

SOME QUESTIONS IN R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S THEORY OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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In this essay I would like to examine some problems that are suggested to me by R. G. Collingwood's philosophy of historical understanding. My method of examination will be as follows: (1) to show that Collingwood's struggle to maintain his thesis that "history is the re-thinking of past thoughts" has involved him in unclear philosophic consequences and substantive problems of method; (2) to present a discussion of the problems raised by Collingwood's distinction between historical understanding and historical explanation under general laws; (3) to show that these problems of consequence and method also relate to and affect his conception of non-deliberative acts and emotions. In short, I want to show that Collingwood's delineation of what constitutes the subject-matter of history has forced on him some interesting puzzles with respect to non-deliberative acts, human nature, and historical method generally.

It is first necessary to note the pertinent parts of Collingwood's philosophy which will allow us to examine these selected problems in the general context of his thought. Collingwood argues that history as an intellectual discipline has a unique set of characteristics and problems. There are at least four basic concepts involved in his idea of history: (1) there is in fact a historical past which consists of events localized in space and time, the occurrence of which can be ascertained by inference from evidence; (2) the historical past is made up of actions, and the "inner side" of every historical action is a thought; (3) these past thoughts can be re-enacted in the minds of historians; (4) these past thoughts which a historian studies are not dead, for while they happened in the past, they are available to the present in some sense, as they 'really were' in the past. History is the story of these human thoughts.¹ While there can be no history of nature proper,² we must not imply by the expression "all history is the history of human thought" that history has no relation to things other than thought, for thought can never be isolated from its physical and temporal context, its "outer side." All "history is the history of human thought" in that the only events of the past with which the historian concerns himself are those which bear on human activities and human goals. These activities and goals must be the proper subject-matter of history, for as Collingwood has it, human activity indicates accompanying thought processes. Mind is constituted by these conscious acts, and the *goals* of man are thoughts *per se*. Again, this does not imply that natural events have no import in historical understanding. Natural events and things are presupposed by the self-conscious action that composes and structures historical reality.³

In short, Collingwood's idea that history is the re-thinking of human thought is a lucid way of presenting several implied considerations: (1) the historian's task is to reconstruct a picture which relates the life of man in various epochs, and in so doing, what he wants to know about men is not what they eat or where they sleep, but what their self-conscious and goal-oriented acts are, what their ideas of life and death are, what they consider important, etc.;⁴ (2) the historian must determine the ideational implications of the past, or the "insides of events." His task is to reconstruct these events in his own mind. Historical knowledge has thought for its proper subject-matter and this thought is self-consciousness, or the becoming aware of what is called thinking.⁵

Now we can address ourselves to the first of our central concerns of this paper: if the historian deals only with reflective activity, i.e., with deliberative thought, what place is there for non-deliberative activity? Collingwood defines a deliberative act as one "in which we know what it is that we are trying to do, so that when it is done by seeing that it has conformed to the standard or criterion which was our initial conception of it."⁶ A non-deliberative act, for Collingwood, is an a-rational or even an irrational act, for as he defines them, irrational acts are "sensations distinct from conception, appetites as distinct from will." (A non-deliberative or irrational act would always accompany a sensation distinct from conception, and may well accompany appetite distinct from will.) For Collingwood this act would form no part of history.⁷ History, as we noted before, can deal with the actions of men only in so far as they are done on purpose, or deliberately, for only then can their acts be self-conscious and thus be a fit subject-matter for history, as self-conscious material which can be re-thought in the mind of the future historian. For Collingwood the non-deliberative aspects of man are the subject-matter of psychology, but not history.⁸ He insists that history must never focus on such causal considerations as psychology or biology; to isolate such psychological or biological factors by themselves as historical explanation is to admit the bankruptcy of historical method.⁹ But Collingwood is not *anti-psychological* as such, for he admits that psychology plays an important role in history, but not an explanatory role proper.¹⁰ One of the problems of this essay is to show that the "irrational" or "non-deliberative" elements in history remain a problem for Collingwood, and the manner in which he accounts for these elements constitutes a weakness in his method. Before we do this, however, we must see what Collingwood means by historical method or knowledge, and how he treats the whole problem of explanation in history.

If, as Collingwood says, psychological explanation is not acceptable in history, then what kind of explanation is appropriate? Physical science cannot qualify as a model, for physical science attempts to draw from

local sets of observations laws or general principles which 'cover' all phenomena of the same kind. But history has no such concern. It does not formulate general laws based on past experiment and experience—laws from which predictions of future outcomes follow with the same kind of certainty as in the natural sciences.¹¹ Facts mean something different for history than for natural science. The question "What is a fact?" is not so difficult in natural science, for here experiments are repeatable, and their results verifiable through perception. In history, however, the events do not repeat themselves; they cannot be reproduced under laboratory conditions. Further, in the discipline of the physical sciences Collingwood was willing to surrender the idea of "cause" on the basis of claims by Russell and others that the concept is superfluous; "cause" in physical science refers to necessary relations between events, and if we place these events in classes, we get causal laws. But in history the citing of causes need have no reference to *classes* or *generalizations*, as we have said; and in history we do not reject the ideal of causation so much as give it a special meaning. Collingwood stresses all of these distinctions because for him the rules of inference in science and history must differ.¹²

Now we must see what Collingwood does count as an "explanation" or "reason" in historical inquiry. In his *Essay on Metaphysics* Collingwood distinguishes two basic subdivisions of historical cause, or two ways of making causal judgments about historical agents; (1) efficient cause or what he terms *causa quod* and (b) final cause or *causa ut* (*Essay on Metaphysics*, p. 292). The efficient cause in history refers to the state of affairs that a historical person believes to exist presently. Final cause refers to the historical agent's intention of bringing about a different state of affairs from the one estimated to exist presently. In other words, "cause" here means either intelligent estimation, or a "means-ends" form of conscious determination. Or as he put it elsewhere, "cause" "means the thought of the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about."¹³ So both efficient and final cause act in the historical agent's mind, and imply self-consciousness for Collingwood. Neither cause implies a mere psychological desire or wish. To act as a conscious agent for bringing about events means that one intends—not merely "wants"—to bring something about, or that one has a motive for bringing something about. This is the real means of explanation in history. In history the traditional idea of a cause producing a necessary effect must be rejected as a superstitious notion.¹⁴ Cause and effect thinking must be replaced by means-end thinking in human activity, and this new conception implies having a rational motive, desire, or intention to achieve ends.¹⁵ If we want to explain what caused Brutus to kill Caesar, we must ask about Brutus' thoughts about Caesar's dictatorial plans for the empire and Brutus' own

intentions to prevent fulfillment of Caesar's purported plans. We need only know his reasons or motives and the ensuing means used to actualize these motives to understand this event.¹⁶ There is no need to appeal to general laws, nor classes of like historical events, nor do we need to make generalizations about human nature.

Having examined Collingwood's concepts of the subject-matter of history, the role of non-deliberative activity, and what constitutes 'explanation' or 'cause' in history, we can see several critical problems which these concepts involve, and why. The root of these problems is this: while Collingwood wants to account for the irrational factors in history, and make them a proper subject for history by linking them to conscious intention or deliberative act, he never tells us to what extent, if any, the non-deliberative or irrational elements in mind determine, structure, or intend the content of consciousness. It is clear that they have for Collingwood great influence on conscious acts, but he never gives any indication of what this influence might be. In fact, he is very unclear about the whole relation between deliberative, intended states and non-deliberative states. For him the final distinction between 'mere' emotion and conscious emotion which can become conscious intention when linked to rational processes seems forced and unclear. Later in his career Collingwood seems to ignore any distinction at all between them. But the crucial question is why Collingwood makes these distinctions in the first place. The full impact of this question can be answered. I believe, only when we look at it with respect to his position on the problem of historical explanation. I would like to suggest, first of all, that Collingwood is forced to treat mere emotion as part of the subject-matter of history only when it becomes part of rational intention, because (a) he does not want to leave emotion out of the historical picture altogether, and (b) emotions are not enough to explain the causal structure of historical events. Secondly, I would like to suggest that the relationship between emotion as conscious intention and 'mere' or non-deliberative emotion is left vague and actually undiscussed because he wants to avoid the question of mere emotion's being a "cause" or pre-condition of rational intention. By asserting that 'mere emotion' is not a subject-matter for history, because the "stuff" of history is consciousness and rational intention, Collingwood ignores the whole problem of the possible influence that 'mere emotion' may have on determining ideas. If it could be *in principle* shown that sub-rational or somatic conditions could in any way "determine" the patterns or content of thought, then this would be fatal for Collingwood's historiography, for then (1) ideas or self-consciousness may not in principle be the basic denominators in historical inquiry, and (2) these basic denominators could be somatic or physical entities, which would be *in principle* subject to quantification by

the methods of empirical sciences; in a word, subject to law. This would destroy Collingwood's whole method of historical inquiry, which he claims has a unique subject-matter—ideas—which are not quantifiable in terms of physical law. Ideas and self-consciousness must remain autonomous and primordial as the “stuff” of historical inquiry—hence Collingwood's inability or refusal to describe clearly the influence of “mere emotion” on deliberative or rational consciousness.

To summarize, Collingwood's conception of historical understanding has necessitated the following: (1) intentional activity and ‘mere emotion’ must be collapsed together into an indistinguishable mass because his notion of historical method demands it. The subject-matter of history is ideational, and all questions which would qualify or threaten his presupposition here are ignored or transformed into self-conscious entities if they are to qualify as history. (2) If intentional self-consciousness is presented as the irreducible and necessary subject-matter of valid historical explanation, then to explain is always exhausted by reason giving, or motives explanation (in Collingwood's sense) as a ‘cause’ of history. Nomothetic explanation need never obtain. For ideas are *causa sui*. Indeed, ideas serve an autonomous or even a random function. Their content is in constant change. Ideas are never reducible to nomothetic or lower-order causes, for whatever those causes may be, they are not part of the subject-matter of history until, as in the cause of feelings and emotion, they are an intrinsic part of self-consciousness, and, as such explainable under the aegis of Collingwood's notion of self-consciousness and rational intention. In principle the consciousness which constitutes human nature could itself be a product of or “caused by” prior or more elemental, recurrent forces, e.g., psychological or somatic functions, which are in turn subject to quantifiable or “causal” explanations. All of these possibilities Collingwood does and must reject. Thus it seems to this writer that Collingwood's idea of history leaves unresolved some stubborn problems.

NOTES

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), pp. 215, 317; *Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 110, 127f. For an excellent discussion of these four basic ingredients in historical understanding see Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of G. G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 210-36.

² *The Idea of History*, p. 302.

³ *Autobiography*, pp. 127f.

⁴ *The Idea of History*, p. 216.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 308f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 308, 310.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315; *Autobiography*, p. 110.

⁸ *Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 290f.

⁹ For Collingwood this contrast between thinking and feeling takes at least three forms: (1) thought is correct or incorrect, whereas feeling cannot be correct or incorrect; (2) thought is public, feelings private; (3) thought is repeatable, feeling is unrepeatable immediate experience: *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 157. A science of feeling can only be empirical, but a science of thought must be *normative* or *criteriological*: *Principles of Art*, p. 171.

¹⁰ Cf. his tribute to Freud in “Aesthetic,” *The Mind*, edited by R. S. McDowall (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1927), pp. 236ff.

¹¹ “The Philosophy of History,” Historical Association Leaflet, No. 79, 1930, p. 10. Cf. also “Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?” *Mind* XXXI (1922), pp. 443f.

¹² *The Idea of History*, p. 131.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 214f.

¹⁴ *Essay on Metaphysics*, p. 322.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁶ Cf. *Essay on Metaphysics*, p. 120.

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