of truth, and unclear, if he does, on what basis". (Taylor, p. 220) He says something similar on p. 223: "Is this neo-Clausewitzian thesis Skinner's? I'm not sure it is"; and on p. 226: "But does Skinner really want to go this route? I am still uncertain."

think it follows from dismissing perennial problems; and secondly (and relatedly) they think he reduces all philosophy to rhetoric. The critics, conversely, want to defend the legitimacy of using past philosophy in the contexts of new arguments, and argue that the pretence of Skinner's contextual definition of 'meaning' would prevent them from doing so. This, though, is a false protest, and we should see it off first to avoid confusion over what is at stake.

When Skinner says 'meaning' he presupposes what is sought by an historian, and not the use to which certain ideas can be put. Skinner's critics sometimes object to being apparently told by Skinner that they should not use historical texts in the context of contemporary debates. They think Skinner is attempting to silence the present (and future) use of past ideas in *new* contexts, and that he is doing so by asserting the hegemony of original authorial intention. This is why they have apparently "repeatedly complained" that what he says "reduces the study of the history of thought to nothing more edifying than a conducted tour of a graveyard".¹ They think that Skinner's Collingwoodian warning – that imposing false perennial questions means historical misunderstanding – amounts to a warning against philosophical misuse.²

But in fact Skinner is not telling them anything of the kind, because there is a difference between understanding and use which is crushed by competing definitions of 'meaning'. If I use Hegel's observation that "the owl of Minerva begins her flight only at the fall of dusk" to explain to the reader of a fashion magazine why it is that the moment at which the latest style craze is successfully formulated in glossy print is also the moment at which it becomes advisable no longer to dress in that way, my historical transgression is not the elaborate and pretentious use of Hegel, but the further claim that 'Hegel was talking about clothes in this passage'. This is where use begins to masquerade as historical understanding.

'Contextualism' is concerned with the historical understanding, and not with the *use* of past ideas. (This is why Kenneth Minogue's attempt to defend against Skinner the unhistorical use of authors for contemporary philosophical ends is not really a defence that needs to be mounted.³) In the example case of use I have suggested, an author

¹ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 125

² This is at least according to Lamb, who describes Skinner's "recent tendency to utilise past political thought in contemporary philosophical debates, something that flies in the face of his earliest methodological arguments". See Lamb, 'Recent Developments', p. 249. Lamb provides his explanation in footnote 11 (p. 249), where he makes explicit what I think is his mistake, and that of others: "Skinner's early methodological writing flatly denied that past thought could be used in this way because of the non-existence of 'perennial problems' in philosophy."

³ See Minogue, p. 179

knows that the ‘owl of Minerva’ idea is not really Hegel’s when it is shoe-horned into a question of fashion.

Some of Skinner’s critics, such as John Keane, commonly defend use by doing exactly the opposite of what they should do: they bundle understanding and use together, and do so by appealing to the ambiguity of the term ‘meaning’, and to the validity or legitimacy of providing different ‘readings’.¹ But the distinction between understanding and use is important to maintain during these debates, because a discussion about the rights and wrongs of one is not simultaneously a discussion about the rights and wrongs of the other. One reason they might appear to be the same is that contributors to these debates pursue arguments by conceptual analysis over the ‘real’ definitions of these ambiguous terms, especially of ‘meaning’ – which is a project that unfortunately takes us even further away from the real question. This diversion is apparent throughout Mark Bevir’s *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, though he is perfectly open about it.²

Back, then, to Skinner’s attack on asking the ‘truth question’ about past authors’ claims. The first criticism – that Skinner attacks the possibility of philosophical thinking *because* he dismisses the existence of perennial problems – operates by characterizing philosophical thinking as thinking about a certain kind of object: the ‘abstract’, the ‘trans-historical’, the ‘eternal’, and so on. Kenneth Minogue, for instance, argues that ideas are “abstract and universal, and it is in virtue of this character that they allow communication to bridge such gulfs as person to person, epoch to epoch and culture to culture”.³ Bevir argues, in one of his early articles against Skinner, that it is only because there “undoubtedly” are various senses in which perennial problems do exist that we “legitimately can approach classic works... as works that express beliefs relating to problems we too can ponder”; only because of perennial problems, Bevir continues, that “we may, if we wish, discuss the relevance of their views... for us today”; and only because of perennial problems that past texts can “confront” us and offer us “arguments, beliefs, and theories which remain relevant to us”.⁴ Similarly Robert Lamb has recently objected that Skinner’s deletion of the “abstract” level, and his insistence on the “localism” of any argument, reduces its “trans-historical import”.⁵ According to Lamb, if

¹ See Keane, pp. 204-17. See especially pp. 205-6

² Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. See most of Bevir’s preface, especially pp. 8-10, 16, and also pp. 31-7

³ Minogue, p. 186

⁴ Bevir, ‘Are There Perennial Problems in Political Theory?’, *Political Studies* vol. 42 (1994), pp. 662-75. See p. 673. Emphasis added.

⁵ See Lamb’s ‘Critique’, pp. 58-9. Lamb also distinguishes between “eternal” problems, which he thinks Skinner is right to follow Collingwood in dismissing, and “perennial” problems in the sense of “enduring,”

an author thinks of himself as dealing with a question in an ‘always and everywhere’ way, then he has given his reader permission to ask the truth question about his work.¹

It is true that Skinner rejects perennial problems and says that the only histories that can be written of ideas are histories of their use in arguments.² But it is not true that we need to invoke a trans-historical, abstract level for ideas to exist in, if all we want to do is to maintain the possibility of understanding philosophical arguments across time – and it does not become necessary even when we want to evaluate them. There is nothing more inherently accessible about ideas that (in Collingwood’s amusing phrase) live “in Plato’s Republic” than there is about those that live “in the sewage of Romulus”.³ Skinner’s critics want to preserve the idea of perennial problems for fear of losing either or both of these possibilities. But Collingwood’s *rapprochement* does not require a plane of ideas and eternal problems abstracted from the earthly mêlée either. Skinner could, if he wished, point to Collingwood’s argument, in his *Essay on Philosophical Method*, that philosophy is not recognized by the abstracts and universals in which it deals, but by marks that “characterize it as an activity or process”⁴ – an argument which is perfectly compatible with Skinner’s chief points.

For philosophical arguments to be appreciated by the historian, all that is required is that, using evidence, he come to know enough about the question the author thought he was answering that he might be able to follow whatever reasoning he is looking for.

But not only is Skinner not interested in philosophy in the erroneous sense of universal, abstract theories: he is not really interested in philosophical thinking at all. This is not meant derogatorily, he says it himself.⁵ Skinner studies instead political rhetorical activity which, as his work demonstrates, has every bit as rich a past as philosophical activity, and seems to hold the best cards in the suits of bloodless coercion and carefully-phrased violence. But because of this, some of Skinner’s critics take him to be claiming that all philosophical communication is *really* rhetoric, or (especially) that all political

which he thinks Skinner is wrong to dismiss. See Lamb, ‘Critique’, pp. 59-63. In fact Skinner does not deny that many of our disputes are “long-standing”. See Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, p. 283

¹ See Lamb, ‘Critique’, p. 58. This point of Lamb’s, I think, doesn’t follow. The Skinnerite historian might be able simultaneously to understand that the author saw himself as doing this, *and* see why the author was mistaken – to see why, that is, the terms of his problem were actually more historically specific than the author realised. Meanwhile, if we *can* ask the truth question, there is no reason to limit ourselves to those authors who intended their arguments to be abstract enough to reach beyond immediate contextual horizons.

² Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 283

³ See *NL*, 17.7

⁴ See *EPM*, p. 3

⁵ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 182

philosophical communication is rhetorical. This is the second false account of how and why Skinner attacks Collingwood's *rapprochement*. Thus, on this reading, it is because concepts and logics are so deeply embedded in their immediate contexts in argument that the rightness or wrongness of them cannot be commented upon. This is what Lamb means when he says that, "for Skinner, as for Collingwood, there is no stable distinction to be made between history and philosophy: all philosophical questions are actually historical questions".¹ Of course, this crushing of philosophical evaluation by historical fact would be a very different thing to Collingwood's *rapprochement*. Critics like Lamb are quite right to point out that not all authors are trying to convince an audience, and that some are engaging in genuine, earnest attempts to answer philosophical problems inherited from the past – and sometimes, *diablement changé en route*,² from the distant past.

But Skinner does not contradict this. When he says that "the only histories of ideas to be written are histories of their uses in argument",³ he says nothing that undermines the integrity of earnest philosophical thinking generally. It is not, I think, Skinner's position that all philosophy is rhetorical activity characterized predominantly by the desire to convince an audience. It is simply that changes in political rhetoric are the subjects of his historical work.⁴ 'Arguments' are also philosophically honest attempts to solve problems; one's 'argument' says 'I think this is the right answer, and here's why'. 'Argument' is not a term reserved exclusively for eristic public performances.⁵

Perhaps, then, historians of philosophy have nothing to worry about from Skinner, and vice versa? Perhaps both can ask the 'success question' about their agents' doings in their own characteristic ways. Collingwood, as we'll see below, does not permit this. But before seeing why let's pursue the reasoning behind this preliminary *apartheid* between historians living "in Plato's Republic" and those, like Skinner, living "in the sewage of Romulus".

Historians of rhetoric are interested only in past rhetorical actions – shifts in meaning, rhetorical manoeuvres, conceptual coups, etc. They can ask whether a speaker or writer succeeded in achieving his intentions, or whether he failed, or whether he achieved something in between (a mixture of both, or it had some unseen consequence, or what have you). They can comment, it seems, on the success or failure of a rhetorical act by pointing to evidence. They might even add that 'this was a clever solution', or 'it

¹ Lamb, 'Critique', p. 59

² *A*, p. 61

³ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 86

⁴ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 182

⁵ *NL*, 24.57-58, 26.21-22

failed because it was too obvious to everyone that the reasoning did not follow'. But it seems that the question of whether or not the agent 'was right' to do or say something could only be commented on by reference to his relative intended outcome. Taylor has captured the reasoning more concisely than I have: "The context of struggle", he says, "can be kept separate from the context of truth".¹ The 'truth question', then, seems not to arise with regard to rhetorical acts, because the 'success' of their actions is assessed differently.

Collingwood's focus is not on rhetorical practice, but on philosophical thinking. Assessments of philosophical success seem different because, as Collingwood says, when a past solution is understood, its question is "re-opened".² The relevant features of a philosophical situation are the terms of a question, and by resurrecting them in all their particular intricacies we face the question ourselves. The success of a past philosophical manoeuvre, a proposed answer to a question, is therefore constantly up for assessment as long as its terms are sufficiently comprehensible. And if they are not comprehensible, we haven't understood the philosophy. We can see, for example, that a solution was wrong, even though historical evidence suggests that nearly everyone at the time was convinced by it. Or we can see that an ignored or ridiculed answer to a question was in fact a good one, or even the right one. This is why, for Collingwood, historical thinking and philosophical thinking are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, if we follow Collingwood, it is not only in the case of using a past philosophical text that philosophical thinking is necessitated: it is also part and parcel of understanding it – and all perfectly within the parameters of, as Skinner says, "seeing things their way", without introducing inappropriate perennial questions, and without appealing to the trans-historical power of the abstract.

¹ Taylor, p. 220

² A, p. 75

Skinner's real attack

I have not sought to clear Skinner of the charge of attacking historians who ask the truth question about past arguments. In fact, I've already said that he is guilty of it. But I have tried to show that he does not argue that today's philosophers may not draw upon the ideas of the past, that he does not argue that all argument is rhetorical, and I've tried to show that if he does destroy Collingwood's *rapprochement* between philosophy and history it is not, as some of his critics complain, because of his rejection of perennial questions – which of course Collingwood also rejects.¹ Those who want to defend the historian's right to ask 'Was he right?' do not have to presuppose that there are perennial or eternal questions of philosophy, and they do not have to presuppose that philosophical argument takes place on some trans-historical plane. As we'll see shortly, Collingwood presupposes neither of these things.

Now, it is actually possible to argue that in fact Skinner has developed a kind of *rapprochement* of his own – and one that still has nothing to do with his apparent 'genealogical turn' of recent years. In his chapter in *Meaning and Understanding*, Charles Taylor asks Skinner about "the relationship between the explanation of beliefs and the assessment of their rationality and truth".² He then asks a different question, whether the historian can "avoid taking a stand on the truth of the ideas he is examining".³ In his reply⁴ Skinner deals with both questions at once and says that, if Taylor means that an historian "should somehow seek to discount or set aside the fact that he or she holds certain beliefs to be true and others false", then "my answer is that I am sure no historian can ever perform such an act of forgetting, and that it would in any case be most unwise to try".⁵ (Collingwood says exactly this in a lively 1936 paper called 'Can Historians be Impartial?')⁶

Skinner deals with the question of truth and rationality assessment mostly in view of the 'explanation' question. But when he turns his attention to the possibility of historians assessing the rationality of past beliefs uncoupled from the question of what

¹ See *A*, p. 60-4

² Skinner, 'A reply to my critics', p. 236. See also *Regarding Method*, pp. 27-56. The corresponding passage there is on p. 27.

³ Taylor, p. 224

⁴ Parts of 'A reply to my critics', roughly pp. 236-59, were re-written and republished fourteen years later in *Regarding Method* as ch. 3, 'Interpretation, rationality and truth' (pp. 27-56). See *Regarding Method*, p. 27 (footnote)

⁵ Skinner, 'A reply to my critics', p. 236

⁶ Published in *PH*, pp. 209-18

this means for explanation, a *rapprochement* of his own begins to emerge. This Skinner does not only say is legitimate: *he explicitly recommends it*,¹ and echoes what Collingwood says about evaluative philosophical thinking.² “We can still apply the concept of rationality in the criticism of such an agent’s beliefs”, Skinner says, “for it remains to be asked whether they held their belief in the light of, rather than in the face of, the criteria locally accepted as appropriate for the formation and testing of beliefs”.³ The historian should not assume that just because something turned out to be false it means that the agent was irrational to believe that it was true, since whether or not it is rational to believe *x* depends on having “good grounds”⁴ given the available information and the rest of the “web of belief” or “thought-complex”.⁵ A belief that does not cohere with the rest of the thought-complex, or which contradicts it, is however an irrational one, and it seems for Skinner perfectly legitimate for the historian to say so. If an action is based on an irrational belief in this sense, then, as for Collingwood, although historical understanding still requires “seeing things his way”, at the same time the historian can hardly prevent himself from thinking ‘that was a bad reason to do that’, or ‘if he wanted to achieve this end he would have been better off doing *this* instead’. But this kind of historical assessment might also involve a logical evaluation, such as noting that a conclusion does not follow, or that an important question in the inquiry has been overlooked; or it might involve saying something like ‘given that our author already thought this thing and those things, it really was an oversight to maintain *this* belief’. If the historian of philosophy cannot prevent himself from thinking such things, from identifying bad reasoning, unsystematic thinking, and if he has described all the relevant features of the philosophical situation as the actor himself saw it so that the reader is likely to draw the same conclusions, then it seems unnecessarily supine to withhold those kinds of evaluation from historical writing. The historian can therefore justify narratives that combine ‘what he thought’ statements with historical statements about ‘why his reasoning was bad’.

So there is in Skinner a kind of *rapprochement* between historical understanding and philosophical thinking. Although he must “try to make the agents who accepted

¹ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 140. See also ‘A reply to my critics’, pp. 243-4

² See Skinner, *Regarding Method*, chs 3 and 7

³ Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p. 141

⁴ Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, p. 239

⁵ “Web of belief” is a now popular term thanks to Quine and Ullian, but at least in the relevant ways it is used by Skinner I think it is clear that the same idea is outlined by Collingwood as what he calls a “thought-complex”. See *A*, p. 55

them appear... to be as rational as possible”,¹ the historian is not obliged for the sake of historical understanding to think a past argument just as ‘rational’ as the author thought it.

But to assess the rationality of a piece of reasoning, or even to assess “what counts as politically true or right... in different ideologies and contexts”,² is obviously to go less far than full, proper philosophical thinking, because assessing rationality, or whether something counts as true in a qualified way, is not the same as asking whether what a philosopher concludes is *true*. Assessments of rationality are not assessments of truth, as Skinner readily acknowledges.³ In assessing rationality the historian might understand that the author ‘didn’t have the benefit of knowing *this*’, and therefore declines to condemn him for being irrational. In assessing truth however he must subject the author’s claim to the full weight of today’s knowledge. “What is required, if I am to know Plato’s philosophy”, Collingwood says in *The Idea of History*, “is both to re-think it in my own mind and also to think other things in the light of which I can judge it”.⁴ Here the fact that an author did not have the benefit of knowing some detail or other might be precisely the grounds for his having been wrong. As long as we have reason to think our evidences and considerations are better than the past author’s, or are in some sense an advance on them, the historian is in a good position to say something like, ‘This was Plato’s claim, and it was wrong because what he did not realize was...’ Again, as Collingwood indicated, the more sophisticated our appreciation of the situation as the agent saw it, the more sophisticated can be our assessment of his philosophical success.⁵

But even when he distinguishes it from the ‘rationality question’, Skinner still does not dispel the truth question as illegitimate. It is clear, however, that it is not among the tasks of historians (*as* historians):

Take for example one of the cases I have already discussed: Machiavelli’s fervently held belief that mercenary armies always jeopardize political liberty. Perhaps there is nothing to stop us from asking whether this is true. But the effect of doing so will be somewhat analogous to asking whether the king of

¹ Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, p. 246

² See James Tully’s introductory chapter to *Meaning & Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, p. 20. See also Taylor, p. 221

³ Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, p. 239

⁴ *IH*, p. 301

⁵ And this is additionally, I think, why it is not quite right to say, as Keane has, that ‘contextualism’ (necessarily) does not entail any kind of critical attitude to something like politics. Keane attacks “the new history” for its uncritical character and its rejection of evaluative thinking. See Keane, p. 212

France is bald. The best answer seems to be that the question does not really arise.

I am not of course adopting the position... that we are *precluded* from asking about the truth of such beliefs... I am merely insisting (to revert to my example) that our task as historians is to try to recover Machiavelli's point of view; and that, in order to discharge this task, what we need to employ is solely the concept of rational acceptability, not that of truth.¹

The operative words here are "our task as historians". Skinner is not limiting his discussion to historians of rhetoric, just as Collingwood is not really limiting his to historians of philosophical thinking. The *apartheid* is breached from both sides. I think this demonstrates that although Skinner's *rapprochement* prescribes the assessment of rationality and reasoning, it only *permits* the assessment of truth – and from his tone it seems to be an unenthusiastic permission. His claim is that the historian's task does not "need" – that is, *require* – asking the truth question. In fact Skinner downgrades the truth question precisely because he thinks it is allied to the error of holding 'true' and 'rational' to be identical – which is, he rightly notes, to relativize truth.² But although Skinner might *allow* the 'truth question', what he says is nevertheless an indirect attack on Collingwood's *rapprochement*. Collingwood's argument is not that the historian merely *may* ask 'was he right?', but that he *must* ask it. For Skinner conversely, the historian does *not* have to. The two are irreconcilable. Where 'P' = the historian's obligation to ask the truth question, Collingwood's claim is 'P', while Skinner's is 'not P'.

x

Collingwood's reasoning

Skinner, then, is reviving the very position Collingwood's *rapprochement* is meant to attack – which, in 'Can Historians be Impartial?', he provocatively calls "the doctrine of the historian as eunuch".³ Interestingly this is also what Collingwood seems to think history is in its "pure" state in *Religion and Philosophy*.⁴ The question is, what argument

¹ Skinner, 'A reply to my critics', pp. 256-7. This sentence was reprinted unchanged in *Regarding Method*, p. 53

² Skinner, 'A reply to my critics', p. 257

³ 'Can Historians be Impartial?', *PH*, p. 211

⁴ *Religion and Philosophy* is Collingwood's first book and, as it was written before the 1925/6 period from which, as Dussen identified, Collingwood developed his investigation of history as a science, it ought not

does Collingwood offer for thinking this “doctrine of historian as eunuch”, which is also Skinner’s revived position, to be wrong?

In *An Autobiography* Collingwood offers two first-hand accounts of how the *rapprochement* must arise: one, familiar to anyone who has done it, of how teaching undergraduates to look for authors’ questions gives way to philosophical problem-solving;¹ and another, again familiar to anyone who has taken part in one, about understanding the arguments of others in academic seminars.² “To think in that way about philosophies not your own”, Collingwood adds, “as I have hinted, is to think about them historically”.³

An Autobiography also contains some theoretical argument to support the point, but it is not, I think, convincingly put. “The reader can easily see... for himself”, Collingwood says, how this distinction between historical thinking and philosophical thinking “broke down in the light of the question ‘how is the so-called philosophical issue to be settled?’” But in fact it is not so easy, especially when Collingwood’s example suggests that if the historical question can be answered, then the answer to the philosophical question *must* be ‘yes’. I’ll refer to this as the ‘Leibniz passage’ for reasons that will soon become clear:

Perhaps we label [Leibniz’s] problem *p*14. Then comes the question ‘Does Leibniz here deal with *p*14 rightly or wrongly?’ The answer to this is not quite so simple as the ‘realists’ think. If Leibniz when he wrote this passage was so confused in his mind as to make a complete mess of the job of solving his problem, he was bound at the same time to mix up his own tracks so completely that no reader could see quite clearly what his problem had been. For one and the same passage states his solution and serves as evidence of what the problem was. The fact that

to be surprising that it contains some passages in which Collingwood attacks history in the guise of “historical positivism” for being the very thing that he would later insist it should not be. See *RP*, pp. 38-9, 42-3

¹ *A*, p. 75

² “In another chapter I have explained that, according to my own ‘logic of question and answer’, a philosopher’s doctrines are his answers to certain questions he has asked himself, and no one who does not understand what the questions are can hope to understand the doctrines. The same logic committed me to the view that anyone can understand any philosopher’s doctrines if he can grasp the questions which they are intended to answer. Those questions need not be his own; they may belong to a thought-complex very different from any that is spontaneously going on in his own mind; but this ought not to prevent him from understanding them and judging whether the persons interested in them are answering them rightly or wrongly.” *A*, p. 55

³ *A*, p. 58

we can identify his problem is proof that he has solved it; for we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution.¹

This seems to imply that if the ‘realist’ distinction between the ‘what did he say?’ and the ‘was he right?’ really collapses, it is only because the answer to the second is fixed as ‘yes’ when the first can be answered at all. There quickly follows another example where the same thing seems to be argued, this time though the example is not ‘theoretical’ but ‘practical’:

Naval historians think it worth while to argue about Nelson’s tactical plan at Trafalgar because he won the battle. It is not worth while arguing about Villeneuve’s plan. He did not succeed in carrying it out, and therefore no one will ever know what it was. We can only guess. And guessing is not history.²

Collingwood appears to be dispensing with the possibility of a passage of theory or action in which the question or problem is obvious to the reader/historian, despite the agent’s failure to solve it properly.³ Furthermore, Collingwood then suggests that believing oneself to have identified a failed solution to a question is to attribute to an author an eternal question “which all philosophers ask themselves sooner or later”. “As a matter of fact”, he then says, an historian who did this “is not basing his assertion on evidence; he is only trotting out some philosophical question of which the passage vaguely reminds him. For me, then, there were not two separate sets of questions to be asked, one historical and one philosophical, about a given passage in a given philosophical author. There was one set only, historical.”⁴

If this is true, then the present study has been largely a waste of time, because my evidence that Collingwood is answering the questions I believe him to be answering is evidence enough that those solutions are right. If I argued that he was wrong, I would probably be guilty of trotting out some philosophical question of which his work vaguely reminds me. So it seems, as I’ve said, that the distinction between the two types of question only fails because the answer to the ‘philosophical’ question is fixed as ‘yes’ where the first can be answered at all. This is the crack that Gadamer opens up for his

¹ *A*, pp. 69-70

² *A*, p. 70

³ Gadamer also notices this, which is – I think – probably what brings it to Skinner’s attention later. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 364

⁴ *A*, pp. 71-2

attack on Collingwood's logic of question and answer as a whole. It only works, Gadamer says, if one subscribes to an Hegelian assumption about the world-historical importance of victors.¹ And it is this little critique of Gadamer's, I think, which is picked up later by Quentin Skinner. Here is how Skinner summarises it:

Collingwood's own misunderstanding derived, I think, from the fact that he chose to link his attack on 'perennial questions' with an excessively strong thesis to the effect that we cannot even ask whether a given philosopher 'solved the problem he set himself', since we can only see what the problem was for him if he did solve it. Thus 'the fact that we can identify his problem is proof that he has solved it; for we can only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution'.²

Skinner is referring to Collingwood's conclusion to the Leibniz example, which is also the page featuring the Villeneuve example. Dussen has noticed this difficulty, and includes it as one of the "puzzling aspects" of Collingwood's logic of question and answer. (Unfortunately he declines the opportunity to discuss it.³) Unlike Dussen, I will go into this difficulty, because it is, for the reason we've just seen, rather important, and because I think it's actually rather easily solved.

Collingwood has misstated his usual position here by seeming to conflate 'solution' with 'successful solution' – that is 'answer' with 'right answer'. But an ostensible solution to a problem can be evidence of the problem without the solution being 'successful'. If by 'solving' a problem in this passage Collingwood had meant merely 'offering a solution to it' then the question of rightness or wrongness is still available. Accordingly the fact that we 'understand' the solution (as a solution) is proof that the problem has been 'solved', but not proof that it has been solved well or properly. We might know that a speaker attempted to convince his audience along a certain line of argument despite the fact that we also know that (a) the audience booed him, and that (b) the booing was due to an obvious non-sequitur in his argument. Nevertheless we can work out the question he was talking about – political, theological or whatever – by using

¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 364-5

² Skinner, 'A reply to my critics', p. 65. Here Skinner cites Collingwood's *Autobiography*. See *A*, p. 70

³ Dussen says "I will not go into these difficulties, however, but confine myself to the relevance of Collingwood's "logic of question and answer" for historical methodology." (*History as a Science*, pp. 295-6) Actually though, although this is a "puzzling aspect", it is also relevant to a treatment of Collingwood's methodology of history, because allowing it to stand unexplained and undefended has, as we've just seen, allowed Collingwood to be dismissed by other authors dealing with similar questions, on the basis of something he didn't really mean.

as evidence what he said in answer to it, and we can work out from the circumstances what his intentions were: *i.e.* to convince his audience that this *was* the answer. But Collingwood does not secretly mean this. When he says ‘solved’ he does not really mean ‘offered a solution’. He has just confused a good argument he makes elsewhere with a bad one he makes only here.

A passage in the chapter ‘Roman Britain’, also in the *Autobiography*, states the correct version of the point, and here Collingwood quite clearly assumes that the historian (and in this passage he is talking specifically about the archaeologist) is still able to judge whether or not the solution was a good one:

Whenever you find any object you must ask, ‘What was it for?’ and, arising out of that question, ‘Was it good or bad for it? *i.e.* was the purpose embodied in it successfully embodied in it, or unsuccessfully?’¹

The Leibniz passage is, then, a misstatement. So what is the real argument for why the ‘realist’ distinction between the ‘historical’ question and the ‘philosophical’ question is to be abolished? I think Collingwood has two arguments in support of the *rapprochement*: a weak one, which we’ve begun to see, and a much better one which we’ll come to next. Collingwood’s claim in the first is that the historian cannot describe a belief without evoking it,² and his argument is this: In order to understand a text we must understand the problem that it is meant to solve, and once we have grasped the proposed solution we catch ourselves already asking ‘Is it right?’³ The second question, as he says here, ‘arises’ out of the first. I think this is what he means. It would anyway put the *Autobiography* argument in line with what he says in *The Idea of History* and *An Essay on Metaphysics*.⁴ Historical thinking is, he says, ‘critical’, and sometimes ‘criteriological’.⁵ This does not mean ‘critical’ only in the sense of distinguishing between good evidence and bad. Collingwood means to say that in re-enacting past thought the historian “forms his own judgement of its value [and] corrects whatever errors he can discern in it”. And he continues:

¹ *A*, p. 128

² This wording taken from Hampsher-Monk, p. 111

³ Dray emphasises this feature of Collingwood’s account of historical thinking several times in *History as Re-enactment*. He doesn’t deal with the passage in *An Autobiography* which seems to contradict it. See *A*, p. 27

⁴ *EM*, p. 108

⁵ *EM*, p. 108

This criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. Nothing could be a completer error concerning the history of thought than to suppose that the historian as such merely ascertains ‘what so-and-so thought’, leaving it to some one else to decide ‘whether it was true’. All thinking is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, therefore, criticizes them in re-enacting them.¹

In *An Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood writes that the science of mind “must describe the self-judging function which is part and parcel of all thinking and try to discover the criteria upon which its judgements are based”.² In practice I think this means the ‘scientist’ – and here we can read ‘historian’ – must answer the question ‘Why did he think he was right?’ in the sense of the question ‘What reasons did he have for thinking he was right?’ This is why, Collingwood says, these sciences of mind were “traditionally called normative sciences” – from the Latin *norma*: “criterion or standard of judgement”.³

What had yet to be decided is whether historical thinking demands philosophical thinking because (a) historical questions cannot be answered without philosophical thinking being awoken, or (b) historical questions are, when properly historical, themselves philosophically evaluative. By ‘evaluative’ here I mean philosophical truth questions, not questions about whether it is historically true that the author thought something. An example of (a) might be ‘What is Kant’s theory of beauty?’, where this can only be answered by way of philosophically evaluative thinking; and an example of (b) might be ‘Does Kant adequately show what beauty is?’ Of course Collingwood does not need to come down on the side of one of these options: in fact I think he maintains both. Because he is attacking the view that historical questions and philosophical questions can be separated – that is, that the ‘what did he think?’ and the ‘was he right?’ can be separated – he can appeal to either. In itself it is, though, an important question, because, in the first place, it goes some way to answering Collingwood’s question of what history is for; and, in the second, if Collingwood’s implicit claim is that properly historical questions are philosophically evaluative, then this has some very great consequences for history indeed.

¹ *IH*, pp. 215-16

² *EM*, p. 108

³ *EM*, p. 108

So how do we settle this? Skinner says that, as historians, we do not need to ask the truth question, while Collingwood says that we “must”. This “must” can be taken in two ways. It might mean that the truth question cannot be avoided; or it might mean something like if, as an intellectual historian, you don’t ask the truth question, then you are not an historian worth the name. In the language of ‘question and answer’, the four possible positions are now as follows:

1. Historical questions are complete without evaluative terms. (This is Skinner’s position.)
2. Historical questions are answerable without evaluative thinking. (This is also Skinner’s position.)
3. Historical questions might be possible without evaluative terms, but in being answered evaluative thinking is always awoken. (This is Collingwood’s first position.)
4. Historical questions that are not evaluative are incomplete historical questions. (This is Collingwood’s second position.)

Now, 1 and 4 are mutually exclusive, because historical questions either can be complete without evaluative terms, or they cannot be. For the same reason, 2 and 4 are also mutually exclusive; 2 presupposes 1 because a question that is evaluative cannot be answered without evaluative thinking.

The position which Collingwood tries to argue explicitly is position 3. I have already said that it is his ‘weaker’ argument. The stronger argument is available by recourse to ‘question and answer’, but Collingwood does not argue it as explicitly. As promised we’ll come to it shortly.

First though there is a further complication to this story. In his *Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood argues that “all metaphysical questions are historical questions, and all metaphysical propositions are historical propositions”.¹ We might expect him to say next that this is why sciences of thought are unavoidably evaluative, or ‘normative’ in the current sense (which would accord with position 3, if not also position 4). But what he actually says, in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, is that the word ‘normative’ may prove misleading, because...

¹ *EM*, p. 49. This does not mean, of course, that all historical questions are metaphysical questions, or that all historical propositions are metaphysical propositions.

It conveys by its form the suggestion that the standard or criterion to which it refers is a criterion belonging to the practitioner of the science thus described, and used by him to judge whether the thinking which he studies has been well or ill done; as if it were for the logician to decide whether a non-logician's thoughts are true or false and his arguments valid or invalid, and for the student of ethics to pass judgement on the actions of other people as having succeeded or failed in their purpose. This suggestion is incorrect. The characteristic of thought in virtue of which a science of thought is called normative consists not in the possibility that one man's thoughts may be judged successful or unsuccessful by another, real though that possibility is; but in the necessity that in every act of thought the thinker himself should judge the success of his own act. To avoid that misleading suggestion I propose to substitute for the traditional epithet 'normative' the more accurate term 'criteriological'.¹

This is a statement that lends weight not to position 3 or 4, but actually to position 2 – that historical thinking is possible without evaluative thinking. This is Skinner's position, where although rationality can be assessed, *truth* cannot. Furthermore, combining two of the 'big claims' of Collingwood's *Essay on Metaphysics* – namely, that (1) metaphysical questions are historical questions; and that (2) it is a nonsense question to ask whether an absolute presupposition is 'true' – one concludes that there must be some historical questions, such as 'what are Hobbes's absolute presuppositions in *Leviathan*?' which cannot be philosophically evaluative without being 'nonsense'.² This lends weight to position 1.

What we have found here in one book are, at best, exceptions and, at worst, contradictions of arguments made in other books by the same author. But we have to be careful about what we think this shows. What it does not show is that Collingwood does not really believe his own *rapprochement* argument(s). Neither does it show that those arguments are wrong. It might also indicate that Collingwood isn't aware that what he says in his *Essay on Metaphysics* contradicts what he says elsewhere, or it might show that although he is aware of it, he doesn't really care.

I think Collingwood is probably deliberately ignoring the apparent contradiction between both positions 3 and 4, and his 'position 2' statement in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, because he does not really think it is a contradiction at all. The *Essay on Metaphysics* was written during Collingwood's voyage to the Dutch East Indies in late 1938, revised a little

¹ *EM*, p. 109

² See *EM*, pp. 47-8

in Java, and revised further during the return voyage in early 1939. It seems unlikely that, while writing the passage I've just quoted in 1938-9, he would not be aware that he seemed to be contradicting what he'd already said in his *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933) and again more recently in 'Reality as History' (1936). Furthermore, he cannot have changed his mind on it – at least not for good – because he would restate it that very same year in his *Autobiography*, where he gives it the title *rapprochement*. So I think Collingwood must, or at least should, have been aware that it sounds like a contradiction.

So why does he not address this? Either one of Collingwood's arguments is wrong – that is, either historical thinking is philosophically evaluative, or it isn't – or the two arguments are proposed answers to different questions and can be reconciled.

They can in fact be reconciled. The *rapprochement* appears only when history as a discipline is being discussed (or, as in the *Essay on Philosophical Method*, the history of philosophy), and not when 'historical thinking' per se, which may arise in other sorts of systematic thinking, is being discussed.¹ Metaphysical questions actually *are* historical questions, Collingwood says, even though they *cannot* ask the truth question.² But because they aren't evaluative, they are not of the normal kind of historical question that historians answer. Those kinds of historical investigators are a special sub-class called 'metaphysicians', with special dispensation, if you like. Similarly, logic is a science of thought which relies on historical thinking, but questions of logic are apparently not evaluative.³ Here we have exceptions, then, to the claim that all historical questions are 'was it true?' questions, and also to the argument that all historical thinking causes 'Was it true?' questions to 'arise'. There are actually two senses of 'historical question': there are those, such as metaphysical questions, which either are not necessarily or cannot be philosophically evaluative – which are the 'historical' questions that lie at the foundation of all the sciences of human affairs; and then there are the historical questions that *historians* deal with – the questions at the root of the kind of history discussed in *An Autobiography*, *The Idea of History*, and *The Principles of History* – and these are the historical questions that must be evaluative.⁴

¹ Although he often speaks as if history is the only science of thought, he actually doesn't think that it is. "Plenty of other people beside the psychologists have been studying thought, and studying it in an orderly and systematic way, for a long time", he writes in the *Essay on Metaphysics*, before naming "metaphysicians, logicians, and others whom I will not enumerate". *EM*, p. 104

² *EM*, pp. 52, 47-8

³ *EM*, p. 109

⁴ In order to sustain this against Collingwood's own real-life separation of the question 'What is Aristotle saying and what does he mean by it?' from "the further question 'Is it true?'"', one only has to point out that this separation is reported as occurring before the First World War, and as a lecturing technique. See *A*, p. 27

My inquiry here concerns the historical questions that historians and historians of ideas deal with, and although there is further inquiry to be made about how history underpins the other sciences of human affairs, I propose to park that inquiry here and return to our real concern, which is the history of ideas – taking with us the continuing preliminary conclusion that either (4) the kind of historical questions which pertain to this history of ideas as a discipline *must* be evaluative; or (3) the only way in which historical questions are answered is one in which philosophically evaluative thinking is awoken.

Skinner deals his blow to both positions in the same passage: “our task as historians”, he says, “is to try to recover Machiavelli’s point of view; and... in order to discharge this task, what we need to employ is solely the concept of rational acceptability, not that of truth”.¹ The words “what we need to employ is solely” confirms, I think, that Skinner’s position is both 1 and 2, rather than only 1. Whether the reader takes Skinner’s position that this is now philosophy, or Collingwood’s that it is still history, I am not content to leave him with a contradiction like this between two figures of the field who want to occupy the same space. Who *is* right?

The odds seem to be stacked in Collingwood’s favour, and for two reasons corresponding to his two possible positions. In order to find that Collingwood is right, we would only have to decide either that historical questions must be evaluative, *or* (failing that) that although historical questions themselves don’t have to be evaluative, the re-enactment of reasoning inevitably awakens some kind of evaluative thinking. The second demonstration is rather easier, I think, than the first. Intellectual historians can describe their authors as ‘attacking’, ‘defending’, ‘trying to show’, ‘using a specific kind of language’, and so on with or without following those authors’ reasoning. But every time they describe authors as ‘failing’, ‘showing’, ‘proving’, ‘disproving’ and so on, they reveal not only that they are following their authors’ thinking, but also that they are alert to the rightness² of the evidence and considerations being offered to substantiate truth claims. Whether the historian’s question demanded it explicitly or not, such an historian has ‘watching’ for truth. Of course an historian can deliberately keep that philosophical alertness and its language out of his narrative, and many historians have, do, and perhaps always will. But this does not prove that he had succeeded in avoiding philosophical

¹ Skinner, ‘A reply to my critics’, pp. 256-7. This sentence was reprinted unchanged in *Regarding Method*, p. 53.

² By ‘rightness’ I mean to refer to what Collingwood says (4, pp. 37-8), which is as distinct from ‘true’ as Skinner’s use of ‘rational’, but may also be used to refer to the ‘correct’ answer.

thinking in the process of searching for his historical answer. It might equally show only that he might have wanted to hide it from his readers.

I have said that I think what Collingwood means is that once the historian has grasped the proposed solution he catches himself already asking ‘Is it right?’ It is this that underpins the third position outlined above – that historical questions might be possible without evaluative terms, but in being answered evaluative thinking is always awoken.

If this were Collingwood’s position, he would be wrong. It seems perfectly possible at times to follow another’s reasoning without reflecting on the truth of it, particularly where the rightness of the answer is of no concern. As in those familiar one-way conversations with people explaining their intended solutions to problems on their minds, you can find yourself thinking little more than ‘well that’s his plan’. It would be simply dogmatic to reply that, because I can maintain my neutrality in this way, and take no interest in whether the plan is the right one, that it is proof that I haven’t understood my friend’s intended solution in relation to its problem. The same is often – perhaps even usually – true of other people’s conference papers. It is, then, untrue that all cases of following other people’s reasoning and solutions to questions awakens philosophically evaluative thinking. We follow it when there is something at stake for us – when we are ‘interested’. But when we are not, we follow the reasoning more passively.

In the case of pursuing an answer to an historical question, that ‘interest’ is more assured. So perhaps the first demonstration – i.e. that complete historical questions themselves must be evaluative – is easier. But actually that demonstration is even more difficult, because the questions to which so many historians’ narratives are intended as the answers are not themselves inherently evaluative questions. Historians of ideas might pursue answers to their questions, and be highly ‘interested’ in their subjects’ reasoning, without commenting on, or even caring about, whether what their subjects thought and said was true. If these sorts of questions are incomplete as historical questions, what kind of questions are they? And, if they are still valid questions in their own right, if they are answerable, and if they provide knowledge as a result, then what kind of knowledge is that if not ‘historical’?

It might be rather less difficult to demonstrate that intellectual history *sometimes* answers evaluative questions. Those questions are, though, often implicit. If an intellectual historian says that an author ‘shows’ something, he might well be implying his own agreement, which in turn means that he thinks the question, whatever it was, has

been correctly answered. But this shows not that evaluative questions are unavoidable, but merely that some do not even try to avoid them.

I think we have to conclude preliminarily that Collingwood's argument is inconclusive. His claim that the historian "must" ask 'Was he right?' in conjunction with a properly historical question cannot be a logical "must", whatever Collingwood thinks. It is not a logical necessity because it is not necessitated by any of the characteristic terms of historical questions that we have so far encountered.

However – and this is a big 'however' – it might make sense if what Collingwood has in mind is the practical service historians "must" provide for their societies, or something about what it is that motivates historical questions in the first place. The 'Was he right?' question might then be a further necessary feature of historical questions, because of where the historical question arises. This is a loose end I'll pick up in the next chapter, because it concerns what the history of ideas is *for*, but I'll hint at the answer here so as to close the *rapprochement* question for now.

The discovery that Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy is inconclusive on its own account reveals that either his argument fails, or it must presuppose something we are not yet getting. What I have decided it presupposes is *another* *rapprochement* Collingwood has in mind; namely, that between 'theory and practice' – which is of course the title of the *Autobiography's* closing chapter. Collingwood does not say that the relationship between these two aspects of his *rapprochement* is one of presupposition, and that final chapter covers diverse topics. But logically the *rapprochement* between theory and practice must be presupposed by the *rapprochement* between history and philosophy, and for this reason: The truth question is necessitated not by the *form* that historical questions take, but by the practical, social, and lived experience out of which historical questions should arise. Collingwood answers his question, in 'Can Historians be Impartial?', in the negative: historians cannot be impartial, he says.¹ His argument as he puts it, though, fails because he (again) habitually states what counts as historical knowledge, as opposed to what is "only a form of pigeon-hole ready to receive historical knowledge". In order to succeed, Collingwood ought to have pointed out that the reason historians cannot be impartial is that they should not investigate historical questions that don't matter to anyone, where there is no dispute over 'rightness' that needs to be settled. The answer to an enduringly important question of how the history

¹ See 'Can Historians be Impartial', *PH*, pp. 209-18

of political thought is to be done, then, is to be sought for in social and political philosophy itself.

Part VI

Theory and Practice: What the History of Ideas is For

- i. A survey of the site
- ii. What history is not for
- iii. Self-knowledge through the science of human affairs
- iv. Self-knowledge by rethinking and situational insight
- v. Transition from practice to theory
- vi. History and freedom
- vii. History and duty
- viii. Transition from freedom to civilization and progress
- ix. History and civilization: in theory
- x. History and civilization: in practice
- xi. Progress

“It would be a more disastrous mistake in the science of mind to forget that thought is always practical than to forget that it is sometimes theoretical.”

– *The New Leviathan*, 1. 68

i

A survey of the site

The prologue to *Speculum Mentis* opens with the declaration that “All thought exists for the sake of action”. “If thought were the mere discovery of interesting facts”, Collingwood adds, “its indulgence, in a world full of desperate evils... would be the act of a traitor”. *The New Leviathan*, twenty years later, contains a similar statement: “real thinking... always starts from practice and returns to practice; for it is based on ‘interest’ in the thing thought about; that is, on a practical concern with it”.¹

But for what kind of action, for what kind of practical concern, does scientific historical thinking exist? According to Quentin Skinner, “the past has been studied for a myriad of changing reasons, and... any attempt to summarise them will almost inevitably degenerate into just such a string of clichés”.² It is my intention to explain here the ways

¹ *NL*, 18.13

² Skinner *Regarding Method*, p. 25

in which Collingwood manages to avoid these ‘clichés’ and offer some good suggestions to one of his 1926 questions: “What are we doing it [history] *for*? in other words, how does this study fit into our general view of the aims and purposes of human life?”¹

The value of history is discussed in *An Autobiography*, *The Idea of History*, and *The New Leviathan*. In the *Autobiography* it is dealt with in more than one of the chapters in roughly the final third of the book. Although only chapter eight carries the title ‘The Need for a Philosophy of History’, chapters nine and ten – ‘The Foundations of the Future’, and ‘History as the Self-Knowledge of Mind’ respectively – obviously continue the discussion. They do so, though, in much more extramural terms. After a short interlude in chapter eleven, in which Collingwood recalls his work on Roman Britain firmly in terms of his logic of question and answer, he returns to the practical purpose of history in chapter twelve, ‘Theory and Practice’. In the *Autobiography*, then, it is in chapters nine, ten and twelve that Collingwood makes his most focused statements about the purposes of history.

In *The Idea of History* the question of the purpose of history survives as one of the four set out in the introduction.² The ensuing text is most useful, though, for Collingwood’s arguments about what history is *not* for. In what follows I’ve dealt with these arguments first.

From Collingwood’s preface to the ostensibly ‘practical’, real-world-concerning *New Leviathan*, the reader would expect the question to be broached there too. Collingwood recalls thinking out “the fundamental ideas of the present book” in 1919, including especially “the problems of history which bore on my subject”.³ But it is not especially clear from the text of *The New Leviathan* what exactly those problems were. *Prima facie*, history, or “historical consciousness”, only really features in relation to what Collingwood calls the ‘historical plain method’, which has already been discussed (III:v), and in relation to what he says about man’s consciousness of duty.⁴

Collingwood’s main arguments about the purpose of history are spread across these three texts. He does not, I think, quite succeed in the arguments he considered the most important. His priority is really the claim that history provides self-knowledge. After our brief review of Collingwood’s attacks on the false purposes of history (ii), we’ll deal with the self-knowledge arguments, of which there are three strategies (iii & iv).

¹ L26, *IH*, p. 359

² *IH*, pp. 7-10

³ *NL*, p. lxi

⁴ See *NL*, 18.5-91

Collingwood's contention is not, I think, demonstrated very satisfactorily in any of them – though this has not prevented it from becoming a celebrated claim. Similarly his attempt to demonstrate the relationship between history and freedom (vi) – one of the main arguments in *The Idea of History's* 'Epilegomena' – is incomplete. There are also problems with his equation between history and the concept of duty (vii), presented in *The New Leviathan* and elsewhere.¹

Once these arguments have been cleared I'll argue that it is only in view of the relationship between history and "practical reason" – the practical reason upon which, as explained in *The New Leviathan*, progress and civilization depend – that Collingwood ultimately provides his best answers to the question of how history fits into "our general view of the aims and purposes of human life".² It is also this relationship between theory and practice which solves the question left over at the end of the last part of this study: namely, why historians *must* also ask 'Was he right?'

ii

What history is not for

In *The Idea of History* Collingwood discusses what history is *not* for – though, again, to today's historians of ideas, little of what he says in those attacks will be new. Historians of ideas now tend to presuppose, for example, that their discipline is not for making predictions.³ History is also not for telling us how to act – the 'pragmatic theory of history' which Collingwood attacks in his 1926 lectures. And I am sure that today's historians of ideas do not think that the purpose of their discipline is that it tells us how to think.

The only reason to discuss these attacks is that they follow the pattern of Collingwood's argument strategy that I've already tried to point out. As he formulates

¹ 'Elsewhere' means his 1940 Lectures on Moral Philosophy. The most relevant part for our purposes has been published in *EPP* under the title 'Duty' (*EPP*, pp. 150-9)

² L26, *IH*, p. 359

³ See *IH*, p. 220. A further objection that Collingwood deals with in 'Human Nature and Human History' leads Collingwood into an argument that might not be shared by today's historians as people – *viz.* that historical knowledge is not the *only* way in which mind can be known – but which, in their historical practice, is anyway irrelevant to them. In other words, although they might think Collingwood wrong to claim that there is no difference between what mind is and what mind does, nevertheless they have no interest in promoting their discipline to the study of what mind is as distinct from what it does – from, that is, 'things done'. Historians are only interested in minds 'doing things', and not in the mind 'at rest', or as a 'structure'. For that reason I have chosen not to subject this argument of Collingwood's to much discussion here.

them in *The Idea of History*, his attacks on these claims tend to be circumnavigations of points that, in view of the starting question principle, can be put more succinctly. By ‘circumnavigation’ I mean that, in order to make those points, Collingwood again ends up discussing history as concerned with a characteristic subject-matter,¹ rather than as the science that answers questions of a particular character.² The value of ‘doing’ history means the value of *investigative* history.³ What Collingwood might more easily say, then, is that questions of prediction are not historical questions, because they lack one or more of the necessary characteristics: they cannot ask ‘what he meant by it’, because the *res gestae*, the things done, have not yet been done at all. Any attempt to reconcile a question of prediction with a ‘what he meant’ results in nonsense: ‘Why did the Prime Minister order the invasion of Cyprus?’ is a nonsense historical question when the ‘thing done’ is actually a thing not yet done. Explaining that properly historical questions cannot be questions of prediction is all Collingwood needs to show in order to demonstrate that prediction is not what history is ‘for’ – though it may provide material that can be used for answering questions of a different kind. ‘Is the Prime Minister going to order the invasion of Cyprus?’ is a predictive question, and answering it might well demand breaking it down into smaller questions and considerations, some of which *will* be historical.

The same circumnavigation of the main point is evident in Collingwood’s attack in his 1926 Lectures upon the ‘pragmatic theory of history’, according to which history tells us what to do. This theory, Collingwood says, is “out of date. No one preaches it now, for people generally recognise that it assumes a finality about the results of historical research which they do not possess”.⁴ What Collingwood means by “finality” is the idea that history “determines” past facts and that, on that basis, “it can tell you what to do in the present”.⁵ He has to concede, though, that history *does* in fact have pragmatic value. We don’t have to assume that all cases of influenza repeat themselves precisely to know that our knowledge of how to treat influenza is derived from past experience; and

¹ i.e. the position we’ve also seen him attacking Hegel, Voltaire, and the ‘theorists of the *Geisteswissenschaften*’ for holding. See *IH*, p. 434-5, and *PH*, p.179

² *IH*, pp. 220-1. See also *IH*, pp. 239-40

³ This is why the following discussion takes no account of what David Boucher has identified as the common conception of the history of philosophy among British idealists. I have no reason to doubt any of what Boucher says in his description of Collingwood’s understanding of the history of political thought as a “triadic” understanding. The conception of ‘history’ that he is describing, though, is that of a succession of philosophers and their ideas, rather than that of ‘history’ as the process of the historian investigating that succession and those ideas. See *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 71-80

⁴ See L26, *IH*, p. 397. This has not stopped Stein Helgeby from arguing that, for Collingwood, the value of history is that it shows us what we must do. See Helgeby, ‘Action, Duty and Self-Knowledge’, p. 104

⁵ L26, *IH*, p. 397

“a soldier or statesman who knew nothing of the history of war or politics would be quite unfit for his work”.¹ But what is important to remember despite this, Collingwood argues, is that the pragmatic value of history is not the “essence” of history, because the facts it relies upon can never be determined in the way that it assumes. It lacks, he says, the “finality” required.

Alan Donagan criticises Collingwood for being “oblivious to the fact that his own analysis of scientific history shows that it too can yield ready-made rules of a kind. Historical situations recur,” Donagan says, “just as natural situations do”.² It seems to me too that Collingwood’s argument, as he puts it, is awfully weak – but for different reasons to those advanced by Donagan. All Collingwood’s argument means is that, if we rely on the certainty of facts to tell us what to do, we cannot use history, where there is no such certainty. If certainty is not relevant, though, why should history not tell us what to do, precisely for the reason hinted in the examples of medicine, war, and statecraft? We might still allow history to offer us lessons, even when those lessons are based on an historical fact acknowledged to be provisional.

To rescue Collingwood’s claim we must again appeal to the character of historical questions. When Collingwood says that its pragmatic value is not the “essence”³ of history, he appeals to the impossibility in history of ‘determining’ facts in the way the ‘pragmatic theory’ requires. He would do much better to point out that ‘What should I do here?’ is not the essence of an historical question. ‘What should I do?’ is, though, a perfectly legitimate question of itself. It is, for Collingwood, what initiates practical reason – which is why in the *Autobiography* and *New Leviathan* he describes the moral, political, and economic characters of the same action as overlapping.⁴ We perpetually face situations that demand action one way or another. We can choose to act capriciously, or we can appeal to reason (and reasons). Acting by caprice is essentially negating the question by bypassing it. Practical reason, which results from accepting or formulating the question, takes one of three ascending, overlapping forms (which need not detain us here).⁵ Whichever form is appealed to, I think Collingwood’s point is that the process of thinking by which we deliberate, decide, and ‘resolve’ to act is a process that may contain some historical thinking, but should not be carried out *entirely* by

¹ L26, *IH*, p. 397

² Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, p. 239. Donagan cites *IH*, pp. 223-4, 265

³ L26, *IH*, p. 397

⁴ *A*, pp. 148-9

⁵ For a concise summary of Collingwood’s attempts to specify the different forms of rational action, see Boucher’s introduction to *Essays in Political Philosophy* (*EPP*, pp. 43-51). For Collingwood’s own explanation the reader can hardly do better than to survey the essays collected together as Part One (*EPP*, pp. 58-159).

reference to 'things done'. This would in fact be a dereliction of existential duty, since it would be imitation. But what is wrong with it is not only that it would very often lead us to take the worse course, but also that it crushes the distinct features of our situations and those of others in the past that make those situations unique, by presupposing that they are the same situation. That presupposition underlies the recourse to history from the question 'What should I do here?' By 'recourse' I mean the assumption that questions initiating practical reason and questions initiating historical thinking are congruent. It is because we can expose that presupposition as false that we also know it to be illegitimate to decide what to do purely by recourse to historical example. In the world of 'action' these situations never repeat themselves in all their details, though they might resemble each other in certain selected features. This is why, although historical thinking cannot *determine* what we do, it might yield insight that assists our decision-making by eliminating enough alternatives that only one action is left available. So when Collingwood says that its pragmatic value is not the "essence"¹ of history, he ought to appeal not to the impossibility of "finality" in history, but instead to the fact that 'What should I do?' is not the "essence" of an historical question. Donagan is right that even scientific history can "yield" ready-made rules of a kind, but the point is that historical questions are not themselves quests for discovering rules.

A note has to be added here to rescue the doctrine of re-enactment. In the world of thought, in the world of philosophy, we must be able to re-enact philosophical situations in order to understand them. Those situations, then, do 'repeat themselves', or can be made to – albeit "incapsulated" in the historian's mind. So is this a difference between the outside world of doing things and the inside world of thinking? No. Even here, Collingwood could point out, we are free thinkers, and even when situations are shared in this sense, history cannot tell us what to do. The historical fact that Karl Marx answered our shared question in this particular way does not mean that I am committed to giving the same answer, or in the same way – unless political sectarian² loyalty is more important to me than problem-solving.

So if history cannot tell us what to do, what *is* its practical value? Let us examine Collingwood's arguments as he presents them.

¹ L26, *IH*, p. 397

² *NL*, 16.11

History, Collingwood thought, could become as important in the twentieth century as natural science was from the beginning of the seventeenth century; it could become the foundation of a “science of human affairs”. The urgency for advancement in the science of human affairs is powerfully illustrated in chapter nine of Collingwood’s *Autobiography*, ‘The Foundations of the Future’:

The [First World] War was an unprecedented triumph for natural science... [but] an unprecedented disgrace to the human intellect... The contrast between the success of modern European minds in controlling almost any situation in which the elements are physical bodies and the forces physical forces, and their inability to control situations in which the elements are human beings and the forces mental forces, left an indelible mark on the memory of every one who was concerned in it... it was a plain fact that the gigantic increase since about 1600 in his [man’s] power to control Nature had not been accompanied by a corresponding increase, or anything like it, in his power to control human situations.¹

“What was needed,” Collingwood concludes, “was not more goodwill and human affection, but more understanding of human affairs and more knowledge of how to handle them”.²

The ‘science of human nature’ (on the model of natural science) had, Collingwood says, failed as a science of human affairs. It could not, and cannot, fulfil that function.³ “It was precisely because history offered us something altogether different from rules”, he writes, “namely insight, that it could offer us the help we needed in diagnosing our moral and political problems”.⁴ He writes, in the same vein in *The Idea of History*, that “the work which was to be done by the science of human nature is actually done, and can only be done, by history”.⁵

¹ *A*, pp. 90-2

² *A*, p. 92

³ *IH*, pp. 208-9

⁴ *A*, p. 101

⁵ *IH*, p. 209. For an interesting discussion of how Collingwood expands the scope of the ‘historical plain method’ in *The New Leviathan*, see Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 117-19.

Now, if history were simply the science that deals with things done by other people, then, given the character of historical questions, there would be good reason to agree with Collingwood about the place of 'historical thinking' at the foundation of the sciences of human affairs as we know them. If history is that which goes from the unknown to the known concerning the deliberate acts of other minds, how could a science of human affairs possibly proceed without it? It is difficult to imagine what would be left of certain disciplines if they attempted to conduct their characteristic enquiries without investigating or referring to people's reasoning. The exceptions among 'human sciences' are, as well as psychology, those that are only interested in humans as physical entities, animals, and perhaps as a kind of collective organism – 'cultures' in the sense in which it is used by bacteriologists. It would still be possible to do 'human geography': to give descriptions of population densities and the physical conditions amongst which people live; it would be possible to describe the preponderances of diseases of all kinds; it would be possible to measure infant mortality, as it would be to compile statistics and descriptions of anything which is the same regardless of 'what was meant' by it. But as we move towards anthropology, and as the ideas, beliefs, and intentions of those involved play ever more of a role in characterising exactly what it is they do, then the more 'history' in Collingwood's sense underpins the study of it. Anything relating to social or political activity becomes extremely difficult without that which Collingwood calls 'historical thinking'.

This is not the place to argue that we should be interested in studying and knowing about other people's purposive actions in general. It seems to me that it is obvious that, for whatever practical or impractical reason, we more often than not have to understand something about 'why' other people do what they do, where 'why' indicates an 'historical' sense, and that we should do this as well as possible. Achieving this often requires some investigative effort. We can't rely on the immediacy of 'aesthetic' to provide us with the knowledge of whatever it is we seek. No more than I can know the ideas embodied in *Parmenides* by a single reading, or in a "rotten little Roman fort" by just looking at it, can I understand the reasoning behind a dervish's whirl just by spectating it, or the complex web of actions and behaviours which we call the European Union by doing a tour of its expensive collection of architectural edifices. Bodies like that are what they do – they 'are' their *res gestae* – and not the steel and glass houses in which they situate themselves.

Collingwood's definition of 'history' in this sense is obviously very broad – so broad that it makes a lot of other disciplines (partially) dependent on historical inquiry. As Collingwood defines 'history', then, his claim can hardly be contradicted. Collingwood is right: the sciences of human affairs really should be built upon the principle (among others) of proceeding from specific unknowns concerning the deliberate acts of other minds to correlative specific knowns by using reason and evidence. If that is what 'history' means, then history really is the right way to answer our questions about European civilization.¹

iv

Self-knowledge by rethinking and situational insight

But Collingwood is really making a more ambitious claim than this. He is saying that history is for *self*-knowledge.² The gap that has to be bridged is between the quite straightforward claim that 'history' is the investigation of things done, and the claim that history produces knowledge of the self.

There are two ways of bridging that gap. The first is that the self is (partly) 'mind', and that knowledge of what mind has done is therefore knowledge of what the self has, in a sense, 'done' as well. On this account human nature is human history because we *are* our species history.³ Studying our history is thus studying what we are. This is what is presupposed when someone says that history offers a science of human affairs, that we are all humans, and that therefore history offers us knowledge of ourselves. In this sense the self-knowledge offered by the human sciences discussed above is rather a mundane one, like the equivalent statement that human biology provides self-knowledge.

A variant which does not appeal to a corporate mind is that the self is 'man', and that knowledge of what man has done is knowledge of what the self *can* do. In history, though, this explanation invites additional objections that become obvious as soon as one tries to think of concrete examples. My study of things done by Oliver Cromwell

¹ Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', in David Boucher, James Connelly, & Tariq Modood (eds), *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 287-8

² Boucher, in *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, does not comment on the success or failure of Collingwood's argument that history is for self-knowledge. He is quite right, though, to say that, in view of this claim, the importance of history to civilization in the education of society "goes without saying". See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, p. 227

³ See for instance NL, 9.21-22

actually tells me nothing about myself. Moreover, even if it were true that in the same situation I could and would do the same as Cromwell, the fact is that I will never face Cromwell's situation. The only knowledge of my situation I get from this is that my situation is not Cromwell's.

A second strategy for bridging the gap is to point out, as Collingwood does in *The Idea of History*, that I can apply historical methods to investigating my own *res gestae*. Historical thinking helps me to answer 'why' questions about my own choices, and liberates me from reliance on memory.¹ The problem with this strategy is that, although it is obviously true that in this way I can answer questions about what I have done, it is true only trivially that this is self-knowledge. If I find myself wondering one day why I did something, I could go back through my correspondence, ask people I'd spoken to at the time what kind of things I'd been saying about it, or whatever. And I would construct some kind of answer. It is true that this can be done well and badly, scientifically and unscientifically – and it seems preferable that it be done scientifically. But 'self-knowledge' in this sense falls short of what Collingwood seems to mean by it. Commonly we would describe this as merely going back through records to fill in gaps in our memories, and it is surely not more of this that we need to improve our control of human situations in order to avert further disasters like the First World War. 'Know thyself' is an instruction which seems to demand something more. So how does Collingwood explain his claim that history fulfils (part of) that demand?

Chapter ten of the *Autobiography* is called 'History as the Self-Knowledge of Mind'. It is not a long chapter – only twelve pages and a bit. Yet it takes Collingwood seven or eight pages to begin to explain the title's proposition. (In the meantime he mostly discusses the re-enactment and "incapsulation" of thoughts.) When he finally gets down to the business of the title, he offers a bright and rare example of his ability to explain the knowledge provided by history in terms of historical questions. But it is also a very hurried explanation, and the reader will see in a moment why it requires disentangling and protracting. Here is what Collingwood says:

Every historical problem ultimately arises out of 'real' life. The scissors-and-paste men think... that first of all people get into the habit of reading books, and then the books put questions into their heads. But I am not talking about scissors-and-paste history. In the kind of history that I am thinking of, the kind

¹ *IH*, p. 219

I have been practising all of my life, historical problems arise out of practical problems. We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act. Hence the plane on which, ultimately, all problems arise is the plane of 'real' life: that to which they are referred for their solution is history.

If what the historian knows is past thoughts, and if he knows them by re-thinking them himself, it follows that the knowledge he achieves by historical inquiry is not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is a knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself. In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of a man he is.¹

This, Collingwood says, was a train of thought not complete until about 1930, and he adds that it answered his problem of how man could construct a science of human affairs and obey the oracular precept 'know thyself'.²

We've already dealt with the science of human affairs. It appears that there are in fact two further arguments here about history and self-knowledge. At the end of this passage Collingwood says something he also says elsewhere, namely that history shows us what we can think, or re-think, and therefore what kind of people we are ourselves. The other argument, which I'll discuss second, is that history gives us knowledge of our situations. Situation and self are, it seems, lashed together with the claim that "it is knowledge of the situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself".

The second part of the explanation given in the passage above is this: "In re-thinking what somebody else thought, he thinks it himself. In knowing that somebody else thought it, he knows that he himself is able to think it. And finding out what he is able to do is finding out what kind of a man he is".³ Now this explanation, it seems to me, is a cautious attempt to bridge the gap between knowledge of what man has done and knowledge of the self by the 'variant' of saying that the self is 'man', and that knowledge of what man has done is knowledge of what the self *can* do – though here those 'things done' are illustrated as *things thought*, which avoids the objection that 'I will never face Cromwell's situation'. The unfortunate consequence of putting it this way is that the explanation for why history provides self-knowledge is more than a little

¹ A, pp. 114-15

² A, pp. 115-16

³ A, pp. 114-15

anticlimactic. That the history of ideas might provide man with self-knowledge gives it, it seems to me, some potential gravitas. But if we can't explain that self-knowledge in terms more significant than the fact that by following the reasoning of, say, Kant, I find out that I am the kind of man who can follow the reasoning of Kant, then the ambition initially stated seems not to deliver properly. Cricket scorekeeping provides self-knowledge in the same way. By doing it I find out that I am the kind of man who can be relied upon to preside over an accurate scorecard. Collingwood, I think, saw this as soon as he penned this passage. What he says next is intended as a remedy:

If he is able to understand, by rethinking them, the thoughts of a great many different kinds of people, it follows that he must be a great many kinds of man. He must be, in fact, a microcosm of all the history he can know. Thus his own self-knowledge is at the same time his knowledge of the world of human affairs.¹

This short passage is much more suggestive. However, this train of thought, having rapidly accelerated over the course of three sentences, then halts, and gives way to a discussion of how the above realization solved his problem concerning the science of human affairs, and then to a discussion about his writing, publishing, and health – which takes up the remaining three pages of the chapter. The reader is supposed to be left, I think, seeing several things at once: first, that learning about what other people have thought and done you learn about what man *is*. The reader is also meant to see that, secondly, by learning about what other people have thought – learning, that is, by thinking these things yourself – you learn about what you are. And thirdly, you see that history is the science for investigating the actions of all people (including yourself), and the *only* science for this. The first two of these points Collingwood thinks he has already explained in the first seven pages of chapter ten of the *Autobiography*. Those pages actually deal with re-enactment and the idea of one person's thoughts “incapsulated” in the mind of the re-thinker. In order to see how this provides self-knowledge, the reader must, I think, go back to the passage on incapsulation² and start reading again with the later explanation in mind. What becomes clear is that this “incapsulation” in history is supposed to provide self-knowledge by overcoming the object/subject distinction. If there is no distinction between the known object and the subject, then the subject too is

¹ *A*, p.115

² *A*, p.113

known. Again, though, history's contribution to self-knowledge is explained in terms of something the individual does and, thereby, finds himself able to do.¹ The language of incapsulation by re-thinking – “removing the gap” between object and subject, as Browning has put it – only disguises the anti-climax.²

Perhaps a little more convincing is an explanation in *The Idea of History* that Collingwood plainly thinks is the converse of the same point: that when the historian finds certain historical matters unintelligible, “he has discovered a limitation of his own mind; he has discovered that there are certain ways in which he is not, or no longer, or not yet, able to think”. “It is the historian himself who stands at the bar of judgement”, he adds, “and there reveals his own mind in its strength and weakness, its virtues and its vices”.³

It would certainly be a significant self-discovery to find that one was unable to think of a certain thing, or unable to think in a certain way. One would in this way find oneself to have some kind of thinking handicap, which it is probably useful to be aware of. But it is hard to see how you would come to the conclusion that ‘I am unable to think this yet/anymore’, rather than concluding that the person whose thought you were attempting to follow must have been extremely confused, and that those who say they’ve followed him must be as well.

In the *Autobiography*, then, Collingwood exploits an ambiguity in his terminology of ‘self’ and ‘man’. By saying that history is the science of human affairs, and that the value of history is self-knowledge, Collingwood is obviously referring to humankind – ‘man’ as a corporate being. Yet his explanations appeal to the personal self-knowledge of the individual. The same ambiguity is in evidence in the introduction to *The Idea of History*, where Collingwood presents these different senses of ‘man’ almost as grades of self-knowledge:

My answer is that history is ‘for’ human self-knowledge... Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man

¹ There is also a similar explanation of how reliving past thinking contributes to self-knowledge in *The Idea of History*. See *IH*, p. 174

² Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 74

³ *IH*, pp. 218-19

can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.¹

The formulation in ‘Human Nature and Human History’ is more focused and clearer. But here, in order to achieve an explanation of what it means to say that history provides self-knowledge, Collingwood is forced to use the word ‘knowledge’ in a way that applies not only to a process of answering questions, but also to one in which information is transferred from one person to another – from a teacher to a student, for example.² What he says is, in essence, that without re-enacting the thoughts of others, no individual could take his share in the wealth of knowledge accumulated by mankind.³ This is self-knowledge, it seems, because the knower now knows that he knows it – whatever ‘it’ is. What is clear here is that Collingwood is no longer speaking of investigative history. He is *only* describing re-enactment; and, although scientific history presupposes re-enactment, re-enactment does not presuppose history – at least not history in the sense we’ve been discussing. Because Collingwood has historical method in mind, he is thinking of the self-knowledge of someone engaging in an investigative process. Thus the historian who re-enacts Julius Caesar’s,⁴ or Becket’s⁵ thinking, knows what he is doing. The object of his own mind – his re-enacted thinking – becomes itself something known.⁶

Let us turn to the other argument. “We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act”, Collingwood says, and later he adds that “the knowledge he achieves by historical inquiry is not knowledge of his situation as opposed to knowledge of himself, it is a knowledge of his situation which is at the same time knowledge of himself”.⁷

The implications of this statement will please those who prefer individuals immersed in contexts, cultures, communities, structures, and so on, and who argue that individuals are ‘constituted’ by their environments, and on that basis that you can’t understand anything without also knowing its context. But we’re talking about self-knowledge now, and there is a common-sense difference between the ‘situation’ that a

¹ *IH*, p. 10

² *IH*, p. 218

³ See *IH*, pp. 218-19

⁴ *IH*, p. 174

⁵ *IH*, p. 297

⁶ *IH*, p. 292

⁷ *A*, p. 114

man is in, and that man himself.¹ By the same token, there is a common-sense difference between my situation and ‘who I really am’. If there were no common-sense difference between these, there would be nothing intuitively wrong with saying that the Polish qualified surgeon working in a British railway café is really just a barista; or that the American backpacker in Kathmandu has ‘found’ herself during her travels, and what she has found is that she is Nepalese.

The problem with Collingwood’s formulation is that, owing to the word ‘situation’, the imagery is too spatial. (‘Context’ can be taken in the same way.) Collingwood’s real reasoning is, I think, this: ‘Purposive’ action means problem-solving. Answering questions about what people have done therefore requires knowing what their ‘problems’ were, and those ‘problems’, as far as understanding their actions goes, means the features of their situations which they regarded as requiring rectification. Historical questions are questions about people’s solutions (and attempted solutions) to problem-situations. Historical investigation, then, produces understanding of situations in this sense.

But my earlier objection returns: these are other people’s situations, not mine. The only knowledge of my situation I get from an appreciation of one faced by Cromwell is this is that my situation is not Cromwell’s situation, and thus knowledge I have of Cromwell is not knowledge of myself. This has not stopped Collingwood commentators from letting their man off very lightly for his ambitious claim. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, for instance, treats the argument as a *fait accompli* demonstration, and allows it to support her own contention that education must be reformed with Collingwood’s philosophy of history in mind, such that it enriches knowledge of the self.²

I hope the reader thinks I’ve given Collingwood’s explicit arguments about why history provides self-knowledge a fair enough run-through, and that although my objections might have been curt, they have not been unfair. I actually think the claim that history offers self-knowledge can be rescued, but it requires relating two things that Collingwood does not explicitly relate, and probably did not mean to. The most significant part of the long passage I quoted earlier was actually one he passed over far too quickly, and it was this: “In the kind of history that I am thinking of, the kind I have been practising all of my life, historical problems arise out of practical problems. We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon *to*

¹ See *NL*, 5.33

² Hughes-Warrington, pp. 161-3

act". I've added the emphasis where Collingwood ought, I think, to have added more of an elaboration than he did. As we've seen, Collingwood's equation, between knowledge of one's situation with knowledge of oneself, does not work well, and it suits the 'idiographic' nature of history even less well. But there is an available accommodation if the concept of self-knowledge can be stretched to include not only identity conclusions 'about' oneself, but also 'decision' conclusions: not deciding that one *is*, has done, or can do such-and-such, but deciding that one *shall* do such-and-such in response to a problem situation.

v

Transition from practice to theory

I surveyed earlier Collingwood's dismissal of what he calls the 'pragmatic' theory of history. If you remember, he attacked the pragmatic theory for presuming that the facts history provides enjoy "finality". The pragmatic value of history cannot, he says, be its "essence". Stripped of the bogus argument about the finality of facts, I said that the strength of Collingwood's point is that it shows that the pragmatic theory of history conflates historical questions with questions about what to do – questions for practical reason. Historical questions are not identical with questions for practical reason.

The passage above¹ remains true to this. Historical questions are not themselves questions about what to do. But historical questions can 'arise' out of practical questions, and be useful for helping to reach decisions of that kind. In fact, Collingwood is saying not only that historical questions *can* arise in this way, but that, at least "in the kind of history that I am thinking of, the kind I have been practising all of my life", historical problems *do* arise out of practical problems.² History as a science, then, provides specific examples of a principle stated in *The New Leviathan*. This is an important point, so I will quote it in full.

Reason is distinguished into *theoretical reason* and *practical reason*: i.e. reason for 'making up your mind *that*' (reason for what logicians call a proposition) and reason for making up your mind *to*' (reason for what moralists call an intention).

¹ *A*, pp. 114-15

² David Boucher has already provided an interesting discussion of this point, of how it relates to the *rapprochement* between theory and practice more widely, and the historical background to it (via Croce) in his *Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*. See pp. 51-7, especially p. 56

We shall see that, of these two, practical reason is the prior: it is the original form of reason, theoretical reason being a modification of it; and by the Law of Primitive Survivals a practical element is always present in a case of theoretical reason.¹

The principle that practical problems and practical thinking survive into all theoretical problems, and all ‘abstract’ thinking, pertains in Collingwood’s thinking to more than just history.² But history is the subject at hand. Scientific history, I am saying, is a form of theoretical reason. The construction of conclusions by historians is a form of “making up your mind *that*”, rather than a form of “making up your mind *to*”. Now, if what Collingwood says here is true, the value or present real-world relevance of doing history is assured for as long as historical questions continue to arise out of practical questions. A Tribunal in The Hague is trying to answer the historical question of whether or not Radovan Karadžić ordered the Srebrenica massacre. This is an example of a question that arises out of a practical problem – namely, the practical legal question of whether or not a man has committed a terrible crime. Even if it is ‘theoretical’, historical knowledge is important or pressing when the questions it answers are important or pressing. History has consequences for action when it arises out of questions of action. Historical thinking doesn’t need to justify itself to the present, because as long as it is considered important that questions like this be posed and that the process of answering them proceed properly, historical thinking in the sense in which Collingwood means it is assured. Equivalent investigations into the notorious ‘princes in the Tower’ episode are no less (and no more) historical, but barring some very surprising developments in the British political agenda that investigation remains what Collingwood calls, in accordance with popular parlance, “academic”, meaning that it “belong[s] to the world of *make-believe*”.³

The passage I quoted earlier from the *Autobiography*⁴ also indicates the solution to a problem we wrestled with in the last chapter: the problem of Collingwood’s *rapprochement* between asking what someone thought, and asking by necessity whether he

¹ *NL*, 14.3. See also 14.38; 1.66-68. See also L26, *IH*, pp. 406-7. There is more general discussion, of the ‘primitive survival’ of practice in theory, in Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 87-91. Because the present study is limited to history, there is no need to summarise Donagan’s discussion – which can anyway be better enjoyed in its original context.

² See *NL*, 14.32–35; 18.13. A very nice passage is at *NL*, 7.64-7

³ *NL*, 2.51. This does not mean that Richard III cannot really have ordered the murder of the princes, or that the episode is fictitious. ‘Make-believe’ in Collingwood’s argument means that such questions and investigations arise with no present purpose beyond the educational. See *NL*, 2.5-55

⁴ *A*, pp. 114-15

was right. The question of whether this facet of Collingwood's *rapprochement* between history and philosophy was well-founded turned out to depend on whether or not historical questions must be philosophically evaluative.

On the analytic grounds of what history as a discipline is, what it asks about, and what kind of knowledge it produces, there is no reason to think that historical questions must in themselves be evaluative. That is to say, the 'Was he right?' question is not determined by other necessary features of properly historical questions. But Collingwood's argument about the practical value of history depends upon the exclusion of "academic" historical questions. In fact he claims, as we've seen, not that that kind of history ought not to be done, but actually that *nobody does it*. *Prima facie* this is untrue. Lots of historians are working on historical problems that have no practical consequences. We can take Collingwood's point either of two ways. Either he means that all historians' work is valuable because all historical problems that are being worked on have 'arisen' in someone's real life, and are therefore 'real problems' with practical consequences; or he is simply being dismissive about some historians working on obscure problems, who are, like their problems, insignificant enough not to have to make concessions for when one says "all". Either way, it is clear that the *rapprochement* discussed earlier depends on another *rapprochement* between theory and practice.¹ The 'Was he right?' question does not follow from an analysis of what historical questions are; but it might follow from a presupposition about why historical questions are asked. In short, the 'Was he right?' question is the 'primitive' element of practical reason that survives into the theoretical reason of scientific history.

The history of ideas is only practically valuable if its answers contribute to solving the practical problems out of which its questions arise. This is what he means, I think, when he writes in *The Idea of History* that history provides for us more than "a mere inventory of our intellectual possessions at the present time" by answering the question "by what right we enjoy them".² The history of political thought is then not only for answering questions about what ideas were held by someone, or what arguments were dominant during a given period. It is also for establishing whether those ideas were right.³ The historian of ideas might then inquire further whether, if those ideas were

¹ For a detailed account of the *rapprochement* between theory and practice in all of Collingwood's work, see Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 51-7. Boucher rightly emphasises this *rapprochement* between theory and practice as one of the "long-term considerations" in the context of which *The New Leviathan* is to be seen.

² *IH*, p. 230

³ This is also part of what Collingwood argues in 'Can Historians be Impartial?' See *PH*, pp. 209-18

wrong, the error was due to inherited superstitions that were allowed somehow to go unchallenged. Historical thinking and philosophical thinking therefore ‘throw light’ upon each other, in the sense that in history we come to appreciate the legitimacies and identify the illegitimacies of the ‘settled’ answers to past questions and problems as we have inherited them. The history of political thought is, then, (or should be) ‘critical’ in the full sense, and initiated by questions of present importance.

vi

History and freedom

The *rapprochement* between philosophy and history – at least, the aspect of it I’ve dealt with – presupposes a certain kind of relationship between historical and practical problems. It is in this way, I think, that the strongest argument can be offered in support of Collingwood’s contention that history fits in a certain way into our general view of the aims and purposes of human life in general.¹ But Collingwood’s own explanations of the link between the ‘theoretical reason’ of history and the ‘practical’ aims and purposes of human life do not, I think, work well. It is nevertheless worth discussing them, because Collingwood puts enough stock in them to refer to them in his last book, *The New Leviathan* – albeit obliquely. Those ‘links’, as I’ve put it, are between history and *freedom*, and history and *duty*. We’ll take freedom first.

Collingwood does not make this argument in his *Autobiography* – at least, not in a way that a reader of that book alone would be able to summarise readily. It is found in *The Idea of History* and referred to again in *The New Leviathan*.² The material I’m referring to specifically is a piece called ‘Freedom’, which was intended as part of book one of *The Principles of History*: chapter three, ‘Nature and Action’. T. M. Knox used this material, with a few changes, and published it in 1946 as the shortest section of *The Idea of History*’s ‘Epilegomena’, §6. He renamed it ‘History and Freedom’.³ It is partly because Collingwood wanted to write *The New Leviathan* that he broke off work on *The Principles of History*. It is perhaps worth pointing out that this means that when Collingwood wrote *The New Leviathan* in 1940/41, his formulation of the argument contained in ‘History and

¹ L26, *IH*, p. 359

² *NL*, 37.1-14. See also 13.31

³ The manuscript survives, and was republished in 1999 in its corrected form in *The Principles of History and other writings in the philosophy of history*. See *PH*, pp. 98-103, especially note 56

Freedom' would have been fresh, or at least clear, in his mind, but it would not be clear to his readers until 1946.

Here, in 'History and Freedom', Collingwood foregoes the easy equation of knowledge *as* freedom,¹ and attempts to show that "our knowledge that human activity is free has been attained *only through* our discovery of history".² His argument refers to the historian's "discovery that the men whose actions he studies" are free in the sense that, although they might not have realised it, they were free to cast off the ways of thinking they had inherited. Their thinking was, whether they knew it or not, autonomous.³ A man who fears to cross the mountains because he believes them to be inhabited by devils is suffering from a superstition that he is in fact free to discard, and his doing so would only require some 'high-grade' thinking. Once the question arises in an explicit form, 'Are there in fact devils living in those mountains?', the traveller has begun to free himself from his previous fearful situation. When we conceive of situations according to the "sin" of the superstitions we have been taught, we "share in that sin".⁴ If a man is "a wise man, it is not until he has... done everything in his power to find out what the situation is, that he will make even the most trivial plan. And if he neglects the situation, the situation will not neglect him. It is not one of those gods that leave an insult unpunished".⁵

The historian, realising this, has made "a discovery which every historian makes as soon as he arrives at a scientific mastery of his own subject". He "discovers his own freedom: that is, he discovers the autonomous character of historical thought, its power to solve its own problems for itself by its own methods".⁶ The argument fits with something Collingwood says in *The New Leviathan*: "The act of becoming free cannot be done to a man by anything other than himself. Let us call it, then, an act of *self-liberation*".⁷

¹ David Boucher has found evidence in Collingwood's correspondence with Knox that he, like Lachelier (Boucher says), "equates freedom with knowledge". See Boucher's introduction to *EPP*, p. 11

² *IH*, p. 315. Emphasis added. Collingwood speculates that it is no coincidence that the 'free-will controversy' arose in the seventeenth century at "the time when scissors-and-paste history in its simpler forms was beginning to dissatisfy people". (*IH*, p. 319) One possible interpretation of this has already been seen off by Boucher in his introduction to *Essays in Political Philosophy* (see *EPP*, pp. 21-2), so I have not dealt with it here. The possible interpretation is that, because Collingwood thought it was a great achievement of Marx to convert the problems of economics into historical problems (as Collingwood says in 'The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History'), he thinks that history leads to freedom in something like the way Marx describes also. Boucher also quotes Collingwood's unpublished 1929 'Lectures on Philosophy of History', where he says "the practical consequences of his [Marx's] teaching have been, perhaps, the most important feature in general politics in the last hundred years". See *EPP*, pp. 21-2, 29

³ *IH*, p. 256

⁴ *IH*, p. 318

⁵ *IH*, p. 316. See however also *NL*, 13.75

⁶ *IH*, p. 318

⁷ *NL*, 13.21

Collingwood's point is that the historian's scientific mastery of his subject mirrors that of the traveller. The freedom of the scientific historian consists not only in that he can ask whatever questions he wants, but also in that the way in which he must go about answering them is never fixed by inherited ideas about what he should do. "The freedom that there is in history consists in the fact that this compulsion is imposed upon the activity of human reason not by anything else, but by itself",¹ he writes. Doing history demonstrates to the historian (eventually) the autonomous character of historical thought, "its power to solve its own problems for itself by its own methods",² because the methodological compulsions under which he had previously assumed he laboured in his situations as an historian – and laboured in order to solve his problems – are gradually removed when he realises that this is not how it has to be done.

The greatest strength of 'History and Freedom' is what it says about the idea of freedom. 'Freedom' means the self-liberation from certain assumed limits and compulsions that fill any human situation. The traveller might have inherited the idea that devils live in the mountains from his cultural environment, of course, but this impediment that shapes his idea of his situation is *really* (Collingwood is saying) of his own making, if he did but know it.³

Granted that the historian – with his situation, his problems, and his autonomous efforts to solve them – is partly here a specific example of all humans in *all* situations, what we have in 'History and Freedom' is a much more sophisticated argument about the nature of freedom than was immediately apparent. Day to day we might presuppose freedom in the way described in the chapter of *The New Leviathan* that discusses the nature of choice.⁴ But we also commonly assume our situations to be full of limitations and compulsions which are 'just there', either by the work of others, the previous irreversible actions of ourselves, or just by 'the nature of things'. We might be aware that we are free to act in this qualified situation, but perhaps we don't initially realise just *how* free. Perhaps we don't know, that is, that we can emancipate ourselves even from some of those qualifications. This kind of knowledge, as distinct from merely being 'aware' of our freedom, can only be realised systematically, Collingwood says.⁵ Realizing our freedom means systematically deconstructing the compulsions and obstacles which we

¹ *IH*, p. 317

² *IH*, p. 318

³ *IH*, p. 317

⁴ *NL*, ch. XIII. See especially 13.16-18

⁵ This is what I think Collingwood means in his response (*IH*, p. 320) to the counter-argument that people have always been aware that they are free.

are anyway maintaining in our own thinking. It is this ‘autonomous problem-solving’ which I wish to emphasize here as underlying what Collingwood says about ‘freedom’, because I think he does not adequately give centre stage to the idea himself, and his argument connecting history to civilization is weaker for it.

In *The Idea of History*, for example, instead of leaving the idea of autonomous problem-solving laid bare, this raw nerve of the argument is, in Collingwood’s formulation, quickly adorned with the academic points he wants to score from it, which are quite historically-specific. This makes his argument more effective to his immediate ends, but in view of wider-ranging arguments – such as that we’re looking at here – it rather obscures the bigger point. Here, for instance:

It is simultaneously with this discovery of his own freedom as historian that he discovers the freedom of man as an historical agent. Historical thought, thought about rational activity, is free from the domination of natural science, and rational activity is free from the domination of nature.¹

Collingwood’s immediate aim – to force the concession that history is methodologically independent of the methods and paradigms of natural science – has obscured the grounds for this independence: namely, that to be free and fully-fledged, historians must, and can only, solve their problems in their own ways. ‘In their own ways’ means that historians come to realise that the compulsion they’d previously assumed, of agreeing or otherwise ‘consulting’ the history’s authorities and testimonies, was actually always theirs to remove. As we’ve seen, historians are now free from the authority of sources (the ‘scissors and paste’ history of old), and they are free from the would-be authority of methods of thinking that are not peculiarly their own (such as offered by ‘positivism’). But we now know, Collingwood says, that by actually doing history, historians learn the necessity and unavoidability of autonomous problem-solving.

But Collingwood’s argument, if successful on the side of freedom, actually shows not that “our knowledge that human activity is free has been attained only through our discovery of history”,² and even less does it show that it has been attained only through our discovery of scientific history. It shows rather that it is the questioning activity in general that makes us free and shows us that we are so systematically. History only shows us that we are free because autonomous question-answering as Collingwood describes it

¹ *IH*, p. 318

² *IH*, p. 315

is as much a presupposition in scientific history as it is in anything scientific. He might have added that the more we think historically the more that presupposition is reinforced, but the same could be said of any science. History might be one of many forms of systematic thought that allows us to practise our freedom, but it is by no means the only one. History on this account offers nothing that is peculiar to itself. So although history might serve man's knowledge of his own freedom, it remains undemonstrated that it is "only" through studying history that man knows himself to be free. It seems, then, that we have to go beyond *The Idea of History* to find Collingwood's best argument about what history does for us in terms of our freedom.

vii

History and duty

Other relations between history and freedom have been remarked upon before. Several commentators have pointed to Collingwood's argument about the apparent connection between history and duty,¹ outlined in his 1940 Lectures on Moral Philosophy and again in *The New Leviathan*.² Collingwood's account of duty is different from Kant's.³ If freedom consists in the elimination of caprice from practical choices,⁴ then the more man's practical reason eliminates caprice, the freer man is. The scale of overlapping forms of practical reason⁵ are, for Collingwood, utility, right, and duty,⁶ while the corresponding forms of theoretical reason are, varyingly, thinking in terms of means to ends (the 'science' of utility, or 'economics'); thinking in terms of conforming to a rule (law, modern natural science); and thinking in terms of unique individual situations (history).⁷ The theoretical counterpart is invoked when an agent, reflecting on his own actions, asks "Why am I doing this?"⁸

¹ See Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 132-3, and Hughes-Warrington, pp. 161-9 (especially p. 168)

² See *NL*, 18.51-92. The relevant part of the Lectures has been edited into a stand-alone 'essay' in *EPP*, pp. 150-9. It is discussed by Boucher in *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, for example, and by Stein Helgeby in *Action as History* (pp. 101-37). For Boucher's discussion of Collingwood's account of duty alone, see *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 105-9.

³ See *NL*, 17.62. Thanks to ES for his suggestion that I document the differences.

⁴ See *NL*, 13.2-22

⁵ See *NL*, 14.3

⁶ *NL*, chs XV, XVI, XVII

⁷ *NL*, 18.3 and 15.6; 18.4-45; 18.5-6

⁸ *NL*, 18.1. Duty is consistently associated with history – albeit for reasons which, as Boucher shows, are themselves shifting. Initially the association is due to the fact that historical thinking is the world of fact, and in historical thinking the universal and the particular are unified in the various ways I've already

A correct conception of duty is, for Collingwood, the fulfilment of theories of practical action. In his 1940 Lectures, he begins his explanation of how this correct conception depends upon history by appealing to his audience's...

experience that there is a form of moral consciousness which does not consist in analysing one's action into means and end, or rule and obedience to rule, or in any other way whatever, but is aware of it in its unbroken or unanalysed individuality as his own response to a situation in which, as I said, he finds himself or places himself... His response to it, similarly, is present to his consciousness not as a response of a certain kind relevant to any situation of a certain kind or to certain features in this situation, but as this response and no other, a response which is an *individuum omnimode determinatum* to a situation which is an *individuum omnimode determinatum*.¹

Collingwood soon adds that he wishes to draw attention to the fact that he has been, during the last few minutes, equating duty with "something that is already familiar to you in another context". That "something" is history, and the equation lies in the fact that history is knowledge of "a past composed not merely of individual events but of individual actions done by human beings in individual situations... Every situation which the historian studies is an individual situation; every action is an individual action".²

The relationship between history and freedom is, then, that the historical consciousness makes duty possible, and duty further eliminates caprice from action. So history is necessary for the further elimination of caprice, and thus the extension of freedom.³

Some of Collingwood's commentators have extended a great deal of sympathy to this argument about history and duty. In his conclusion to *The Social and Political Thought of R. G. Collingwood*, David Boucher seems to lament the fact that "the realisation of a

explained. In the first place (and this is what Boucher thinks is most important) it is in historical thinking that the false dichotomy between mind and its object is overcome. In Collingwood's Lectures on Moral Philosophy of 1940, the relationship is explained a little differently. For our purposes, this later version is more pertinent. Later Boucher explains, more clearly than Collingwood perhaps managed, why it is that duty is the highest form of practical reason and, as such, absorbs ethics, just as the theoretical counterpart of duty, history, absorbs philosophy. Boucher's account is in *Social and Political Thought*, p. 94 (the full discussion spans pp. 93-108). For the correspondence between history and duty see pp. 82, 90, 94

¹ *EPP*, p. 154. See also *NL*, 17.51

² *EPP*, p. 155. See also *NL*, 28.9

³ See also Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, p. 169. There is more that could be said about how 'history' liberates social man from caprice. For example, it is difficult to see how, without historical thinking in Collingwood's sense, criminal investigations and decisions about punishment could be carried out in any way other than capriciously.

historical civilization characterised by duty, rather than by utility, is as remote a possibility now as it was in Collingwood's own day".¹ More recently Marnie Hughes-Warrington has treated the argument as another *fait accompli*. "From the above discussion it should be abundantly clear", she says, "that aesthetic, religious and scientific education presuppose historical/philosophical education. History/philosophy takes us to self-knowledge and dutiful action via the activities of the a priori historical imagination".²

Not all commentators are so generous. In *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, Alan Donagan attacks Collingwood for shortcomings in this same argument. Collingwood, Donagan thinks, "confounds historical insight with moral". "His error", he adds, is "to think that in any concrete situation you are immediately aware that there is some concrete action which it is your duty to do".³ And he continues:

I cannot explain Collingwood's conviction that he was aware of such duties, except as a relic of philosophical idealism... So as far as it rests on direct consciousness, I question Collingwood's theory of duty because my moral consciousness does not corroborate his; and so far as it rests on the presupposition that an action done from duty must be rational in every concrete detail, I question it as flouting common sense.⁴

Donagan's attack, then, is aimed at Collingwood's conception of duty – with some additional reference to inconsistencies with his philosophy of mind. I will not enter the debate on the 'duty' side of Collingwood's argument. Our interest here is with what it says about what history as a science is for, so our interest is in whether Collingwood's argument actually does justice to what he says elsewhere about 'history as a science'. Here there are some additional shortcomings.

Collingwood does not say merely that the concept of duty is *associated* in some way with the concept, or with one of the concepts, of history. He does not say that the 'individual' nature of duty *resembles* the 'individual' nature of history. And he does not say that this sensitivity to particularity on the part of historical understanding "harmonizes" with the particularity of focus of moral duty, as Gary Browning says he does.⁵

¹ Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, p. 241

² Hughes-Warrington, p. 169. See also p. 178

³ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, p. 243

⁴ Donagan, *Later Philosophy*, pp. 243, 245

⁵ Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 133

Collingwood actually says that he is “equating”¹ duty with history; he says that “the consciousness of duty is thus identical with the historical consciousness”.² And he warns that “until these obsolescent tendencies in historical thinking have become wholly obsolete” – and by these he means analysing past actions “either by the utilitarian analysis or by the regularian analysis” – until then, “we shall not have a fully developed consciousness of duty”.³ Collingwood claims, then, that historical consciousness and consciousness of duty are “identical”, and that history is a prerequisite of a fully developed consciousness of duty. He is not saying merely that history “reinforces” duty.⁴ Duty, he is saying, presupposes history.

But history also presupposes duty, because dutiful action is suddenly, in *The New Leviathan*, the proper subject-matter of history:

To think historically is to explore a world consisting of things other than myself, each of them and individual or unique agent, in an individual or unique situation, doing an individual or unique action which he has to do because, charactered and circumstanced as he is, he can do no other.⁵

As an account of the ‘value’ of history, Collingwood’s argument is inadequate, and for this reason: The sense of ‘history’ which he appeals to and identifies with duty is not the same highest form of ‘history’ that we have been examining. It is not history as a science. History corresponds to duty, he says, because of correspondence with the subject-matter of history, which is – to use the technical language – ‘idiographic’, rather than ‘nomothetic’.⁶ This relation of history to the concept of duty, and thereby to Collingwood’s moral philosophy in general, reveals that, for Collingwood, the highest form of practical reason presupposes only the concept of concrete uniqueness (or unique concreteness). This is quite different from claiming that duty requires investigative history. Duty on this account is equally well-served by scissors-and-paste history. To think historically “is to explore a world consisting of things other than myself, each of them and individual or unique agent, in an individual or unique situation, doing an individual or unique action”,⁷ Collingwood says; but it is precisely the practical

¹ *EPP*, p.155

² *EPP*, p. 157

³ *EPP*, pp. 157-8

⁴ Browning, *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, p. 136

⁵ *NL*, 18.52. See also Boucher’s introduction to *EPP*, p. 42

⁶ *IH*, p. 166

⁷ *NL*, 18.52. See also Boucher’s introduction to *EPP*, p. 42

importance of *how* that ‘exploration’ is carried out that has not been accounted for. He has merely appealed to a formal concept presupposed by his account of duty that mirrors one of the ‘habitual’, ‘arbitrary’¹ concepts of a lower form of history. Because Stein Helgeby deals, in *Action and History*, with precisely this lower form, where history is its own subject-matter, he finds much in the argument about history and duty to agree with. Although he has some reservations about Collingwood’s theory of duty, Helgeby certainly doesn’t think the argument inadequate to Collingwood’s philosophy of history.² But it *is* inadequate, since it does no justice to ‘history as a science’. Helgeby’s book is anyway not about history as a science, so he has no obligation to comment upon it.³

What, then, is the social function of *investigative* history? We could attempt to provide an answer by elaborating on the overlap between the conception of history that Collingwood appeals to in his discussion of duty, and the conception of history as a science. I’ve already explained what that overlap is in itself, but here’s how it works in relation to the correspondence between history and duty: Investigative history (history as a science) is the only way to answer the kind of questions that typically arise about things done by unique agents other than oneself in situations uniquely their own: questions in which the specific unknown is some specific ‘constellation’ of ideas that we can call somebody’s reasoning. If this is what is meant by a ‘why?’ question, scientific history is the only way of answering that question properly.

Now, two hesitations should arise. The first is that unique actions in unique situations can actually fail to raise any historical questions at all. Historical questions might arise which we consider unimportant, and which we ignore; or questions of another kind might arise – a psychological question, for instance. More familiarly, just because I recognise that the deed of a man whom I observe was done out of duty, it does not mean that I commit a category error in putting to him the ‘logically effected’⁴ question ‘Can I offer you a drink?’, rather than an historical question inquiring about his reasoning. This hesitation is easily soothed by noting that nowhere does Collingwood say that practical reason *necessitates* its theoretical counterpart. Dutiful acts do not demand historical thinking. But when we do ask ‘Why did I do that?’ – as some people always will – we need the question-and-answer logic of history to provide answers.

¹ *IH*, p. 213

² See Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 136-7

³ He considers it merely “epistemology”. See Helgeby, *Action as History*, pp. 51 and 58

⁴ *EM*, p. 27

The second hesitation is, I think, more of a problem for Collingwood's claim. Actually duty and investigative history are not identical, and neither are they prerequisites of each other. We can have a concept of duty, and know what our duty in a given situation is, without posing a single historical question. And for recognising uniqueness as a characteristic of human reality, a lower form of history will suffice just as well. Collingwood does not even use 'historical thinking' for the kind of reasoning used to decide on acts of duty. Deciding between "x, y and z as claimants for the title of my present duty" is, he says, a matter for one's 'consideration'.¹ Historical thinking is not 'consideration' *per se*. It might, of course, occur as part of that consideration process. But it might not; so recognising one's duty, or doing one's duty, does not presuppose scientific history.

By the same token, historical questions do not presuppose dutiful actions. But Collingwood seems to argue in *The New Leviathan* that they do – though he doesn't say this anywhere else. Here is the passage again:

To think historically is to explore a world consisting of things other than myself, each of them and individual or unique agent, in an individual or unique situation, doing an individual or unique action which he has to do because, charactered and circumstanced as he is, he can do no other.²

Let's use Collingwood's own language to follow his reasoning. In a utilitarian action, x is the means and y is the end. The historian inquiring into x (by asking 'Why did I do that?' or 'Why did he do that?') takes y as his specific unknown. If he is a scientific historian he uses evidence to offer a conclusion about what the thought-content was of the agent's y. If he is presupposing that the act was of a utilitarian nature, then y stands for the 'specific unknown end'. If he presupposes that the act was regularian the content of y is a specific unknown rule. The historian's question might be, in other words, 'what rule did he think he was following?' The specific unknown is still y. And it is again still y in acts of duty. But in acts of duty there is, Collingwood says, a "one-one relation" between x and y.³ He means to say that where acts of utility and rule-following have features which are not determined by the end or the rule (capricious elements), in duty nothing is left to caprice. To this Collingwood adds that, therefore,

¹ NL, 17.81

² NL, 18.52. See also Boucher's introduction to *EPP*, p. 42

³ NL, 17.53

dutiful action, among these three kinds of rational action, is the only one... whose explanations really explain; the only one whose answer to the question: 'Why did I do that action?' (namely, 'because it was my duty') answers precisely that question and not one more or less like it.¹

He seems, then, to be saying that the thought content of *y* will be not an end or a rule, but the action itself classed as a duty. *y* is the specific unknown duty, which has a one-one relation to *x*, the specific known deed.

We are not interested here in any shortcomings in Collingwood's account of duty. Such alleged shortcomings have anyway been dealt with by others. Our interest is his philosophy of history. The passage just quoted shows, I think, that here Collingwood has confused theoretical reasoning regarding non-dutiful acts with theoretical reasoning that ultimately fails to 'satisfy' its question – that is, fails to correlate. He uses the same language in his argument about history and duty, as we've seen, to dismiss historical explanations of the French Revolution which would also explain other revolutions of a similar kind.² The conflation, though, must be avoided, because actually scientific history in Collingwood's sense is in no way inappropriate to understanding utilitarian or regularian actions. It might be true that understanding dutiful acts requires the historian to have a concept of duty, but an historian is not less scientific just because he never investigates that kind of act. In other words, historians can legitimately conclude that the reasoning behind a deed was that doing *x* would secure *y*, or that *x* was done in order to follow rule *y*. What Collingwood should say, if history is a science, is that only theoretical reasoning that offers an answer correlative to its historical question offers historical knowledge. What he actually says in *The New Leviathan*³ is that only theoretical reasoning about dutiful acts is historical thinking. He thereby makes the value of history, as it is presented in *The New Leviathan*, dependent on his account of duty. If, as Donagan contends, Collingwood's account of duty is wrong, then history is a science which deals with a kind of act whose existence is doubtful.

Here, then, the equation of history with duty has begun to erode history as a science. And this 'erosion' pertains not only to 'Why did he do that?' questions, but also to 'Was he right?' questions. If historians get into the habit of saying 'he did it because it

¹ *NL*, 17.55

² Compare 'Goodness, Rightness and Utility' in *NL*, pp. 476-7, with 'Reality as History', in *PH*, pp. 180-1.

³ *NL*, 18.52

was his duty', and they accept that it was his duty, the answer to the evaluative question seems presupposed to be 'he was right to do it'. It cannot, by Collingwood's definition, be wrong to do one's duty, since duties are what one 'owes' – they are what one 'ought' to do.¹ It seems that by attempting to equate duty with history, Collingwood is inviting an implication much worse than what has been called the 'what-why paradox'. He is getting close to saying that once the historian knows why someone did something, he also knows why it was right.

The way out of the difficulties I've explained is either (a) to deny that the forms of 'history' which Collingwood discusses actually overlap at all, or (b) to concede that Collingwood has either made an error here in his account of 'history', or he is only talking about a lower form of 'history'. The first strategy would operate by not only cleanly separating what Collingwood says about subject-matter from what he says about 'question and answer', but also by insisting that a complete philosophy of the subject-matter of history is possible and demonstrable without the advantage of 'retrospect' from a higher form. According to this, Collingwood would be using *The New Leviathan* to narrow even further the subject-matter of history to dutiful actions. But this move invites chaos, since it divorces historical subject-matter from historical questions, and historical facts from historical thinking. All of those misinterpretations of Collingwood's doctrines about history that can only arise without that 'retrospect' are resurrected. The subject-matter of history is again asserted arbitrarily, except now the arbitrariness is compounded by the exclusion of utilitarian and regularian actions from history. Re-enactment is again arbitrarily insisted upon; the distinctness of sciences appears again to be based on their distinct objects – which Collingwood anyway still denies; and only someone prepared to assent to Collingwood's philosophy of mind, to his dialectical method in general, and now also (unlike Donagan) to his account of duty, can find much agreement in what Collingwood says about history. I've tried to show in this study that agreement can be found on Collingwood's most embattled contentions without presupposing his philosophy of mind or the so-called dialectical method at all. All one needs to agree with is that history, when done properly, poses certain kinds of question and seeks to answer them systematically using evidence. To deny the overlap of the forms of history I've described would be not only to assert that the concept of 'history' defies a pattern of overlapping concepts in Collingwood's thinking that he is perfectly explicit about, and which has already been observed in certain other concepts by commentators from

¹ *NL*, 17.15

Boucher and Mink and beyond – but it would also be to dismiss a legitimately available line of defence for those contentions.

The second is, I think, the best option. We have to conclude that Collingwood has contrived rather clumsily this argument about the equation and co-presupposition of history and duty, and that in doing so he does no justice to his own philosophy of history, let alone to the points he can make about what scientific history offers civilization. It is not clumsily presented, of course: nothing Collingwood says is. But it is clumsy in view of the accidental damage it does. We should concede that instead of saying that the consciousness of duty is identical with the historical consciousness,¹ Collingwood ought to have said that both rest on the kind of thinking that can, when needed, dispense with utility and rules and think in terms of uniqueness without rendering the object of thought arbitrary. In the present study, we have already seen Collingwood making this point anyway. The argument for uniqueness by allusion to dutiful action adds nothing to it. In conclusion, this argument does not demonstrate that the practical function of history is to underpin duty and further man's freedom by that route. All it demonstrates is that the kind of reason that can answer 'why' questions about acts of duty is simply a kind of reason that has a place for the concept of uniqueness.

viii

Transition from freedom to civilization and progress

Collingwood's opening question regarding history in the 1926 Lectures is "What are we doing it *for*? in other words, how does this study fit into our general view of the aims and purposes of human life?" In order to get to the best answers he offers in later work to this question, we should modify that question slightly, and we should modify it in such a way that what we've already heard about the highest form of history, history as a science, remains properly the focus. Our question is, then, 'How does history as a science – investigative history – fit into our general view of the aims and purposes of human life?'

I propose now a certain direction. We should abandon the contention that it is only through history that man knows himself to be free, or can realise his freedom

¹ *NL*, 18.52-18.7. See also *EPP*, p. 157

through dutiful acts. We don't leave empty handed, though. Following Collingwood's argument in 'History and Freedom' we can still accept that it is only through autonomous problem-solving that man knows himself to be free, and that history is a form of problem-solving that is autonomous from other forms. Our interest since the close of part two has been in history specifically, so this argument – which in fact concerns the questioning activity in general – shouldn't detain us here.

Instead we should take seriously further arguments about history specifically, starting with the function of history within civilization as outlined in *The New Leviathan* and other essays in political philosophy. After that we'll move on to Collingwood's argument that historical thinking creates progress. My reasons for thinking this the right course at this juncture are as follows.

Firstly, abandoning the argument about history and freedom as it is offered in *The Idea of History* means opening up the social and political function of history for 'man' rather than for individual 'men'. Collingwood is quite clear that freedom is something that pertains only, and reducibly, to individuals.¹ By leaving behind the direct relationship between doing history and realizing one's own freedom, then, we can pursue his arguments about the importance of history to human life, rather than to *a* human life – which means that what is at stake is why *we* should protect history, rather than why *I* should take an interest in it.

In fact freedom in Collingwood's thinking is not only a given presupposition of social activity. Individual freedom is also something that civilization produces – through education.² In this sense freedom is an aim of politics, not just a presupposition of choice. Civilization and progress, then, do not only presuppose freedom, they also foster it. All the same I propose to discuss civilization and progress on their own terms, rather than as means to a kind of freedom which is more implicit in Collingwood's political arguments than explicit. This is, I think, more in line with the first opening question of Collingwood's 1926 Lectures which I began the present study by quoting. Progress and civilization can be "aims and purposes of human life" in their own right, and are not only valuable as means to freedom.

¹ See NL, 13.18-27

² NL, 37.1. Boucher has explained how this puts Collingwood more in line with continental liberals, and his account of Collingwood's liberalism puts more historical perspective in the frame that I can here. See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 141-66. See particularly the ten or so pages from p. 145. Boucher also provides a detailed discussion of the relations between Collingwood's liberalism and that of the (other) British and Italian idealists. See approximately pp. 147-54, and the comparison with Ruggiero's account of freedom on p. 144. Gary Browning has recently gone to some length to demonstrate the resonance between civilization and freedom in Collingwood's thinking and that in Hegel's. See particularly *Rethinking R. G. Collingwood*, pp. 125-39

And finally, as well as opening up to the present inquiry what Collingwood thought was at stake beyond one's own freedom for the maintenance of scientific history, it brings us into areas already discussed in sophisticated Collingwood scholarship.¹

ix

History and civilization: in theory

There has already been some strong work done on other aspects of the relationship between history and civilization in Collingwood's thought. Of particular interest is a 1995 volume of essays on Collingwood, *Philosophy, History and Civilization*, particularly David Boucher's contribution, 'The Place of Education in Civilization'. It is an insightful and not uncritical treatment of Collingwood's thought on the subject, and I discuss it here only with the intention of showing the reader what has already been covered that we needn't rehearse, and what he has left open for the present inquiry.²

Boucher refers to the importance of handing down practical scientific knowledge from generation to generation³ – which might be fairly summarised as the technical importance of the 'content' of inherited knowledge. In *The New Leviathan* Collingwood presents an argument – and it is a very convincing one – that civilization regarding man's exploitation of his natural environment depends on a certain level of civility in his social environment.⁴ Civility, in short, is required for the transfer of knowledge. But Collingwood does not call that transfer of knowledge 'history' – even though it is obviously based on knowledge of the past successes of individuals getting what they needed from their surroundings. And if he did call it 'history', it would not be scientific

¹ Boucher notes, however, that many commentators have "chosen to ignore the very close theoretical connections" between mind, society, and civilization in Collingwood's social and political philosophy. (See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 195-6) Here we have only indirectly to touch on Collingwood's philosophy of mind. As I've already argued in Part IV, although Collingwood's arguments about historical method draw on his philosophy of mind, they are not dependent upon it. Our interest here is in the role of history in civilization.

² Taking many of her cues from Boucher's work, Marnie Hughes-Warrington has provided a really valuable study of the relevance of Collingwood's philosophy to education. See Hughes-Warrington, particularly pp. 9-46, 155-202. Her focus is really on what schools should teach, how they should be organised, and what they should take as their aims. The importance of education to civilization is taken for granted – as is only appropriate given the aim of her study.

³ Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', pp. 282-3, 286-7

⁴ See *NL*, 36.25; 36.46-52

history. At best it would be the transference and sharing of today's historical conclusions. That is why Collingwood actually calls it "an ancestral, prehistoric civility".¹

Boucher also refers to the fact that education should also, for Collingwood, concern itself with "inducing habits of orderly and systematic thinking",² and with encouraging people to attain the highest form of rationality by being able to ask and think through 'Why did I do that?' – in the way the practical reason of duty is supposed to be associated, as we already know, with the theoretical reason of history. I've already explained why, although both 'systematic thinking' and 'concrete uniqueness' are involved in historical thinking, the function of history as a science cannot be satisfactorily explained by reference to those concepts in general. And Boucher also discusses very efficiently Collingwood's series of contentions that metaphysics is an historical science, that without metaphysics there is no science, and that without science there is no civilization. (We return to this below.) But the most relevant part of Boucher's article for our purposes is that in which he discusses the importance of "these so-called historical sciences", which are "at once descriptive and critical".³ He refers to passages in *An Autobiography* and *The New Leviathan* in which Collingwood claims that the purpose of the history of scientific, economic, and particularly of moral and political thinking are meant to improve your own practice – they are for the sake of acting better.⁴ Boucher's investigation does not require him to go further into this.⁵ He is, after all, attempting to display in full range the nuances of Collingwood's thinking not only regarding history and civilization, but history as part of education in general and civilization – so he is wise not to get diverted. In short, Boucher has left open the question of the role for civilization of history as a form of inquiry specifically. How, then, does investigative history serve better action?

As we saw in 'Transition from practice to theory', historical investigations serve action when they arise out of questions of action. It probably needs little demonstration that, where important historical questions arise out of pressing questions of what to do, it is presupposed that answering that question correctly rather than falsely is desirable for the sake of deciding upon the best course of action. Here is an example: If I am approaching the deadline for making an important financial decision, and my financial

¹ *NL*, 36.52

² *EM*, p. 134. See Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', p. 283

³ Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', pp. 287, 289-90

⁴ Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', pp. 289-90

⁵ At the close of the essay Boucher returns to the subject of Collingwood's "historical or criteriological sciences" and points out to his reader Collingwood's implicit emphasis of "the importance of people like himself in the civilizing process". Boucher, 'The Place of Education in Civilization', p. 295

advisor is unavailable for a conversation, I might instead go back through my correspondence with him to find out what options he had given me, what considerations he had made regarding each, and what course of action he had recommended. That is an historical investigation. My question is ‘What did my advisor suggest as the answer to this (largely unchanged) financial situation?’ (‘What was he ‘driving at’ in these letters and emails?’) It is an historical investigation arising out of a practical problem. By seeking an answer, I am already presupposing that my decision will be better if I answer my historical question properly. If I didn’t presuppose that, I would not take the time to investigate it. Collingwood’s contention, then – that historical knowledge helps us to act better – is not really in need of demonstration. When historical problems arise out of practical problems, it is already presupposed that the right ‘historical’ answer facilitates a better practical solution. If it is not presupposed, the historical question does not arise in the first place. If it does arise, but answering it would not help, it is a question of no importance. The ‘knowledge’ that would be its answer would be utterly useless – or, as Collingwood puts it, “academic”.¹

How, then, do historical questions that *do* arise serve the “aim of human life” that we call ‘civilization’? That depends on what we mean by ‘civilization’. Collingwood discusses ‘civilization’ in several chapters of the *Essay on Metaphysics*² where he argues that, if metaphysics is historical investigation aimed at explicating the absolute presuppositions made in certain lines of reasoning, and civilization depends on metaphysics in this sense, then civilization depends on historical thinking. I will not waste the reader’s time by rehearsing an argument he can find elsewhere, both in the original form and in ample commentary.³ I will instead point out that the arguments about historical science in the *Essay on Metaphysics* explain the importance of history only in so far as it is required for answering metaphysical questions. Although all metaphysical questions are historical questions, not all historical questions are metaphysical questions. I’ve already said that, on Collingwood’s account, metaphysicians are a special class of historians with special dispensation against having to ask ‘Was he right?’ Collingwood’s arguments about the purpose of metaphysics explains the dependence of orderly thinking on explicating presuppositions, but does not explain the purpose of answering historical questions that are not metaphysical.

¹ *NL*, 2.5-51; 2.55. See also 26.22

² See *EM*, pp. 103, and particularly 133-42 (i.e. ch. XIII, ‘The Propaganda of Irrationalism’)

³ *EM*, pp. 34-48. See also Boucher, ‘The Place of Education in Civilization’, pp. 288-9

The meaning of ‘civilization’ is laid out in a more focused and systematic way in Part III of *The New Leviathan* – and there is nothing about metaphysics in *The New Leviathan*. Collingwood explains that, properly speaking, civilization is the process that occurs in a community of becoming civil, (rather than the state resulting from that process).¹ And it is an asymptotic process: though it is never complete, under civilization the community resembles ever more an ideal of civility.² Because it can never achieve its ideal, civilization is a “permanent enterprise”.³ Relating ‘civilly’ consists in ‘respecting’ people – that is, treating them as beings with free will, rather than relating to them by force.⁴ ‘Civilization’ therefore “indicates abstention from the use of force”, and although “a degree of force is inevitable in human life”, nevertheless “being civilized means cutting it down, and becoming more civilized means cutting it down still further”.⁵ In this process, individuals within a community relate increasingly civilly to other individuals within that community, and also ever better to members of other communities. And it is this that is of direct interest to us here: whether – and, if so, how – investigative history is useful, or even necessary, to the process of improving relations between man and man by extending civility; i.e. to the process of civilization.

Collingwood explains that “the process whereby a community becomes civilized is the process whereby its members become free agents: agents possessing and exercising free will. To have free will implies being conscious of freedom”.⁶ We have already examined Collingwood’s argument in ‘History and Freedom’ about how it is only through the discovery of history that man has become conscious of his freedom. I said that, although that argument holds strong cards in the suit of freedom, it is empty-handed in that of ‘history as a science’ specifically. We therefore abandoned that argument as it is presented in *The Idea of History*.

Now this is what I think Collingwood really thinks freedom consists in: truly autonomous problem-solving. This is the freedom implied by the having of free will in

¹ *NL*, 34.36. See also 34.22

² By this Collingwood means that the process of civilization is “if the process of civilizing is at work”, he says, “the civil elements in the life of the community are gradually predominating and the barbarous elements are being gradually prevailed over, though the community’s condition never becomes one of pure civility and the barbarous elements never vanish”. *NL*, 34.55

³ *NL*, 21.92

⁴ Medhat Khattar has already provided an interesting discussion of how civility in certain social circumstances means ‘toleration’. See Medhat Khattar, ‘Toleration, Civility, and ‘Absolute Presuppositions’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 6, nos 1-2 (2010), pp. 113-35. As this is not the only kind of civility to which historical thinking is necessary, I have maintained a more loyal sense of civility in general.

⁵ *NL*, 39.11; 39.15

⁶ *NL*, 37.1-2

The New Leviathan. “This consciousness of freedom is self-respect”, he says.¹ I respect myself, then, not because I am free from the instructions of others at all times, but because I can and do solve my own problems in my own ways.² I respect myself because I know I don’t allow my emotions to get the better of my intellect. I respect myself because I prefer to find out systematically the real nature of the situation I am in, rather than to be satisfied with the illusions and narratives my “sectarian” thinking³ maintains or (worse) creates in (or *as*) that situation. Equally, I respect another when he is such an autonomous problem-solver; but I cannot respect him (i.e. recognise his free will) when he wallows in his problems, lets situations and emotions get the better of him, or even creates more for himself.

I’ve already explained that, although Collingwood’s argument about autonomous problem-solving is a good one, he fails to demonstrate that history is the only form of problem-solving that delivers it. *The New Leviathan*, I think, offers a different function for history in relation to freedom that Collingwood does not take advantage of. That function concerns the recognition that *others* are free as well.

For Collingwood, it is recognizing the freedom of others with whom one stands in social relations that makes society, social activity, and *civility* possible.⁴ Civility is the demeanour of a self-respecting man towards one whom he respects. Without it there might only be *servility* – the demeanour of a man lacking self-respect towards one whom he fears.⁵ Civility, then, presupposes the recognition of others as free agents. But Collingwood explains how we come to view others as free as follows: Self-respect, he says, recognizing one’s own freedom, is “inseparably bound up” with the respect for others.⁶ “No man has any idea of himself as a free agent, without an idea of free agents other than himself and of social relations between them”.⁷

Collingwood’s argument appeals to the principle that ideas about the self are attended by correlative ideas about others. Whether or not the reader finds this principle convincing – and today’s specialists in Asperger syndrome might offer a catalogue of qualifications and exceptions – he will probably observe also that here Collingwood has missed an opportunity for further demonstrating the reliance of civilization upon history. It is not (or not only) in recognising one’s own freedom that history plays a necessary

¹ *NL*, 37.12, 13.31

² This may, of course, be inconsistent in practice. See *NL*, 21.8

³ *NL*, 16.11

⁴ *NL*, 19.57; 20.2-23; 20.61; 20.72; 20.9; 21.6

⁵ *NL*, 37.11-17. This is, of course, a major departure from Hobbes.

⁶ *NL*, 37.13; 37.16. See also 21.19; 21.76

⁷ *NL*, 21.19

role, but also in recognising freedom, or certain degrees of freedom, in others. By choosing to ‘bind the two inseparably’ Collingwood elects not to open up the crack between self and other which would actually suit his previous arguments about history rather nicely. He turns the opportunity down partly because he wants to get on with the business in hand in those chapters, dealing with ‘society as joint will’ and ‘civilization as education’. But he turns it down mostly because he thinks he’s already demonstrated two things: first the connexion between history and freedom, as we’ve already seen; and second the interdependence of ‘self’ and ‘other’.¹ In other passages in *The New Leviathan*, the freedom of others is not ‘given’ in this way: Collingwood discusses “those who, having reached mental maturity, are capable of free action”, for example, and “those who are not”.² And in chapter thirty seven: ‘Civilization as Education’, for example, children have to be made free. Other people are not always recognised as free just because we recognise our own freedom. We might, of course, recognise everyone’s *potential* freedom.

But as the only available discipline for investigating the free actions of others, history serves not only to show that others think freely, but also to facilitate and regulate investigations of how autonomous and how capricious their reasoning is. By ‘regulated’ I mean controlled by the normal ‘rules’ of reasoned demonstration with evidence. In a political community, understanding the actions and reasoning of each other, let alone those of the authorities set up in our name, is of no small importance. It is necessary to the practice of joint will³ – so the form of theoretical reasoning that assists the answering of practical problems of that kind is of no small importance either. “Joining with these others” on terms of civility, rather than on terms of force or fear, therefore presupposes the recognition of them as to some degree autonomous, and a readiness to follow their reasoning. Only then can a community become a society, and go about its business of solving its common situational problems autonomously and civilly.

¹ *NL*, 21.19

² *NL*, 25.42

³ See *NL*, 37.18

History and civilization: in practice

That, then, is historical thinking and civilization in theory. Now we'll turn to practice. Collingwood's project of writing and publishing *The New Leviathan*, it is generally assumed, is what he is referring to in the closing passage of his *Autobiography*. "I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism", he says. "I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight."¹ Thus ends the *Autobiography*. Three years later, *The New Leviathan* emerges.

But because *The New Leviathan* is a device for the netting of very big fish, it has to trawl, for the most part, at a depth far removed from the everyday lives of men. It does not skim the surface of recent political history with the same fine mesh which, in the *Autobiography*, snares David Lloyd George ("a landmark, second only to the *Daily Mail*, in the corruption of the electorate"²), Ramsay MacDonald ("who seemed to say so much and never said anything at all"³) and the "con-man" Stanley Baldwin ("who seldom said anything except what an honest man he was and how completely every one could trust him"⁴). Because of this, it is the *Autobiography* which provides the best specimens of everyday 'historical thinking' in the currents of political life.⁵

Here we can see how Collingwood thinks maintaining the settlement of a democratic system of government depends on maintaining certain habits of mind among a populace. This is not exclusively Collingwood, of course: Machiavelli's *Discourses* are full of the same idea. "So long as the majority were well enough informed and public-spirited enough for what they had to do, fools and knaves would be outvoted",⁶ Collingwood explains. The democratic system is not only a form of government: it is also "a school of political experience coextensive with the nation",⁷ in which, "so long as the individual voters did their political duty by keeping themselves adequately informed on public questions... there was little danger that their representatives would be insufficiently informed... to do their work creditably".⁸

¹ *A*, p. 167

² *A*, p. 156

³ *A*, p. 162

⁴ *A*, p. 162

⁵ See though, *NL*, 30.4-45, which affords an exception to this rough rule.

⁶ *A*, p. 155

⁷ *A*, p. 153

⁸ *A*, pp. 154-5

In order to maintain democratic government, the degree to which the public is informed must be maintained and, if possible, improved. The news must be conceived as the situation in which the reader, listener, or viewer, finds himself called to act, and not as “facts, or fictions, which it might amuse him to read... a mere spectacle for idle moments”.¹ But informed about what? Informed, of course, about society’s ‘situation’: the problems, of various kinds (moral, political, economic, etc.)² that it faces, and the good and/or best solutions that are available. Importantly, these are the kind of practical problems that give rise to the theoretical problems that demand ‘historical thinking’, and in various ways.

For one thing, there are sometimes/often/always people in a community who want to mislead the populace about its collective situation. Historical thinking carries an inherent distrust of what it is fed by (would-be) authorities, and the demand for real evidence to support claims about human, political situations.³ As in historical work, so in political life: when we stick to what the testimonies of ‘authorities’ tell us – when we treat them as sources of knowledge – we are easily led astray. The British media and the National Government, Collingwood says, misled the British public, either by ignorance or by design, about the true nature of the Spanish ‘Revolution’ of 1930-31. This is an example of one group of people misrepresenting the collective situation in order to win public support for a course of action that is not that of the common good. But a nation makes itself very much more difficult to deceive when it demands *evidence*. As it was in the early ’30s...

The electorate was willing to put up with almost anything so long as war was averted. But no evidence was produced, either then or later, that it had been. No evidence was produced that either or both of the dictators bullied the British government into adopting the ‘non-intervention’ policy by threats of war. No evidence was produced that the British government would have endangered peace... No evidence of these things was produced; and there were things which, certainly, no one would have believed at the time, and no one ever will believe, without evidence, and conclusive evidence, adduced to prove them.⁴

¹ *A*, p. 155

² See *A*, pp. 148-9

³ *A*, pp. 159-63

⁴ *A*, p. 162

And there are things which, we might add, no one ever should believe without evidence to prove them, especially where private gain or appeals to the emotions are being offered in place of such evidence.¹

But it is also only by scientific historical thinking that we are able to construct properly answers to the question of why these ‘authorities’ want us to believe certain things. This brings to light features of the collective situation which have perhaps been kept in the dark. “Failing any statement of the ‘National’ government’s policy”, Collingwood says, “I found myself obliged to infer their policy from the evidence of their actions. This was not difficult. For any one accustomed to interpret evidence, their actions admitted only one explanation”.²

It is in these ways, then, that scientific historical questioning is necessary as a certain habit of mind among a populace, which is in turn necessary to the maintenance of democratic government – the political *modus operandi* of civilization.³ It is historical thinking by which a voter constructs in his own mind the actual situation in which a community finds itself. But it is also by historical thinking that voters can understand properly the situations of their own politicians, which are so often misrepresented to them. It is historical thinking that must go further, and ask not only what the politician’s solution is, but whether or not that was and is a good one. And it is historical thinking that enables a voter to see through the claims of a would-be-authority newspaper that, for example, a U-turn is proof of weakness or of political humiliation, and to see that it might in fact be rather the right solution, carried out by a political *virtuoso*, in response to a political situation that has changed and, in the course of events, become something else.

¹ See *A*, p. 167

² *A*, p. 163

³ See *NL*, chs XXXV-XXXVII, XXVI

Civilization is itself an asymptotic process.¹ But it also consists of progress within what Collingwood calls “channels of development”.² In our own time, academic terminological orthodoxy has turned against ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’, identifying them as agents of Western supremacism. It should be obvious from what we’ve just heard why such objections to Collingwood’s invocation of ‘civilization’ would probably be superficial. The same should be clear from what follows about objections to Collingwood’s idea of ‘progress’.

Collingwood tries to explain why history serves man’s progress in §7 of *The Idea of History*’s ‘Epilegomena’. The section was written, under the title ‘Progress’, as a chapter of the second part of Collingwood’s 1936 Oxford lectures on the philosophy of history, which he had called ‘Metaphysical Epilegomena’.³ It is worth dwelling on this subject of scientific history and progress, at least because it is necessary to reassure today’s reader that there is nothing of the ‘Whig interpretation of history’ about what follows.

By the time he wrote this script ‘Progress’, Collingwood had already been writing on the subject of history and progress for nearly ten years (at least), and for all of that time the notion of ‘problem and solution’ had been a central component of his arguments about it. It occurs in his 1927 essay on ‘The Theory of Historical Cycles’, where he says that the *only* sense in which history can be a progress (“and nothing but a progress”) is that it is a succession of problems and solutions.⁴ He explicitly discounts the sense of ‘progress’ according to which any of the phases through which history moves is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than any of the others. However, justice is not fully done to the idea – “not wholly untrue” – that “throughout history man has been working at the same problem, and has been solving it better and better”.⁵ This point, only really hinted at there, receives a more thorough treatment two years later in a 1929 article for *The Realist*, titled simply ‘A Philosophy of Progress’.⁶ By 1936 (and this is what ends up in *The Idea of History*) Collingwood had relaxed his earlier claim that the “only” sense in which history was a progress was that it was a process of problems being solved and leading to new

¹ NL, 34.5

² NL, 41.7

³ See *IH*, pp. xiii-xv

⁴ *EPH*, p. 86

⁵ *EPH*, p. 84. Emphasis added.

⁶ In *EPH*

problems. The idea that progress is simply a succession of problems and solutions is, Collingwood now adds, “just as true of a dog as of a man”.¹ What is specifically ‘historical’ is when new specific types of “actions or thoughts or situations” come into existence, where such novelties are conceived of as improvements. This is what makes a succession of problems and solutions a progress in the positive sense. But ‘improvements’ from whose point of view? The Collingwood of 1929 might have said ‘from our own’, or ‘from the historian’s’ – before adding, in his mischievous impertinent way, something to the effect of ‘who else?’ But now, in the 1936 argument, the position has changed in a manner reminiscent of Mill’s appeal to judgements of higher pleasures. Improvements are assessed from the point of view of those who know both types.²

Collingwood’s new example concerns an old and a new method of catching fish. This seems conspicuously to be a problem that has been around for millennia. Here we should remember part of Collingwood’s argument about why problems are never ‘eternal’ in their concreteness:

People will speak of a savage as ‘confronted by the eternal problem of obtaining food’. But what really confronts him is the problem, quite transitory like all things human, of spearing this fish, or digging up this root, or finding blackberries in this wood.³

The argument continues that only those who know both methods by actual experience can decide whether or not the new is an improvement on the old. And if they cannot know the old method by actual experience, they must rely on the “sympathetic insight which may take its place for such a purpose”. In order for the change to be an improvement, it is not necessary that the old method be thought a bad one, but that the new be thought *better*. “This he can only do”, Collingwood says, “on condition of his knowing what the old way of life was like, that is, having historical knowledge of his society’s past while he is actually living in the present he is creating: for historical knowledge is simply the re-enactment of past experiences in the mind of the present thinker”.⁴ The only one genuine meaning for the question of progress is, he says, this:

¹ *IH*, p. 324

² *IH*, pp. 324-7

³ *A*, pp. 32-3

⁴ *IH*, p. 326

If thought in its first phase, after solving the initial problems of that phase, is then, through solving these, brought up against others which defeat it; and if the second solves these further problems without losing its hold on the solution of the first, so that there is gain without any corresponding loss, then there is progress. And there can be progress on no other terms. If there is any loss, the problem of setting loss against gain is insoluble.¹

Now this seems to be a much more satisfactory sense of progress, at least as a definition, and it is very clear how Collingwood thinks ‘history’, or at least ‘historical knowledge’, is necessary to it. An additional virtue, which also makes this argument itself an exemplary improvement on earlier essays on progress, is that it reconciles the apparent contradiction between the facts that (a) our modern solutions can be improvements on old ones, even though (b) our problems and purposes are different from those of the past. The claim is that present solutions ‘contain’ or ‘retain’ those of the past. One of the errors made in our own time in arguments about the history of ideas is the assumption that authors’ problems across time are either (a) the same, or (b) different. Collingwood has reconciled the two by having problems develop not in such a way that they are separated, but in such a way that they overlap.

The cost of this definition of progress is that it limits the range of the concept to a particular problem, or set of problems that are somehow interrelated. We can never really talk of the general ‘progress’ of our society, or of an age, let alone of humanity in general. Instead we can only aim at the progress of specific ‘lines’ of problem-solving – or, in Collingwood’s words, “channels of development”.² The natural sciences are the archetypical example of a line of questioning that exhibits progress.³ But as long as there are problems arising and solutions being established in succession, there can be progress in any discipline: and this means in history and in philosophy.⁴ (Where there is no real process of successive problem-solving, there can be no progress – though there can be *development*.⁵)

This narrowing to ‘channels’ of problem-solving is not itself a great cost, since it is still not terribly limiting on what we can say about the processes among us. Our politics as a whole are ‘progressive’ when (and only when) solutions are being found to

¹ *IH*, p. 329

² *NL*, 41.7

³ See *IH*, p. 332

⁴ See *NL*, 21.94

⁵ Collingwood’s example is art. But he also says there is no progress in comfort, happiness, or satisfaction. *IH*, p. 330

the political problems that are newly arisen among us, without any corresponding loss of our hold over the problems that were previously 'solved'.

But this qualification of 'no corresponding loss' means that it can almost never be said that 'our politics' are in a state of progress. We are constantly losing our hold on previously 'solved' problems. The eruption of war between nations previously at peace is proof that the settlement that maintained that peace has slipped, albeit under new pressures. And the relaxation of the legal and social incentives that previously held marriages together, although intended as solutions to attendant moral evils that follow the marriage ideal when rigidly applied (not least of which is the problem of a kind of domestic oppression that affects women more than it does men), have meant a corresponding loss in our society's ability to discipline and educate children in a stable and controlled way.¹ A truly progressive move would be a new arrangement that reconciled and satisfied new requirements and maintained the solution to old ones. But, as Collingwood says, "If there is any loss, the problem of setting loss against gain is insoluble".²

So what is Collingwood's concluding point about how history creates this progress in political reality? The answer is to be found on the last two pages of *The Idea of History*. Einsteinian physics is an improvement on Newton only because it 'retains' the solutions found by Newton. What follows that short discussion is, again, an example of progress in politics (which is more appropriate here anyway), and finally the closing words of Collingwood's classic posthumous work:

Progress, in those cases (common or rare) when it happens, happens only in one way: by the retention in the mind, at one phase, of what was achieved in the preceding phase. The two phases are related not merely by way of succession, but by way of continuity, and continuity of a particular kind... If we want to abolish capitalism or war, and in doing so not only to destroy them but to bring into existence something better, we must begin by understanding them: seeing what the problems are which our economic or international system succeeds in solving, and how the solution of these is related to the other problems which it fails to solve. This understanding of the system we set out to supersede is a thing which we must retain throughout the work of superseding it, as a knowledge of the past conditioning our creation of the future. It may be

¹ My examples are drawn from *IH*, p. 331, though the elaborations are my own.

² *IH*, p. 329

impossible to do this; our hatred of the thing we are destroying may prevent us from understanding it, and we may love it so much that we cannot destroy it unless we are blinded by such hatred. But if that is so, there will once more, as so often in the past, be change but no progress; we shall have lost our hold on one group of problems in our anxiety to solve the next. And we ought by now to realize that no kindly law of nature will save us from the fruits of our own ignorance.¹

This “retention in the mind... of what was achieved in the preceding phase”, this “understanding” of the problems of the past and especially of the solutions still in place among us to hold them down, is, of course, a product of history. If progress is to be achieved and maintained, it is necessary that those engaged at the ‘mining end’ of any channel of inquiry understand the settlements of that line’s past. Indeed, as Ian Winchester has again argued in a recent article for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, this is why advances in physics presuppose knowledge of the history of physics² – or, at least, some knowledge of the recent history of physics.

In his *Autobiography* Collingwood describes his own attitude towards politics as “what in England is called democratic and on the Continent liberal”.³ Here we see that this ‘liberalism’ retains the achievements of Burke’s classical conservatism. Proceed by all means with improvements and reforms to the political system that supports us, he is saying, but beware of destroying at the same time that of which you don’t understand the function.⁴

In philosophy there might be more room for recklessness, and the risks of aiming at a wholesale overhaul of ‘the system’ significantly lower – at least in terms of body-counts and so on. But if politics *is* political thought, losing our grip on the solutions of the past that we have since built upon means not investigating our history on our own terms, but allowing those old problems of politics, in Burke’s imagery, to blow

¹ *IH*, pp. 333-4

² See Ian Winchester, ‘Physics and History’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2008), pp. 17-35

³ *A*, p. 153

⁴ There are further expressions of the general principle of conservatism (though it is very general) in *NL*, particularly at 36.33-34, where Collingwood writes: “in this kind of science improving on what is handed down to us is far less important than conserving it; a fact which it is well to remember. The proportion between the two things has been much misunderstood in the last century or two when for accidental and temporary reasons Europeans have attached too much importance to invention and too little to conservation.”

themselves open beneath our feet.¹ Collingwood identified the initial tremors of this kind of slippage in the lead-up to the Second World War, which is why the course of action he took was a public reinforcement of ‘Hobbesian’ foundations in an updated and accessible form, in *The New Leviathan*.²

Now, the reader might already have noticed that this whole argument about history and progress appeals to a form of history according to which ‘history’ means historical knowledge. When he says ‘history’ here Collingwood is not talking about history as a science, at least not explicitly. This time, however, the overlap is fairly obvious and, furthermore, the connexion to progress, unlike the connexion to duty, strengthens his argument about scientific history.

If Collingwood is guilty of misstatement it is only because the idea of ‘retention in the mind’ seems to equate historical knowledge with memory. Importantly, history as a science is not the “retention in the mind... of what was achieved in the preceding phase”:³ it is the investigation of it, the reconstruction of it. The overlap of historical knowledge with ‘history as a science’ consists in the fact that scientific knowledge is created by systematic investigation: it is not created by being remembered. If progress were reliant only on memory, we could only improve on what we could remember; we could only retain the achievements of the past according to, at worst, our own memories and the stories we’d been told and, at best, a form of history which is stuck at the level of ‘scissors and paste’. It is because we can investigate history that we can come to understand the ‘solution’ nature of much of what survives among us in a systematic, evidenced way – rather, we might add, than by keeping it as an article of conservative political faith or dogma.

Collingwood offers an account of doing precisely this himself in *An Autobiography*. He recounts how he “began to reconsider in in detail all the familiar topics and problems of moral philosophy... on the principles which by now were controlling all my work”.⁴ One of these principles, he says, is that every topic and problem has its history and is “unintelligible without some knowledge of that history”. Now, *prima facie* the principle is untrue. Someone coming to moral philosophy with a principle of reading nothing written before 1980 could not only make a great deal of sense of most

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790] L. G. Mitchell (ed.) (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 58

² See, though, Boucher’s clarification of the relationship between “the two *Leviathans*” in *Social and Political Thought*, pp. 63-109

³ *IH*, pp. 333-4

⁴ *A*, p. 148

contemporary debates in that field, but could actually be a valuable contributor to some of them as well. Collingwood's claim is easily salvageable by pointing out either that even a book published earlier this year is 'history', or that 'history' includes the function of ascribing to any moral philosopher a question he is understood to be answering. But that is changing the terms of the claim such that it is trivially true.

The real value of investigating the history of a problem is not that it makes the problem's present form 'intelligible', but that it ensures that today's contributions are progressive, that they build on achievements hitherto secured, rather than that they relapse into errors that have already been made and exploded. Collingwood reappraised the history of moral philosophy not purely because he wanted to understand it better, but because he wanted to make sure that, by contributing to it himself, he was offering good solutions to new problems without weakening moral philosophy's hold over old ones.¹ This is, of course, why historians of philosophy have to ask whether a past solution is right or wrong. They have to ask whether So-and-so was right, because their historical inquiry into what So-and-so thought – what his reasoning was – is driven by a presupposed need to find out whether a certain question has already been answered adequately; or, if not, what considerations have already been offered along the right lines. The conclusion that follows from all of this is, then, that scientific history of philosophy is *for* the progress of philosophy itself; and the history of political thought is *for* the progress of political thinking.

¹ This is what produces what Boucher calls the "idealist conception of the history of philosophy". See Boucher, *Social and Political Thought*, p. 93

Part VII

Conclusions

i

Summary

It is time to sum up what has been said and to say something about what it means for us.

We've seen that history can be a 'science' – a science in the 'Baconian' sense that sound historical questions can be posed and systematically answered by being broken down into series of sub-questions and answered by recourse to evidence. Because all history is the history of thought – and because the vital characteristics of starting questions in history are the same as those in the apparent sub-discipline, the history of ideas – the 'rules' of scientific history are the same as those for the history of ideas.

But we've also seen that Collingwood does not consistently speak of history in this way. In fact he also uses 'history' to refer to assertions of unique, concrete facts, and instances of 'becoming'. These 'forms' of history are not simply different sub-topics of his writings on history. Generally they are chronologically and thematically mixed in his work. But they are not separate: the three forms of history – though other readers might identify more – lend themselves, by the way Collingwood employs them in his discussions, to precisely the sort of 'scale of forms' that he thinks characterises all philosophical concepts. He does not say this explicitly, and I have not claimed that although he didn't say it he *really* meant it. I have meant only to demonstrate that what are apparently competing, or at least separate, 'categories' within the idea of history, are actually reconcilable such that the highest form – history as a science – gives reason to what are otherwise defects of arbitrariness in lower forms.

The lower forms of history are absorbed into the highest form by Collingwood's Law of Primitive Survivals. But that highest form, 'history as a science', is not itself a lower form of some other science, because its specific type of question is special to it, so that such questions cannot be satisfied by answers that do not correlate to them.

The specialness of those questions consists of several conditions which I have explained as 'characteristics' of their typical 'specific unknown'. They are not discussed as such by Collingwood. He has phrased his arguments about history as a science

differently, such that his claims and arguments have appeared to some readers as in various ways defective. But I have argued that by making them more explicitly into terms of what historical questions (in Collingwood's own phrase) "expect", Collingwood's contentions are reasonable and, as far as his account of investigative history goes, workable.

It is because we have approached 'question and answer' in history in this way that we have seen that the doctrine of re-enactment has been taken routinely to be much more complex than it really is. Some commentators have tried to make sense of it by appealing to Collingwood's philosophy of mind and language. But, imported into history, Collingwood's philosophy of mind only functions as support for certain presuppositions of historical questions, and those can anyway be presupposed on other grounds. Appealing to Collingwood's claims in philosophy of mind as if they are his hidden supporting arguments for the doctrine of re-enactment only alienates readers who can see further defects in his philosophy of mind and language. Actually re-enactment is necessary to historical knowledge simply because no properly historical question can be satisfied without it. And this, we have seen, is what answers the criticisms that survive other commentators' attempts to defend the doctrine of re-enactment.

What Collingwood has illuminated, whether he intended to or not, is something more about what kind of thing we are trying to find out when we ask historical questions that really are 'historical', and what counts as an answer. The claim that re-enactment is not necessary for historical knowledge can only be maintained if this feature of Collingwood's delineation of what historical questions pursue is also overturned. Denying that historical knowledge is about re-enacted thoughts looks easy and tenable; but it seems less so when it is demonstrated that it also means denying something that Collingwood is implicitly endorsing as a characteristic of all historical questions – common to all historical questions, but exclusive to the questions of history: namely, what somebody 'meant' by something, in the sense of what his 'reasoning' was.

We've seen, furthermore, that historical questions are not those that are aimed at the discovery of rules. They aim at following certain concrete trains of reasoning, not 'rules' of reasoning or, necessarily, common patterns of reasoning.

It is also because we have approached scientific history in this way that we have been able to make sense of certain aspects of Collingwood's arguments that have troubled commentators. Collingwood's claim that once the historian knows 'what happened' he already knows 'why it happened' – the so-called 'what-why paradox' – only

makes sense where the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ signify identical specific unknowns – which, in order to be properly historical ‘whats’ and properly historical ‘whys’, they must be. Meanwhile, the dispute over whether the past is, for Collingwood, ‘real’ or merely ‘constructed’ has been dissolved by showing that it is both. It is a presupposition of scientific historians that what they are aiming at is the truth, but the knowledge they produce through their investigations is not ‘apprehension’ of, or ‘compresence’ with, the event or act of thinking itself, but rather the conclusion they have constructed. Scientific knowledge consists in the warranted assertion of conclusions.

We’ve also examined Collingwood’s arguments about what history is for. His claims that it is only through history that we have knowledge that human activity is free fails where it refers to scientific history and to knowledge of one’s own freedom. But some accommodation may be made with the claim that it is only through scientific history that we can make reliable judgements of the freedom of others. Similarly, his argument that history provides ‘self-knowledge’ fails to deliver where self-knowledge means facts about ourselves and our capacities. He succeeds in showing that, if ‘history’ denotes all systematic investigations of other people’s reasoning, then certain sciences of human affairs require it; and he can succeed further if ‘self-knowledge’ is stretched to include conclusions in practical reason: deciding *to* rather than only deciding *that* – where, that is, ‘know thyself’ includes ‘know what thou shalt’. Collingwood’s equation of history with duty – explained in his 1940 Lectures on Moral Philosophy and in *The New Leviathan*, and admired by some commentators – appeals only to a concept of history asserted as the ‘essence’ of history in a lower form of ‘history’. As applied to history as a science, it actually militates against what Collingwood means elsewhere by ‘history’.

Finally I think we’ve seen that returning our methodological debates to such foundational ‘Baconian’ principles, we are able (as Collingwood puts it) to dispose of a good deal of “clap-trap”.¹ Debates over the definitive senses of terms like ‘explanation’, ‘cause’, ‘meaning’, ‘understanding’, ‘significance’ and so on, are to be dissolved by referring them to what they mean in concrete instances of historians investigating the kind of questions which, as historians, they really try to answer. Where conceptual analysis of those terms is conceived as ‘methodology’, method (it should be remembered) is a consequence of question. Where ‘methodology’ is conceived as the establishment of principles governing how such questions should be answered, method (again) is a consequence of question. Nothing more specific can really be said about how to answer

¹ *A*, p. 32

questions scientifically beyond that one should use evidence and reason. Something is evidence when it is used as evidence – evidence *for* something particular, helping to answer a particular question. And evidence relates properly to a conclusion when it satisfies the court of other historians that the conclusion has been demonstrated. Attempts to be more specific than that really only invite objections and exceptions.

ii

History of political thought as education

I began by describing the history of ideas as a subject for undergraduate study and this, I think, is where the arguments of Collingwood's that we've seen so far are best put to use, especially those concerning scissors-and-paste history, evidence, and the general but vital prescription to *ask historical questions* – and, better, to ask those historical questions that arise out of the (political) philosophical questions that are, for whatever reason, most in need of being answered properly.

For Collingwood, as we've seen, the purpose of the history of political thought is the progressive advancement of political thinking. We should investigate the works of the past with the aim of seeing, as precisely as we can, what their problems were, what their reasoning was in terms of the solutions they offered and, importantly, whether they were right. We should ask whether they solved their problems adequately and – if not – where they went wrong. Collingwood's philosophy of history is not only for investigators with 'historian' in their job title. It is not for a social class, but for a way of thinking common to many areas of inquiry, and accessible to all independent-thinking people.¹ Philosophers must be historians of philosophy; political theorists must be historians of political thought; and the same goes for any "channel of development"² that can progress – any, that is, in which old problems solved lead to new problems opened, and so on.

But not only must historical thinking in disciplines be maintained by those in the disciplines themselves. It must also be passed on by the generation that knows how to do it, to a generation that so far doesn't but takes an interest in what their seniors are doing.³ We're straying into pedagogical territory here, but why not? The history of ideas is a discipline of both research and teaching, and those who do it professionally are usually –

¹ *IH*, p. 7

² *NL*, 41. 7

³ See *NL*, 37. 43–44

rightly – employed in both capacities. The ‘methodology’ of the history of ideas should concern not only the methods by which these professionals do their research, but also those by which they do their teaching, since it is there that the basics of the discipline are transferred to new initiates. Collingwood himself discusses, after all, the ‘rules of thumb’ that he used in his teaching at Oxford, right in the middle of a discussion concerning his practical research work as an historian and archaeologist.¹ And I’ve already said that many of his conclusions – if not the arguments that support them – are actually presupposed by working historians, though undergraduates may have to be taught to presuppose them.

Marnie Hughes-Warrington has already provided a deep study of the relevance of Collingwood’s ideas to education in general, and especially to the teaching of history, in her 2003 book, *How Good an Historian Shall I Be?* I don’t want to replicate what she has already shown. But fortunately she does not discuss the logic of question and answer anywhere in the book. This is partly because her focus is on the historical imagination, and not the logic of inquiry, so she does not need to discuss ‘question and answer’. That, though, is where we can add to her discussion about Collingwood and the teaching of the history of political thought.

Very few historians of ideas, no matter how well they know his work, have as much of Collingwood’s personal experience to draw on as they have of their own. From my own I can say this about the importance of Collingwood’s logic of question and answer to the teaching of history of political thought at present:

Firstly, the scissors-and-paste problem still seems highly prevalent among history of political thought undergraduates, and probably also among those on courses which familiarise students with old philosophy in general. At worst, scissors-and-paste history in the student work I’ve seen takes the form of a summary of the whole book, sometimes with biographical and quasi-psychological material included. In its most sophisticated form you might get a short inventory of commentators’ views on a particular point or other, with the attendant implication that because they have been published for saying it, these authorities must have a point – and the point is then, in Collingwood’s word, ‘fixed’. Where two authorities contradict each other you might get a statement that one view is ‘preferred’ – especially where what is being assessed is an account of human nature. But more often than not the contradiction is not commented on.

¹ See also *IH*, pp. 7-8

There are two guilty parties here, where the survival of ‘scissors and paste’ is concerned. The first is a paradigm picked up by students, I think probably before the stage of higher education, that the task in academic work is to provide only ‘facts’, and to keep your own private thoughts out of it. Thus you describe what an author says, but don’t offer a view on whether or not what he says is correct. The reasoning is that where the former is ‘objective’, the latter is merely ‘subjective’. The former, as long as the facts are correct, gets academically rewarded – the reasoning goes – while the latter causes your work to haemorrhage marks. It is much safer, then, to reproduce material from trustworthy sources – namely, from the published work of authorities.

The other guilty party is the teachers. We’ve seen that the question-and-answer logic of historical questions cancels the distinction between past and present – or, at least, renders it unimportant from the point of view of history. Collingwood’s prescription, that the past be seen as an element of the present, is very seldom realized, because most historians think of the past as a ‘foreign country’. Historians of ideas are particularly prone to this today, because they are more aware than ever that in these foreign countries foreign languages are spoken. Lectures and tutorials in the history of political thought take on more of a ‘language class’ tone than they did in Collingwood’s day. Indeed part of Collingwood’s complaint, in *An Autobiography*, is that historians of philosophy were completely *ignorant* of the inherent differences in the meanings of ostensibly identical words through time. But today, since the ‘linguistic turn’, historians are perfectly aware of the hazard of terminological *faux amis*. But it is perhaps not unrelated to the reason why their answers to the question of what those pasts can be for are commonly quite thin. If the past, with its foreign languages that must be learned, is a foreign country, then the purpose of this time-tourism seems to be merely that it broadens your mind with a temporary diet of exotic cuisines. You can never go there, of course, but then again you don’t have to intend to move to Saudi Arabia for a course in Middle-Eastern Studies to be good for the broadening of your global-historical outlook. Contemporary political issues are, it is true, thrown into perspective when you’re suddenly exposed to the minutes of fierce debates in the past concerning the fundamental nature and origin of authority, property, freedom, or custom. In contrast, current affairs begin to appear quite parochial.

Although this is undoubtedly a case of the broadening of minds, the effects of the ‘foreign country’ idea in the history of political thought at undergraduate level are also very limiting. The idea that the past is a foreign country perpetuates a common

assumption among students that they are being tested on how many ‘doctrines’ they can remember. The notion of deciding whether long-dead philosophers were right about something, or whether they were instead responsible for sowing the seeds of some monstrous blunder from which we still suffer, strikes them as an exercise that somehow breaks the rules. Indeed, as we’ve seen in the cases of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Quentin Skinner, some eminent figures in the field are telling them that it *does* almost break the rules of being a good historian. Student essays, I’ve found, for the most part reflect this. They tend to be overly descriptive, and betray an assumption that, apart from what it means for their degree result, it no longer matters whether Hobbes, Locke or whoever was right or wrong.

But because of the cancelling of the past/present distinction, Collingwood shows us why someone who thinks past mistakes in argument unimportant is someone who thinks present mistakes unimportant. If investigating past philosophy is important it is because there are things we want to know about our social present which cannot or should not be answered without doing so. This is not only about surveying the history of a problem in order to avoid repeating exploded errors, so that your own contributions can be genuine advancements – as Collingwood describes himself as doing with the history of moral philosophy in his *Autobiography*.¹ Investigating other people’s reasoning concerns not only what is still being said, but also what is no longer being contested. Its proper ‘subject-matter’ is equally what is now simply assumed. The only way to answer evaluative questions about ‘cultural assumptions’ inherited from past reasoning is the historical way. What I am saying is that what historians of ideas deal in are equally the last explicit forms of what has often been settled and has survived into the present as implicit assumption, or what Burke calls ‘prejudice’. In this light, the history of political thought appears as the authentic ‘critical theory’ of cultural assumptions concerning politics. I say ‘authentic’ because it does not, unlike other fields using the name ‘critical theory’, presuppose a cultural-ideological level of bourgeois conspiracy last explicated properly by Antonio Gramsci; and I say ‘authentic’ because properly scientific history of political thought accepts the required rigours of historical evidence – and of any other kind of evidence. The history of ideas, when properly pursued, offers us a way of doing properly what ‘critical theorists’ of all kinds have claimed to be doing more recently and more noisily: exposing what really lies below the surfaces of the ideas and assumptions we use in our practical reasoning. The ideas which historians of ideas expose, examine and, if

¹ See *A*, p. 148

they are doing it properly, blow wide open again with full-blooded philosophical assessment, do not belong to a cut-off world of the past: they are there in our own time to be, like Oliver Cromwell, dug up and subjected to new rounds of torture.

It seems to me that, if Collingwood is right about the importance of rooting historical inquiry in the pressing concerns of the present, historians of political thought can legitimately identify not only the sources of the ideas we've inherited, but also ask by what right we retain those inheritances. If certain political thinkers of today seem to presuppose, for example, Locke's account (by 'historical plain method') of the origin of private property, then historians of ideas should not be afraid to decide, with the full force of their reasoning, whether Locke was right. What is required, as Collingwood says, is both to re-think Locke's reasoning in my own mind, "and also to think other things in light of which I can judge it".¹ And this, I think, is how Collingwood would have us educate newcomers to the field. We should let them join in with what we're already doing: show them what we're trying to find out, why we're trying to find it out, and demonstrate to them the infinite means we have of proving that so-and-so proposed this answer, whatever it is, to this question. And we should not stop there. We should also show them the further means we have of deciding whether this author was right – and, if he wasn't, *why* he wasn't.

That is the pedagogical task, ultimately, and it is obvious that it involves the teacher spreading habits of autonomous historical thinking. The solution to 'scissors and paste' is for teachers to insist that material not be collected according to a topic or a 'point', but that the mass of material written on any given subject in the history of ideas be 'navigated' according to some principle decided upon before a single word has been written, and that that principle be the specific question the essay is supposed to answer – a question built upon a specific unknown that satisfies all the conditions we've already examined.

It will be said in reply to this that undergraduates are given questions to answer in every assignment; that they always *get* questions, but some of them ignore them. This is not true: they are not always given complete historical questions. What are disguised as questions are sometimes little more than invitations to say something about a vaguely-specified area of a work, an argument, or whatever. Sometimes the prefabricated questions we provide for students even end with a one-word instruction: "Discuss".

¹ *IH*, p. 301

If no professional historian of ideas would consider basing one of his own articles on such a poorly-conceived question, why should he get his initiates into the habit of making do with one? The best work, I have found, is always offered by those students who have ‘narrowed’ the question initially set down to something more easily satisfied within their word limit – whether deliberately as a means of managing their material, or quite coincidentally. Answers must be correlative to their questions, after all. Once they have done so, it is very easy for students to know where in the primary text to look for their evidence, and to see whether something written by another commentator is of any significance to their inquiry or not. This is how professionals operate. But by giving students inadequate questions without the attendant advice to make them more specific according to what they see as the most pressing questions, teachers are effectively withholding from students the principle of navigation that prevents their own work from collapsing into scissors-and-paste history.

Undergraduate essays in the history of political thought sometimes show that the student has made some mistake or other about the reasoning of the author being studied. We should be quick to forgive this, in general, because oftener still their essays evince little attempt to follow his reasoning at all. Instead students, as if by instinct, pick up on an author’s conclusions which then, cut away from the inquiries that originally led to them, are treated as stand-alone propositions which can be evaluated on the terms of a critique of a manifesto in this year’s election. It is an unconscious habit of students, particularly in the history of political thought I think, to treat past philosophers’ conclusions as their ‘policies’.

The marker, who knows that this is not what the discipline demands, will characterise this as something like an insufficient ‘engagement’ with the author’s argument. But what it means at root is a failure to re-enact the author’s reasoning. For Collingwood, as we’ve heard, this is the absence of ‘historical’ thinking. In its guise of ‘engaging with the argument’, re-enactment is widely acknowledged in the history of political thought as a requisite of doing the thing properly, and a prerequisite of criticising past arguments appropriately. This shows that, even when as professional historians they are attacking the possibility of re-enacting past thoughts in print, as teachers they are probably trying to foment it in the seminar room. This is why they should be doing with their students exactly what Collingwood said: you tell them that what they have read for that week was our author’s answer, and then ask them to tell you the question.

There is a moral here about asking students to explain *why* an author thought what he thought. ‘Why’ questions are ambiguous: they demand ‘explanations’, and we have seen that the idea of an explanation is ambiguous too. Giving students an instruction to provide an ‘historical’ explanation does not help particularly, since it invites the notion that thoughts are products of their contexts, and Hobbes said such-and-such because there was a Civil War on.

Instead we ought to be better at explaining what kind of a ‘why’ historians of ideas pursue. Here’s an example: I might ask my students to write an essay about why John Locke said private property was legitimate. I would, though, be inviting all sorts of explanations that would by-pass Locke’s arguments altogether: ‘Locke was acting as a mouthpiece of the Whig Shaftesbury’; ‘Locke was trying to justify capitalism’; ‘Locke was a slave-trader’. All of these might be true, but that was not what I was trying to get them to do – and the fact that these facts about Locke came from a reliable source will contribute to their sense of injustice at getting a low mark. A better formulation would be, ‘What reasons does Locke give for thinking private property legitimate?’ This, I think, gets students re-enacting thoughts; this is what gets them following the details of an argument, and this is what ‘raises the stakes’ in making sure that, given intervenient changes in terminology, the author really does mean what he seems to mean by saying something. Collingwood helps to explain, I think, why good historical thinking is incubated, and the future of systematic history of political thought is secured, but ensuring the adequacy and the real-world importance of our historical questions.

iii

Is Collingwood right about ‘historical questions?’

I’ve said that, Collingwood’s arguments having been reordered to reflect his principle of question and answer, the best defences of his most contentious arguments in philosophy of history are to be mounted by pointing to what is demanded by a class of questions that are ‘historical’. Historical questions pursue what people ‘meant’ by doing things; they cannot be aimed at general rules or laws; they seek processes and not states; and, where historical knowledge is to have any relevance to the aims of human life in general, historical questions ask whether people’s actions were right.

It follows that we ought to ask whether Collingwood's philosophy of scientific history is right, and it's turned out that the only way to do this is to ask whether his conception of historical questions is right. This does not put us back to the beginning, because we've identified along the way strategies for attacking Collingwood that fail, and strategies for defending him that make sense of his claims. I should remind the reader, though, that Collingwood does not present this as his 'theory of historical questions'. It is not Collingwood that is being put to the torture. It is the strongest versions of his claims, strengthened with his most fundamental principle of systematic thinking.

How can we assess this sketch of historical questions? Not, I think, by giving praise or blame to anything which "relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction"¹ – but rather by viewing this account of 'historical questions' in relation to concrete instances of their arising: that is, in relation to the kinds of question that really arise in the work of professional historians, and the 'answer' narratives that are meant to presuppose them either explicitly or implicitly.

We instantly see that there are some very significant consequences of this account of historical questions. There are abundant ostensibly historical questions that do not presuppose meaning. History teachers in schools ask their students, 'When was the Battle of Trafalgar?' or, 'How did the Great Fire of London begin?' And these are commonly thought to be historical questions. Collingwood's answer should, I think, be that these are only quasi-historical questions – or, at best, they are incomplete as historical questions. Certainly they resemble historical questions in being 'about the past'. But questions of date are really only chronological questions. Chronological questions might 'arise' in an historical inquiry, but where they stand alone they can only really be useful for providing 'general knowledge' details for filling in our "innate" idea of the past. Similarly there are non-chronological questions that seem to be historical. At every moment over the last six decades there have been professional historians attempting to establish the true number of Jews killed in the holocaust. That is a question of numbers, and is apparently disconnected from the 'historical' question (in the sense I've been explaining) of what the German officials of the era were trying to do. We already know all too well what they were trying to do. The point is, if these systematic researchers are not historians, what are they?

¹ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 7-8

Some commentators have spoken of Collingwood having a ‘narrow’ conception of history and a ‘broad’ one.¹ In short, it follows from the conception of historical questions we’ve seen that not all of what we commonly call history is history, and a lot of what we don’t think of as history in fact is – or is based on it. The ‘broadness’ refers to all the other subject-matter and types of investigation that, according to Collingwood, are drawn into ‘historical thinking’ or made to depend upon it. The ‘narrowness’, meanwhile, refers to the fact that much of what we ordinarily call ‘history’ is not, according to Collingwood, real history. Chronology; descriptions of past states of affairs (however accurate); the method of ‘scissors and paste’; past natural events, and so on, are excluded from ‘history’, it seems. Actually, though, we’ve seen that they are not excluded from history – though Collingwood says very often ‘that is not history’. Rather, they may serve as components of scientific history by taking up proper places within the systematic investigations of scientific historians. It is simply that they are not adequate descriptions of ‘history’ in its highest form.

I’ve said that Collingwood’s philosophy of history is at times framed so as to support with reasons what had previously been “habitually” and/or “arbitrarily” described as the subject-matter of history.² The question that haunts my explanation is whether, by resolving this arbitrariness by recourse to what historical questions demand, it has not been resolved at all, but rather merely transferred to the ‘question’ side. My answer is that arbitrariness is not something that can survive the transfer from answer to question in the way that a number value can be passed inverted from one side to the other of a mathematical equation. Where questions of ‘what I should be investigating’ are transformed into statements of ‘what I want to investigate’, the arbitrary concentration upon a subject-matter becomes the deliberate concentration upon a question. The above account of historical questions derived from Collingwood’s arguments about historical thinking collects certain general characteristics of a kind of question that really is asked by people for real reasons and calls them ‘historical’. Those questions are shown to be internally coherent – in the sense that the characteristics and presuppositions of their ‘specific unknowns’ are not mutually contradictory – and, when aimed at truth, sometimes of present real-world importance. Nowhere does Collingwood say that people may not pose and answer systematically questions that fail one or more of these conditions. It follows from his logic of question and answer that such other questions are simply not what he means by ‘history’.

¹ See also *IH*, pp. 6-7

² *IH*, pp. 212-13

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