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# R. G. Collingwood: Psychologism and History

Psychologism is the reductionistic position that grounds, links, and connects all human endeavors through and upon a knowledge of the human psyche (Scanlon 1997). It is comparable to biologism, formalism, and/or anthropologism. Such representative thinkers as Jacob Fries, Friedrich Beneke, and John Stuart Mill embraced the position. Each presupposed that the study of the psyche (psychology) was necessary for a logic, a metaphysics, and/or an ethic. Without a firm empirical, psychological basis, mere speculation abounds. Gottlob Frege and Edmund Husserl were opponents of psychologism. Frege (1884) writes,

> Never take a description of the origin of an idea for a definition, or an account of the mental and physical conditions through which we become conscious of a proposition for a proof of it. A proposition may be thought, and again it may be true; never confuse these two things. We must remind ourselves, it seems, that a proposition no more ceases to be true when I cease to think of it than the sun ceases to exist when I shut my eyes. (Qtd. in Abbagnano 1967, 521)

Husserl (1900-01) also warned against the tendency to psychologize the eidetic: "To refer to it [a number] as a mental construct is an absurdity, an offense against the perfectly clear meaning of arithmetic discourse, which can at any time be perceived as valid, and precedes all theories concerning it" (qtd. in Abbagnano 1967, 521).

This paper contends that the English philosopher/historian R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) is equally suspicious of scientific psychology as a propadeutic for historical investigation. Collingwood wished to preserve the autonomy of history. The Greek imperative—"Know Thyself"—means something other than introspective insight. Among Collingwood's many works, the posthumously published *Idea of History* (1946) details succinctly his peculiar declaration of independence. For this paper I will concentrate upon the section of that volume entitled "Human Nature and Human History."

The methods of history must transcend the limitations of introspective tests and controlled laboratory experiments. The two disciplines, psychology and history, have the same goal—to understand human beings—but they differ in four respects:

- Psychology investigates the so-called lower qualities of the human psyche whereas history confines its attention to "reasons."
- Psychology initially adopts a direct but static stance whereas history is consistently dynamic.
- The historian imaginatively places him/herself in the middle of history whereas the psychologist adopts a removed position from that which is studied.
- Psychology presumes to be value free. Historians, on the other hand, readily concede the inevitability of making value judgments and of attending to the value judgments of the human actors studied.

Most authorities would agree with the second edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary*, which defines "psychology" as "the science which treats of the mind in any of its aspects. ..." Collingwood restricts psychology to the "science of feeling." However defined, psychology tends to encroach upon other fields, e.g. logic, mathematics, and history. Of course, psychology is sometimes invited to encroach. In 1957 William L. Langer, then president of the American Historical Association, castigated his colleagues for ignoring psychology, psychiatry, and particularly psychoanalysis as tools for investigating historical figures. Langer's presidential address that year, "The Next Assignment," recommended studies on historical figures such as those carried out by Sigmund Freud, Eric Ericson, and Johann Huizinga. Groups as well as individuals concerned Langer (1971):

> As historians we must be particularly concerned with the problem [of] whether major changes in the psychology of a society or culture can be traced, even in part, to some severe trauma suffered in common.... [I]t seems likely that the group would react in a manner most nearly corresponding to the underlying requirements of the majority of its members—in other words, that despite great variations as between individuals there would be a dominant attitudinal pattern. (94–95)

Collingwood would consider this advocacy to be a restatement of Beneke's psychologism (1833): "Only what is formed in the human soul according to the laws of development can be thought; if these laws are understood with certainty and clarity, then a certain and clear knowledge of those disciplines (logic, ethics, law, and religion) is likewise achieved" (qtd. in Abbagnano 1967, 520). To Beneke, and probably to Langer, history remains at the mercy of psychological endeavors.

In the introduction to *The Idea of History* (1946), Collingwood asserts, "Psychology ... treats mind in just the same way as biology treats life" (2). In so doing, psychology severs the connection of mind from its intentional qualities and from its temporal/historical sequences: Psychology "does not deal with the relation between thought and its objects. It deals directly with thought as something quite separate from its object, something that simply happens in the world." Both philosophy and history are broader and more comprehensive in their usage of human reason: "Philosophy is never concerned with thought by itself; it is always concerned ... with the object just as much as with the thought." Philosophy and history require intentionality, and through intentionality Collingwood saves both from psychology:

> The psychologist may interest himself in historical thinking; he may analyze the peculiar kinds of mental events that go on in historians.... I do not suggest that such analysis is a waste of time ... [only that] it concentrates its attention exclusively on the subjective term in the original subject-object relation. It attends to the historians thought, not to its object the past.

The passive subjective quality makes psychology static and precludes its usefulness for history.

It has long been noted that Collingwood was ignorant of many facets of psychology. He makes no mention of Freud, Jung, or Pavlov. Alan Donagan (1962) comments,





> Collingwood's neglect of it [behavioralism] disqualified him as a critic of psychology in general, because it precluded him from gaining an accurate knowledge of what a large number of psychologists had in fact been doing, based not on hearsay but on a critical study of their works.... He had, therefore, no right to denounce psychologists as a class, as he did when he accused them of making propaganda for irrationalism by applying methods proper in the science of feeling to the study of thought.... Whatever charges may lie against the behaviorists, that one does not; for their methods are not those of the 'science of feeling.' (160)

It is difficult to summarize in a short space Collingwood's positive principles of historical investigation. Nonetheless, Louis Mink in his book *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (1969) does accomplish the task under six rubrics:

- "All history is [exclusively] the history of thought,"
- "All history is the reenactment by the [present] historian" reflecting on the past,
- "There can be history only of individual purposive actions," not compulsions or causes;
- The criteria of historical truth is reason and *a priori* imagination which recreates past actions and the reasons given for such actions,
- "History produces not probability but certainty," and
- "When the historian understands what happens, he/she already understands the reason for its happening" (162).

The thoughts of historical personages are recorded in documents, can be deduced from artifacts, and can be reconstructed by imagination. Each of these methods assumes the priority of what mind does over what mind is. T. M. Knox in his editorial preface to *The Idea of History* (1946) quotes Collingwood: "Psychology legitimate and invaluable as a science of feeling becomes the propaganda of irrationalism when it masquerades as a science of thought" (xxii). According to Knox, Collingwood believes "that modern analytic and positivistic philosophies, despite their avowed aims, are essentially irrationalistic in tendency and dangerous to civilization." Although Collingwood repeatedly uses terms appropriated by psychology—e.g. "feeling," "imagination," "reason," and "will"—to describe the mental qualities of the historian as well as the mental properties of historical subjects—i.e. Caesar, Napoleon, or Bismarck—he is careful to distinguish what he means with such terminology from the usage in psychological science. His criteria seems to be whether such qualities contribute to the "reasonable" behavior which the historian both exercises and studies. Reasonable will, desire, and imagination are operative in historical actions. The historian is only interested in cogent accounts which explain minds in action. He/she is uninterested in the feelings which supposedly originate, sustain, and justify such actions.

The reasons Caesar crossed the Rubicon; Napoleon made a stand at Waterloo; or Bismarck, on behalf of Prussia, invaded Denmark differ according to whether one is a historian or a psychologist. The psychologist's explanations in each case have to do with feelings, i.e. from glandular conditions, toward previous experience, or as moods and

attitudes. The reasons given by historians for the acts in question are couched in terms of sequences of strategy, perceptions or misperceptions of political conditions of the time, and the overall aims which rulers and leaders must adopt according to the situation. To Collingwood the context of historical reasons constitute a dynamic field unique to the designated situation in question. The psychologist, on the other hand, studies historical figures as "kinds" or "types" to classify such figures according to laws and to modes. To Collingwood the imaginative reenactment of past experience produces breadth, tolerance, and a rich entertainment of possibilities. By contrast the psychologist confines, restricts, and dampens his/her inclination to indulge in speculative possibilities. An excessive use of psychology to study historical characters and sequences of events results in what Collingwood calls a "scissors and paste" approach. This approach is a prosaic, dull, routinized account of the facts and accompanying feelings which are then reposited in file boxes and typified in rigid schemes. History proper is a series of thought experiments concerning the past. It is an inexhaustible fund of what human beings have accomplished or have failed to accomplish as well as their reasons for either judgment. The choice between a dynamic exploration of the capabilities of the human mind at its best in the past, which is history, and the human mind in its routinized behavior today, which is psychology, is a clear one. At least, this is the case for Collingwood.

In following Wilhelm Dilthey's principle, "Man does not have a nature, he has a history," Collingwood chooses to praise the students of the human condition over those who search for a human nature. The search for the human condition requires participation. An account of human nature demands that the investigator cut him/herself off from that nature in order to investigate it. The historian's involvement with history requires an intellectual reconstruction of the past sequence of events. The investigator holds in abeyance his/her feelings and limits historical data to the actual intellectual plans and choices. Care is taken not to distort the data which is imaginatively explored. The psychologist confuses subjects and objects. The historian keeps them separate but considers both.

To Collingwood, history contains both an outside and an inside approach. An exclusively outside approach would be a mere chronicle. An exclusive inside approach would be a series of autobiographies. Authentic history requires both:

> By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements; the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought: Caesar's defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other.... His [the historian's] work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this. (Collingwood 1946, 213)

Collingwood reverses the adage *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, "the history of the world is the court of the world." Rather through the imaginative study of reason,





the historian brings values before the "world court." According to Collingwood this has a double meaning. Historical figures are judged as to whether their stated reasons for a given course of action are adequate or inadequate. To what degree does Caesar's march against the Gauls exemplify his awareness of the values of first century B.C.E. Romans? To what extent does he speak about or document these reasons for his actions? If unstated, how can reasons be adduced? The historian judges him/herself as well as the historic actors by the rigor he/she applies to the process of history: "[I]t is the historian himself who stands before the bar of judgment and there reveals his own mind, its strength and weakness, its virtues and its license" (ibid., 219). Although the sciences—physics, chemistry, psychology, etc et al—pretend to be value free, history cannot even make this pretense. The sciences, including psychology, "are designed as accounts of one unchanging subject matter" which is neither healthy nor unhealthy, good nor bad, holy nor mundane (229). The psychologist is as unable to make moral pronouncements as is the physicist: "To speak of the moral self [in psychology] is to misuse words and to confuse issues" (231). The historian, on the other hand, must make judgments concerning the adequacy of the thoughts and the resultant actions for the figures studied. The question "In what way is a designated figure moral or immoral?" is historically legitimate. To the historian there is no unchanging, timeless, universal standard; there is only the moral codes of the times in question. Historians participate imaginatively in past-evaluations. The psychologist, even with some knowledge of history, studies feelings, "the basis of our rational life although no part of it. Our reason discovers them, but in studying them it is not studying itself" (231). This task is left for historians.

To facilitate his historical studies, Collingwood outlines his theories of the human mind. Mind consists of appetites, feelings, desires, reactions, and needs. These components are structured as imagination, will, and reason. Psychologists, along with their counterparts in the other social sciences, study the rudiments of the human psyche. They do not and should not attempt to pursue the higher faculties. The lower mental functions manifest themselves in hunger, sex, fear, and anger which the psychologist theorizes about while performing experiments. Such studies attempt to establish causal chains. The historian is uninterested in such rudimentary causes. The province of history deals with scales of value open to choice and execution. Good/evil, useful/useless, true/false, effective/ineffective, and beautiful/ugly are used as standards. Thus, the historian is in a position to make pronouncements concerning rights, duties, failures, and responsibilities. The psychologist is precluded from making such statements since the value scale of his/her discipline is lacking. The historian at his/her best becomes a philosopher ready to recommend or to advise better courses of action for the past, the present, and the future. Through considering temporal sequences, the historian's value judgments are placed in what Collingwood calls "the larger whole." The psychologist on the contrary remains confined to a restricted area of piecemeal judgment.

In a manner similar to Husserl's defense of reason as phenomenology and Frege's protection of logic/mathematics through reason, R. G. Collingwood looks to reason and its study as the preserver of authentic history. Just as the formalists considered

psychologism a threat, so too does Collingwood. The latter's idea of history established, implements, and maintains an autonomous mode for historical investigation. The strong points of Collingwood's arguments are

- Imagination's alliance with reason provides a series of techniques for universal history.
- Collingwood asks his readers to affirm the strong points of historical pursuits as well as the places where it may be vulnerable.
- Through imaginative participation, Collingwood invites the historian to be a participant in his discipline rather than a detached observer.
- Collingwood gives to history a goal, i.e. to understand, to revive, and to relive what human beings have thought in the past and may think again when the occasion arises.

Some of the weaknesses of Collingwood's position are glaring and disturbing.

- His confinement of history's interest to reason presupposes and accepts a dualism between those aspects of human beings which are divine, laudatory, and pure versus those which are mundane, confused, and contaminated. Such a dualism may be seen as a restatement of Descartes mind/body bifurcation which has haunted modern philosophy from its inception.
- Collingwood's contention that the methods applicable to historical occurrences markedly differs from those of the natural sciences confuses the supposition that the universe is a cosmic and social unity. Collingwood's own position may lend itself to defense of over specialization and fragmentation.
- Collingwood's idea of history may be flawed in that those he considers to be enemies of history, the psychologists, are no more guilty of psychologism than he is. To assert that rational connection is only perpetrated between historical figures is to place the locus of meaning within the psychological structure of those who investigate that meaning.
- Finally, In cutting himself off from what he considers to be nefarious psychological pursuits, Collingwood ignores a potential source for clarification of will, imagination, and reason—key concepts in his own system.

Whatever the verdict on Collingwood in respect to his contributions to the philosophy of history, he has provided a framework which allows his readers to clarify issues, confront frustrations, and present alternatives for those who concede that the concept of what constitutes history is crucial for any and all intellectual pursuits.

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